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Paralogical Moments: Herstories of Colonialism, Conversion, Diaspora and Migrancy

This paper is an attempt at recounting why it is that I am working on a project on conversion narratives in the Seventh-Day Adventist community [1] specifically in the places where my families, maternal and paternal, come from, i.e., the coastal regions of Andhra Pradesh, India. For this project, I will be interviewing South Indian Adventists to look at how their stories of conversion may sit with or challenge narratives of Hindu fundamentalist nationalism, secularist nationalism, as well as narratives of western Christian missionaries who converted many Indian Adventists.

This paper attempts to make visible my own location in relation to the project, as well as the space that I am speaking within, i.e, Australia. For this purpose, my tracing of this location uses and critiques the relationship between the postcolonial migrant and the subaltern that Gayatri Spivak theorises in her attempt to make visible, at least, the discursive space of the subaltern. In this sense, this paper and the project are a site where the conceptual tools of postcoloniality, identity and subalternity are both challenged and expanded in the context of speaking within an Australian space while locating my relationship to the project.

As a 'postcolonial migrant' speaking from within the colonial space of the Australian nation, which has a long way to go in terms of its relationship with the Indigenous owners of this land, colonial discourses mediate and complicate my knowledge production. In addition, the discourses that emerge within Australia's relationship to India must also be articulated as the space of the reception of my knowledge production. I will be referring to the theoretical problem of 'postcoloniality in the space of difference' as Spivak phrases it (1993: 77), or the relationship between the 'postcolonial migrant' and the 'subaltern' in order to make visible my location and the possible reception of such a project. Lastly, I want to situate stories that connect my grandmother, my mother and myself to illustrate the 'paralogical moments' that inform the relationship between the 'postcolonial migrant' and the 'subaltern' in the context of 'herstories of colonialism, conversion, diaspora and migrancy.'

Paralogical, in its dictionary meaning, has to do with illogical reasoning or a logic contrary to reason. In a deconstructive methodology, it also means

unpacking the manner in which a logic works, and turning the logic of narration against itself. In this sense, I hope to illustrate why it is that these stories can be read as paralogical in an affirmative manner when situated within the larger project of conversion narratives and their relationships to dominant nationalisms and missionary Christianity. These paralogical moments may be read as affirmative precisely because they refuse the exclusionary negations of the rationalities of either missionary Christianity or dominant nationalisms; rationalities that attempt to work within the one or the other paradigm.

I am no longer a Seventh-Day Adventist, and have not been for at least 16 or so years. My leaving the Adventist Church had no ex-communicatory ritual, just the ritual fights with my parents whom I accused of being colonised by the church into thinking of whiteness as superior, and men (white missionaries and Indian men) as hierarchically placed in relation to beings like myself, Indian women. This moment of rebellion took place within a couple of years of our family's migration to the U.S. It may have been informed by my understanding of Anglo-Adventist racism which refused to provide my father, a senior 'official' within the Indian Adventist Community, with even a teacher's job. The Lancaster Adventist High School's reasoning was that they had an Indian teacher, whom they disapproved of, and didn't want to hire another Indian. Faced with such rhetoric from the place renowned for the birth of Adventism itself, [2] and coming from a place where the missionaries preached the brotherhood and sisterhood of an International Adventist community, I began to refuse to participate in the activities of the Church. This frame of thinking around issues of colonialism and patriarchy, my rebellion against the church, and my parents' wishes, informed my desire to write a PhD thesis on Christianity and Colonialism at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA.

Ten years ago, I was studying with Professor Ketu Katrak, reading diverse postcolonial texts by South Asian and African writers. It was interesting that my identifications with the texts of Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'O (*A Grain of Wheat*), Zimbabwean writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga (*Nervous Conditions*) were based on their critiques of the use of Christianity to 'tame' or pacify local populations or even produce subjectivities like Nyasha in Nervous Conditions who were trapped within the triple bind of the collusions between Indigenous, colonial, and Christian patriarchal systems. Perhaps somehow oddly unspoken in that identification was the curious 'fact' of my nationality. Why was I as an Indian identifying with a Zimbabwean or a Kenyan christianised character? It took a Ghanian academic, one of my supervisors, to ask me why I was so interested in

African literature and film. This question made me realise, in fact, that my identification with many of the texts from African countries were based on their experiences of 'missionary' Christianity, an experience with which I not only identified, but shared a similar sense of critique against its paternalisms and maternalisms embodied in the figures of the missionaries themselves. However, although I did quite a bit of reading on Christianity and colonialism in relation to African literatures, I put my thesis on a back burner as I moved to Australia. Here, angered by colonial discourses in television news representations of Indigenous issues, I decided to work on a PhD on that subject.

