

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN INDIA: CASE OF ALLAHABAD DISTRICT IN UTTAR PRADESH

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Abstract

Religious conversion has become very common these days; and remains as one of the hot topics. This process is said to be a window for enhancing one's Social, Economic and Educational status. Structural discrimination of depressed classes of society is one of the factors responsible for conversion. So the root cause and outcome of Religious Conversion is to be identified and examined in rural society. The mass conversion is a regular incidence in India but this paper focused on the issue selected Religious Conversion in rural setting. The research sample has been taken from Pachdeora Village of Allahabad District with the objective of investigating the socio- economic background of respondents, motivations and factors behind changing their religion. This study is also covered the inter-caste feelings of both caste Hindus and Non- converts of SC caste group. I have selected 50 converts and divided into two parts Converted (Baptized respondent) and non- converted (Only following Christianity not Baptized).The converted and non-converted Scheduled Caste people, others Hindus, and religious leader formed the key informant of this paper.50 converts were selected as respondents by adopting purposive sampling. This paper discusses the issues of Religious Conversion with reference to caste structure of the village and acceptance in society.

Keywords- *Religious conversion, Discrimination, Depressed class, motivation caste Structure.*

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Introduction

The topic of religious conversion has been a major theme in the sociology of religion. In a religious context, it means turning away from evil, towards the good, rebirth to a new life and guilt for sin. Different religious traditions try to interpret it differently. For Christians this corresponds to a change of heart, for Muslims it is submission to Allah and acceptance of his Prophet, for Buddhists it is "going for refuge" or being enlightened, for Hindus it is self- purification and self- realization (Heredia, 2007: 8)ⁱ. The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956 and to other religions in subsequent years, "Dalit conversion", also denotes their conversion to full citizenship that followed with the abolition of untouchability, institution of universal adult franchise, extension of legal and political rights to all sections of the population, with special safeguards for disadvantaged groups. It could also denote a conversion to the "modern"- signified by a certain sensibility, particular kinds of dress and comportment and particular rules of social and political engagement (Panday 2006)ⁱⁱ. Disillusionment with the Congress and its decline triggered rising interest in Ambedkarite ideology among SCs in the hindi heartland, providing room in the 1980s for a new, post-Ambedkar Dalit leadership, that has built movements and parties based on socio cultural and political mobilization. The writings and speeches of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, emerged as an important leader of the depressed classes, but more particularly of the Mahars in the Bombay Presidency (Gore 1993)ⁱⁱⁱ. Pandit Nehru said that the history of Christian Church in India 'Is as old as Christianity itself (Brain, 1983: 167)^{iv}. But there is no documental evidence available to reach at any exact knowledge about the origin of Christianity in India. According to Mundadan (1989: 21)^v one, the foundations of Christianity in India were laid by St. Thomas, the Apostle, or

even by two apostles, St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. The other view would ascribe the arrival of Christianity in India to the enterprise of merchants and missionaries of the East Syrian or Persian Church". Christianity as per the tradition in India has existed since the first century when one of Christ's Apostles, Thomas called Didymus, travelled through Parthia to North West India. Some definitions have focused too narrowly on few aspects of conversion, and include these- Frykenberg (1980)^{vi} said "Conversion is a process by which people move out of one religious community into another. According to (Andrew 1997)^{vii} Conversion is a process, including a personal decision taken alone or as part of a group, to centre one's religious life on a new focus, which one believe more liberating in every aspect of that word, and closer to truth. This involves changes of behaviour and religious practices". Lewis Rambo (1993)^{viii} focused on some issues in conversion- conversion is a process over time, not a single event. Conversion is contextual and thereby influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations and situations and factors are multiple and interactive there is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of the process.

This research article is a fieldwork based and it is a study of depressed communities who had brought back their individuality through conversion into Christian faith. The impact of religious conversion on structural position and formation of a rich type of identity and growing physical capacity of converts in dealing with their suffering and pain of the past through new faith of Christianity. I have used the term 'depressed classes' in this study for these people whose history is rooted in the Hindu caste system as 'untouchables' or 'outcaste' were changed by the British period they calling them as the 'depressed classes' in 1919. Gandhi gave them the name 'Harijan' (People of God). But the Harijan was not accepted by Dr. Ambedkar the father of Indian Constitution and a low caste Hindu. He recommended the term for as the 'protestant Hindu' and demanded a separate electorate for these 200 million depressed class people. In 1935, British government defined these people as the 'Scheduled Caste'. And after that during the 1970s the term 'Dalit' was bevelled by Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra.