While the two projects seem rather disparate, I would argue that the two projects do have something in common: the dissemination of colonial, and even Christian discourses in two different areas. As I located myself in the project of producing an analytic of television news in Australia, I asked myself, why an Indian Christian diasporic woman was so invested in such a topic. At the time, I didn't have a 'coherent' enough answer. And yet, as I restart this project that has been my 'shadow' project, so to speak, it seems to me that there is a contiguity to these areas that I am interested in. Both projects reveal how colonial discourses are entrenched in contemporary Australian and Indian contexts. Both projects challenge me to unpack these discourses and critique them in the spirit of decolonisation. Also, my own location within these projects is a complex space, one that intersects narratives of colonisation, conversion, diaspora and migrancy. So, I would like to spend some time speaking about this space as one that I inhabit, speak from, and am also heard from.

Speaking As A Postcolonial Migrant I (Nation and Australian Orientalism)

In her two recent books, *Outside In the Teaching Machine* (1993) and *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Gayatri Spivak critiques 'postcolonial reason' for its traps and pitfalls in terms of speaking within a postcolonial migrant space. I would like to use Spivak's challenges to point to why this space becomes a complex one for me as an Indian academic situated in Australia.

The space that I speak from in this immediate moment is, of course, a shared space, one that is inhabited by me the speaker, and you the reader. In this sense, the narrative that I construct can be as much a textual product of your reception as it is of my narration. I am making visible here the notion that I am constructing a specific narrative, one that makes sense of certain events, emotions, identifications from my specific discursive position. In doing this, I am constructing my-self and other

selves, such as my mother and my grandmother. My narrative may therefore, be quite different from theirs in the manner in which I thread events or colour them according to my political beliefs. Simultaneously, as we (the reader and author) inhabit this shared space of speaker, listener or reader, I want to point to the manner in which we are located within a colonial and multicultural context. So, this narration does not unfold in a void, rather it is located within the power relations of the Australian context, i.e., relations between Indigenous owners, white settlers, white and non-white migrants, but also within the complex of relationships that inform 'Australia's' relationship to 'Asia' in a broad sense, and 'India' in a specific sense, and to your and my location in this complex of relationships.

One of the reasons I am highlighting this relationship of narration construction and reception is my attention to conversations I have held specifically with white Australians about my identity as an ex-Christian, more specifically an ex-Seventh-Day Adventist. In most of these conversations, these white Australian others have assumed my identity to be that of a Hindu or a Muslim woman. When I state that this is not the case, I am usually faced with a bemoaning of the loss of 'my culture'. I have even faced a kind of implication, that as an ex-Christian, I am not an 'authentic' Indian. Such a categorising of my identity appears to me to be dangerous in several ways.

There is a conflation, in the conversations I have pointed to above, between an Indian national identity and a religious one, especially that of a Hindu. Such a conflation transgresses the core of the formation of India as a secular nation-state with diverse religions. Or as Partha Chatterjee suggests that the newly formed Indian nation-state 'aspired to recognize equally the nation's plurality of religious and cultural voices through the constitutional adoption of the principals of secularism'(1995:13). And, I want to stress, strategically, how this notion of secularism becomes important in the assertion of Indian Christian identities. In other words, I have always taken the identity of being Indian as a given. By this I don't mean that I am an Indian nationalist. In fact, I express solidarity with all those who critique Indian nationalism in the name of those for whom nationalism has continued colonial structures of governance. But I express this identity of being Indian as given, whatever hyphens might be added successively because of the definition that Brennan suggests: 'natio' as 'a condition of belonging' [3] (1993: 45). And in those conversations with white Australians, I perceive a remarkable similarity between the essentialist fascism of Hindu fundamentalism, which attempts to construct non-Hindus as other to India itself, and colonial white Australia. Perhaps this is not so remarkable given that essentialist, stereotypical Australian

perceptions emerge within the larger colonial discursive field of the British Empire as does Hindu fundamentalism.

Secondly, the slippage between religious identity and culture presumes not only that all Indians are Hindus, but that 'Indian' culture itself is monolithic. It presumes an identical cultural identity between all Indians. Again (and I am posing perhaps as a native informant here), my identity and movement within India has always been about co-existing with a diverse, and for lack of better words, multicultural, multilingual and multireligious peoples. This is precisely what is being homogenised under the identity of Hinduism and its others in the regime and knowledge production of Hindu fundamentalism as well as colonial discourses of India and Hinduism.

Speaking As a Postcolonial Migrant II: (Dis)Placing the Subaltern

Having pointed out the ways in which my speaking might be situated within Australian Orientalist reception practices, I want to shift the attention to what it means to speak as a 'postcolonial migrant'. Speaking within the context of multicultural, postcolonial politics in the U.S., Spivak warns of the manner in which the 'postcolonial migrant' occupies a 'subaltern' space that makes invisible the 'subaltern' located within the country of origin. Spivak's description of this space refers to the manner in which the 'subaltern' (and here she may be referring to tribal or peasant populations within India) is displaced 'on decolonised terrain' (1993: 77). This is 'postcoloniality in the space of difference, on decolonised terrain' (1993: 77). I want to pause here and reflect on what this means in the context of deconstructing my speaking position and my knowledge production, not in some navel-gazing exercise, but to unpack Spivak's challenge so as to inform my project. The challenge is to speak as a postcolonial migrant without silencing the subaltern. Spivak's argument is situated as a critique of the logic of the discourse of development. So, she suggests, '(i)t is through a critique of development ideology that we can locate the migrant in the First World in a transnational frame shared by our obscure and oppressed rural subaltern. Otherwise, in our enthusiasm for migrant hybridity, Third World urban radicalism, First World marginality, and varieties of ethnographically received ventriloquism, the subaltern is once again silent for us' (1993: 255). This silence is not about the inability to speak, but the manner in which the staging of the debate on Sati in India left no speaking position for the 'subaltern', the woman herself (Prakash 2000: 131).

What does such a warning present for me as a 'postcolonial migrant' located in a First World Australia, working on a project to look at the

manner in which conversion narratives within my own community might challenge Hindu fundamentalist nationalism, secularist nationalism, as well as narratives of Christian missionaries? There are some complexities here that I want to trace carefully, in a manner which may move in Spivak's direction as well as challenge her 'discontinuity' between the 'postcolonial migrant' and the 'subaltern'. So, I will begin with Spivak's deployment of the term 'subaltern', my use of that term, and then situate the herstories of the relationships between my grandmother, my mother and myself in the relationship between the postcolonial migrant and the subaltern.

Talking about the political fiction of Mahasweta Devi, Spivak theorises the characters of tribal men and women in those stories as 'subaltern'. They are subaltern to the movement whereby the 'event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand-in between colony and decolonisation as an unexamined good that operates a reversal' (1993: 48). In other words, in the logic of reversal between colonisation and decolonisation, in the logic whereby the 'new nation is run by a regulative logic derived from a reversal of the old colony from within the cited episteme of the postcolonial subject' there is a space that 'did not share in the energy of this reversal, a space that had no firmly established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism' (1993: 49). This is the space that Spivak suggests, is the 'displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal'. This is the space that can become, Spivak suggests, 'a dystopic representation of decolonization as such' (1993: 49). This is also the space of bonded labor, displaced from the logic of capital. In one such story, that of '*Douloti, the bountiful*' (a tribal woman who has no choice but to become a prostitute to redeem the value of the loan given to her father), Douloti (who throughout the story has not heard the news of the bonded labourers organising around election day), in the last passage of the story, is found dead on a map of India, which the schoolteacher (Mohan) had inscribed on the clay courtyard 'in preparation for Independence Day' (1993: 94). Or as Spivak reads it, '(t)he space displaced from the Empire-Nation negotiation now comes to inhabit and appropriate the national map, and makes the agenda of nationalism impossible' (1993: 94). Mahasweta Devi ends her story in two sentences, 'What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India' (1993: 94).