In this article since most of the converts share the common experience of depressed backgrounds, this paper explore the conversion in rural area of eastern Uttar Pradesh in Allahabad. It is the story of people from depressed background that had accepted Christianity to escape from their lower and Untouchable caste status in Hinduism. An attempt is also made to show the Baptized and only believing not Baptized people gaining social, economic and health benefits in Pachdeora village. In order to understand their conversion, it is imperative to trace the causes and circumstances which were responsible for their conversion into the Christian faith. Since their conversion story is rooted in Indian History and require an in-depth study of the religious, social, economic and political background of India. Objective of this article investigating first, the socio- economic background of the respondent, second is motivations and factors behind to leave Hinduism and adopt Christianity. A fieldwork has been carried out to gain a detailed understanding about religious conversion in Pachdeora Village. The data collection follows information from qualitative method for field research. Some oral narrative was used as a conversion stories whereby selected village elders were made to narrate about the conversion. The method used during the fieldwork the participant (quasi) observation and in- depth interviews.

Semi- structured and open- ended interviews were carried out with the help of interview schedule for the Head of the family, individual cases, organisation leader, non-converted respondent and volunteer who are working in Yesu Ashram Pachdeora. The interview conducted in a quiet place to maintain the privacy of respondents and to encourage them to talk freely about their conversion. The data gathered from these interviews were as a primary data. Some interviews were audio- recorded, to achieve this, the study used the new words related their new faith in Christianity, phrases of the respondent as it is to illustrate about their conversion story. The respondents were extremely opposed to efforts of the researcher to interview them about conversion, which seems to be both extremely personal and sensitive. It is difficult to draw all but the sketchiest conclusions about their individual attitudes and experience of conversion.

The field selected for this article is a village named Pachdeora is located in Soraon Tahsil of Allahabad District in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. The block is holagarh, which is about seven kilometres from the village. This village is divided into five Purvas and villagers said that- Dorihan ka pura, Bhunni ka pura, Devki pandey ka pura (main Pachdeora), lakhraiya and Judapur karnai. The total population of the village according to 2011 census is 3775, and total households are 653. In Pachdeora village different caste system is living but majority of population belongs to Scheduled caste, which is now the dominant caste of the village, and constitute 60% of the total population. In OBC castes Maurya, Patel, Yadav, Kumbhar (potters), Kahar (Havoc), Bania(a merchant), Nai(Barber), darji (tailor) and in General caste thakur and Brahmins are lived in village. Total number of male population is 1975, and total number of females is 1800 in village according to census 2011. Total number of SCs population is 1155, on which number of male is 592 and females are 563. Total number of literate people is 2312, on which male are 1414 and only 898 females are literate (census 2011).

Agriculture and small industries are the main profession of this village. Still this village is waiting for employment and industrial development. Education, drinking water, sanitation, road and electricity are the main concern of this village. Young generation is more attracted towards, Yeshu Ashram situated in Pachdeora village and many of them are working as volunteers. Apart from that the young generation is engaged in modern professions like Mobile shops, Laptop and computer technologies these days. If any bank and finance institutions provided loan and other financial support to the villagers, this village will see the real development. The health facilities being run by the government are not available in the village, in the ashram, solutions to health problems are without medicines and money, and young people and those wishing to work also get employment on the basis of their ability, so the youth, poor and low caste people are likely to be attracted to new religion. Poverty and lack of health facilities make people attracted to the healing services and job offered by Yeshu Ashram.

Discrimination

In Pachdeora Village people of Upper caste and OBCs still practices discrimination and untouchable behaviour with SCs (mostly pasi and Chamar). The people who converted in Christianity face discrimination by non- converted and other upper caste people of village. According to Antonovsky (1960)^{ix} individual are denied desired and expected rewards or opportunities for reasons related not to their capacities, merits, or behaviour, but solely because of membership in an identifiable out group. According to data assigned as upper caste and OBCs in their marriages and eating food are restricted because of their caste and conversion and some menial jobs like cleaning of houses, dung lifting and assist in preparing food not making etc. SCs do wage labour in the Upper caste and OBCs fields. After their conversion situation is changed they discriminate by food but not in work place and work according to their choice.