By highlighting the manner in which Mahasweta Devi's fiction spread-eagles the body of Douloti onto the map of India, Spivak traces how the 'story can push us from the local through the national to the neocolonial globe' (1993: 95). Where the story began from a space of displacement from the Empire-Nation reversal, and the reversal of the logic of capital, Douloti's gendered, diseased body on the map of India simultaneously

fractures the agendas of nation-state and the logic of global capitalism that attempts to represent itself as benevolent to the agendas of especially 'third-world'nation-states. But before we begin to capture or arrest the figure of Douloti within feminist narratives, Spivak warns that Mahasweta's fictions are 'not stories of the improbable awakening of feminist consciousness in the gendered subaltern' (1993: 49). She describes these characters as 'singular, paralogical figures of women (sometimes wild men, mad men) who spell out no model for imitation' (1993: 49). That is, they spell out no model for imitation within the narratives of nationalism or even resistance, precisely because they disrupt the space of the nation-state.

Now there are several complex issues that need to be unpacked within the theorisation of speaking from a 'postcolonial migrant' space about a 'subaltern' space within India. What do I mean by 'subaltern'? The practices of conversion within Seventh-Day Adventist communities as in many other Christian communities in India focus specifically on tribal and poor peasant populations. In fact, as a child growing up in at least six or seven different States, my memory is of most conversions occurring around tribal areas. This in itself is not perhaps a criterion for my use of the term 'subaltern'. But the itinerary of the 'subaltern' can be traced in the conversion of disempowered communities. And, if it can be traced in the conversion not only to Christianity and jobs, but also to cultures that denigrate 'the pasts' of those Indigenous cultures which are not placed within the comfortable spaces of Hindu caste practices. Then it is in this itinerary that many Indian Adventist subjectivities are constituted. And it is this space in-between--of transformation or even conversion of identities from tribal or peasant/dalit to that of Indian Christian, often through the promise of participation in colonial Christian capital, now perhaps global Christian capital--that the itinerary of the 'subaltern' may be traced. This is not the space of the 'subaltern' tribal or rural farmer, but the space of mostly 'subaltern' tribals turned Christian, whose entry into mission economies signals their simultaneous separation and assimilation into the larger national economy as well as global economies of aid and sponsorship.

Subalternity, as I want to deploy the term, is sometimes, not always, about being poor, but also about a specific kind of loss, the loss of the 'pasts' of pre-conversion life through 'missionary' discursive representations of it or Brahminical discursive assignments of identity. These 'pasts' were almost always never spoken of, in my experience of growing up as an Adventist, so much so that it signals the work of maintaining a disconnection or discontinuity from the identity of the past

even as converts speak of the darkness of past identities in collective terms in contrast to the new lives in the light of Christianity.

Why is it that this past is so important? My identification with many African writers and theorists outlined earlier may provide a provisional answer. For many of these writers and theorists, the onslaught of colonial and Christian ideologies specifically targeted the 'past' of the natives for denigration. It is this denigration that enables missionaries and colonialists, by contrast, to posit the benefits of enlightening the 'natives' not only through their conversion to Christianity, but also through their conversion to a European capitalist modernity. But what is troubling about this denigration is not only the fact of denigration within a Eurocentric framework, but the possibilities that converted tribal and rural populations may, for instance, have been living within religious and by extension cultural systems that were and are other to Hinduism as demonstrated by the existence of contemporary unconverted tribal and rural populations within India.[4] In this sense, there are other questions that emerge here that point to the project that I want to work on. What are these 'pasts' of the Indian Adventist community around coastal Andhra Pradesh? What current everyday practices survive in the lives of Indian Adventist communities that emerge from these pasts? How are these practices negotiations with or even challenges to a missionary Christianity that attempted to impose the Adventist Health message and the regulation of everyday life through Adventist ideologies? [5] How do they pose a challenge to dominant Hindu nationalist narratives? But these are questions which will have to await their asking until I begin the project.

Returning to the notion of 'postcoloniality in difference,' my speaking and researching this project emerges from the space of the postcolonial migrant, but it is also the space that emerges from the diaspora of Indian Adventists. This is not the diaspora of middle-class Indian professionals, but of those no longer able to sustain livelihoods within the parameters of the Indian Adventist Mission, which pays 1/3 rd of the salary that non-Adventists get in similar positions. This is the diaspora of those who cannot work 'Outside the Mission' both due to the fact that their educational qualifications differ from non-Adventists, but also because of religious practices such as not working on Saturday or the Sabbath. This is also the diaspora that maintains its links with the 'subaltern' figures through familial structures. This familial relationship complicates the model that Spivak conjures of migrant hybridity or First World marginality that makes invisible the figure of the 'subaltern'.

Speaking As a Postcolonial Migrant III (Paralogical Subalternity)

In the context of this familial relationship of postcoloniality in difference, I want to narrate a few anecdotes about my grandmother. Who is my grandmother in my memory? Why does she embody this subaltern figure that I am attempting to theorise? My early memories of my grandmother encounter a 'strange' woman. She is not seen as unusual through my mother's eyes, but is constructed as 'eccentric' from the narratives of other family members on my father's side. Her 'eccentricity' is not that of someone who cannot function in daily living, but that of someone who was widowed early on, when my mother was just six years old. Her strangeness is about her constant narration of my grandfather's death. My grandfather was a medical doctor who died from an asthmatic attack. My grandmother was apparently slightly late in administering an injection that might have saved his life. My grandmother's insistence is that this death occurred through spells, evil eyes cast on the prosperity of my grandfather. She then put her resources to investigating who cast these spells or who poisoned my grandfather. In the process, she lost all the wealth that my grandfather had, as well as land. This narrative of my grandfather's death I heard from my grandmother when I was a young child.

My grandfather's community is named as Brahmin. This is an unusual conversion as he was from an upper-caste community. He was disowned by his parents for converting to Adventism. Later, he left his work within the mission to set up an independent practice, because he was fed up with the corruption of Adventist officials as my mother tells me. My grandmother was an Adventist, who went to school at Narsapur Adventist High School. My mother tells me that the missionaries offered to adopt my grandmother when she was a little girl, but her parents refused because they did not want to lose her. Beyond this, there is no information about my grandmother's life, no naming of community as in my grandfather's case. I have asked questions, not directly, of course, about who her community might have been in their pre-Christian identities? But there is no information given, except the naming of the Christian names of her brothers and sisters as well as her parents. So, I gather from this information that this was a marriage between a Brahmin who became Christian and a rural Andhra woman. This is a mixed marriage in Indian terms. I am not certain whether it is a marriage arranged by the white missionaries, but it could have been--as my grandfather's parents certainly did not arrange the marriage. The naming of my grandfather's pre-conversion 'past' in contrast to the non-naming of my grandmother's pre-conversion 'past' alerts me to the differential treatment of 'pasts'. However, since there is no relationship maintained between my mother's

family and my grandfather's 'Brahmin' family, that past has also been effectively erased in family narrative terms just as my grandmother's is.

My grandmother's loss of her economic resources meant that she had to rely on employment from the mission. But by her account, she was treated badly, accused of stealing from the mission, perhaps because she was a widow. She then left the Adventist mission, raised four children with meagre resources, and somehow sent my mother to the Adventist Nursing School in Nuzvid. While I have early memories of visiting my grandmother at her village, I also have a vivid memory of her as (what might, from a Christian or even western rational perspective, be termed) practising witchcraft. As a principal of the Adventist school in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, my father was puzzled at some of the discrepancies in the school's financial books. During this time, my grandmother had come to visit, scandalising our lives with her tales to our church members of how my father's family had plotted to kill my grandfather, how they had treated my grandmother badly during my parents' wedding, and so on. During that same visit, when my grandmother heard of my father's dilemma, we were treated to the sight of the use of the Bible otherwise. By reading certain passages from the Bible, and by holding another Bible on a string, my grandmother was able to ascertain the name of the embezzler. Later on, she was proved right through the investigation that was conducted through audits.

Needless to say, my grandmother embodies, in my imagination, the paralogical in the way that Spivak means its, as a figure that spells no model for imitation. She is a figure simultaneously of loss and vulnerability (through her constant narrations of my grandfather's death) and strength (through the fact that she raised four children in the midst of complete poverty). Her existence is now enabled through the money her children send her, but she is resolute in her independence, preferring to live, move around and speak on her terms rather than her childrens' terms. She wakes up at three in the morning praying to a Christian god for at least two to three hours. At the same time, she depends on and perhaps is a practitioner of Indigenous 'magic' in relation to what I would like to call investigative or problem-solving operations in the logic of her everyday life. This isn't 'proper' Adventist behaviour, perhaps as the missionaries would envision it, but she is intensely religious and would be considered a good Christian by community.