Depressed Classes

According to Baader (1937)^x the Hindu creed, the origin of the depressed classes also known as pariahs, outcastes, untouchable, Harijans- ties in the divine law of Karma, the just retribution of the individual soul for its good or bad acts during successive reincarnations. Forrester (1860-1970)^{xi} said these large- scale conversions were on the whole a new experience, not because the converts came from the most depressed sector of society and not simply because the numbers involved were unprecedentedly large, but because the converts came in caste groups rather than as individual. According to data in Pachdeora village depressed classes most of SCs (Pasi, Chamar, OBC and womens) are converted in Christianity. And situation is differing from Forrester study in Pachdeora village individual conversion occure. Before 1860, missionary and churches efforts directed almost totally towards the conversion of individuals regardless of caste, and concentrated on highest caste but in Pachdeora village it is shifted from highest caste conversion to Depressed Classes.

Inter- caste relationship is different in Pachdeora village. Upper caste people do not invite people who converted their religion in Christianity in their marriages and saying that, 'they became Christian and eat everything'. It means people who converted in Christianity they eat meat, fish and all type of flesh so they are polluted. And second thing is that the people who go the Yeshu Ashram and believe in Jesus, they don't attend any rituals of Hindu gods like worship (puja), of non- believers of Jesus. Even if they go, didn't eat offering (Prasad) nor give donation (dan). Some people of OBC caste also converted in Christianity and people of their community discriminate in his society.

Pastor of Yeshu Ashram says that if a boy and girl love each other and believe in Jesus, they are allowed to get married with the consent of their families he said there is no caste discrimination in believer of Jesus. But according to elder person and key respondent of the Pachdeora village tell a story of same context- In 2014, 'Sonar's daughter of another village had eloped with a Jesus devotee, the villagers could not yet trace them where both of them have gone. If there is no caste discrimination they why both of them ran away?

Access to Information about Field Data

Experiences of receiving information about their conversion were varied. The variations were resulted due to the kind and level of interactions with the respondents like women, men and elders. While some respondent women (30 per cent) give information about their conversion and whole story with researcher and spent a considerable amount of time with researcher, other (60 per cent) reported that they lacked information about their conversion. Almost (10 per cent) of respondents had not been given any information about their conversion of religion.

More than half of the respondent (60 per cent) is illiterate and live in the village at below poverty line. It is found that (70 per cent) respondent of converted belongs to SC caste and their socio- economic condition are very bad but after conversion some of them achieve job as volunteer in Yeshu Ashram Pachdeora, working as a whole time devotee of Ashram, teaching Bible verses in Bible Training School run in Ashram. 60 per cent people

motivated for go to Yesu Ashram and adopt Christianity because of Pastors Charismatic leadership and 40 per cent go for their health problem.

Conclusion

Religious conversion in Christianity has emerged as most widely topic in the last century. Since Religious conversion introduce in India it has given desperate lower castes to hope of having a job, education, medical facilities has always been a resource. In India, higher position is regarded, where the status, social condition is central to the concern of Individual of Individual and conversion is the tool factor in the Indian household to achieve mobility. Depressed classes, historically, has been and continues to be a means for Indian context to gain certain kinds of approach and benefits- social, material, economic, familial and spiritual. In a qualitative format the paper raises question about the ways in which religious conversion practices are structured by Yesu Ashram, their considerations and the motivations for conversion. While giving hope to Depressed Classes suffering from discrimination, untouchable behaviour, this study conducted in Pachdeora village in Allahabad district of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, brings to light the social, economic and status related questions with believes in Christianity. It shows how depressed class people appeal to their status for overcoming social discrimination, fear, influence and psychological stress besides, ignoring their prior religious belief and community pressure.

Conversion can be seen as the give social power to depressed classes by changing their familiar belief system and structure as well as through conversion according to Yesu Ashram. The religious conversion in Christianity an important tool for the development of depressed classes village society in India, especially in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. In India, setting up guidelines, not for conversion, but for improves the condition of converted people and their social, economic and health problem. Issue such as the burden of those people who changing their faith faces social pressure, community discrimination, and not acceptable in Upper caste, some of the OBCs and SCs who are not converted. The study concludes with that if the above issues are keenly addressed then people's involvement and

participation in conversion process can be changed and to encourage other people of Pachdeora village to convert and enhance their status in society through conversion.

Notes

I Legally, discrimination may refer to preferential, rewarding treatment. Such treatment always implies its converse. Most discussions of discrimination have been limited to its negative aspects, for it is these which constitute the core of the social problem of discrimination.

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