What did it mean to convert to Christianity in her instance? What does it mean now? I am not sure that there was a traffic with the culture of imperialism or even nationalism in my grandmother's case. But in my mother's case, nationalism becomes an important site of identity through

her experience of growing up in a post-Independence era, but also through the experience of migrancy to the U.S.. In my own case, my rejection of Christianity, my attempts to decolonise through a critique of colonial discourses, my rejection of dominant versions of nationalism as asserted within a Hindu fundamentalist agenda, all these movements are contiguous with other self-professed anti-colonialists. So, the connection between my grandmother, mother and myself appears discontinuous as none of us appear to share the same ideological or historical space. This may be the case with many other mother-daughter relationships. But there is a distance here not only of ideologies, but 'postcoloniality in difference,' as Spivak might put it. In my narration then, my grandmother's early life is positioned as an entry into the logics of nationalism and Christianity. My mother's life is situated within these logics but within the difference of diaspora and migrancy. My life has been situated in all three narratives, but with the difference of my self-positioning of a rejection of Christianity and dominant versions of nationalism. My grandmother, and even my mother, however, fracture and complicate a too-easy space of rejections of Christianity and nationalism that have perhaps enabled my first world positionality, my upward mobility, but they also become figures that embody an unnamed loss of a pre-conversion past. In this sense, the simultaneous discontinuity of ideological and historical space and the continuity of familial links complicates Spivak's theorisation of 'postcoloniality in difference.'

So, there is a circle here between the points at which I position my grandmother and myself, entry into and rejection of Christianity, entry into and rejection of dominant versions of nationalism. But this is a circle I don't want to seal. And, I can only situate my project of working on conversion narratives in the context of the contemporary political climate of a Hindu fundamentalist government that enables the mobilisation of violence against Christians in India. In this sense, I hope to challenge the mechanisms of fundamentalism by asserting why many tribal or non-caste populations might have converted to Christianity. Yet, as an ex-Christian working on a project on conversion narratives, attempting to trace, at one level, a family history of Adventism which leaves ancestry unnameable, I realise that this project is a paralogical one Just as paralogical moments describe the discontinuities in my matrilineal relationships, the project is paralogical in that it may work contrary to the logics of dominant nationalisms, missionary Christianity, and my own theory of subalternity as loss. But this is an affirmative paralogism: it validates its others--nationalisms as diverse, Christianity as a space of heterogeneous cultural practices, and subalternity as not just loss (even as it is not yet not loss).

Notes

[1] Seventh-Day Adventism began in India in 1893 through the efforts of American missionaries. Currently Seventh-Day Adventists in India constitute a small portion of the 2% of Indian Christians. While St. Thomas is generally credited with the entry of Christianity in India in the 1 st century A.D., Christian (Indian and other) missionary activity has been greater in post-Independence India.

[2] The Seventh-Day Adventist Church emerged in 1863 after an intense period of millenarian preaching especially around the New England (U.S.) area, based on calculations and visions of the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Seventh-Day Adventist Mission is a world-wide organization composed of churches, schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, and companies.

[3] I am aware here of the fraught debates on nationalism and the slippages of signification between natio, nation, and the nation-state. However, I'm making a distinction between my assertion of Indian identity and the mobilisation of national belonging through dominant exclusionary nationalist ideologies.

[4] Anand Patwardhan's film, A Narmada Diary , for instances, chronicles the struggle of the populations of the Narmada Valley against the building of the Narmada Dam, against the will of the State, Central governments as well as the World Bank. But the film also conveys the sense that the philosophical underpinnings of the populations in the Narmada Valley are much more egalitarian than Hindu Brahminism and its exclusions around caste.

[5]The Seventh-Day Adventist Church regards the maintenance of health (e.g. vegetarian diet, exclusion of intoxicants such as alcohol, tea or coffee) as an integral part of its doctrinal message.

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