

# Religious Conversion and Dalits: A Sociological Study

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**Abstract**— Religion still plays a dominant role in India and caste system is inseparable part of Hindu religion. Religious conversion is the change from one religious belief to another. As it is generally understood, it means simply that a man or woman has accepted a new set of religious convictions and that usually, he or she now goes on to another religious centre. Inevitably it means a deep change in the entire intellectual, emotional and social life. Dalits in India are the most oppressed and the worst sufferers of caste system throughout the ages. Due to their peculiar miserable condition in the social and religious front under the Hindu religion and due to low ascriptive social status, the social exclusion and oppression they face in their very social life, force them to look for a way out in the form of religious conversion and protests against caste system. As in the case of dalits, in order to gain social respect and to get rid from the evil effects of Casteism they do conversions.

**Keywords:** Conversion, Dalit, Religion.

## Introduction

'Dalit conversion' refers, at first glance, and in its most likely usage, to the mass conversion of dalits to Buddhism in 1956 and afterwards, as well as to Islam, Christianity and other religions at various other times, both before and after 1956.

Caste system is mainly responsible for the social disharmony among different sections of people. The roots of exploitation are found in the caste system. Hence shudras (dalits) were deprived of all the opportunities deliberately and were reduced to the weakest position. In this respect Dr. Ambedkar (1936:28) writes, "on account of the Chaturvarna untouchables could receive no education. They could not think out or know the way to their salvation. They were condemned to be lowly and not knowing the way of escape, they become reconciled to eternal servitude their inescapable fate".

In efforts to liberate themselves from the humiliation of brahminical oppression, oppressed caste groups have undertaken attempts at what Srinivas (1966) refers to as "Sanskritization." By this process, low-caste Hindus attempt to change their customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of high castes. It may be noted that Sanskritization aims at an upward mobility in terms of the caste hierarchy, but does not challenge the hierarchy.

From early times, conversion has been one of the strategies adopted by dalits in seeking to counter their humiliation. Such religious challenge to Hindu Brahmanism has largely come from Islam and Christianity, both these institutionalized religions having made an early entry into the region. Thus, to Hindus who craved for social transformation and for those who wished to shake off their caste burden, either of these religions appeared to offer an attractive alternative.

Conversion which appears a remedy for Dalit problem is in fact, not effectual enough to heal the deep wounds of disrespect for dalits. Their conversion in any religious fold does not help in changing the status of a Dalit. In Sikhism the temple for dalits are separate, when they are Christians they are discriminated in churches, when converted to Islam they are not allowed to inter-marry with affluent Muslims. Thus discrimination like their kin in Hinduism, it is always there, wherever they go. Buddhism on the contrary, is more trusted by dalits as it is indigenous and does not believe in any caste system from which dalits want an escape. (Abul Majid, 2012, p.263-285)

Although untouchability was legally abolished under India's secular constitution in 1950, the reality is not much improved today. Considering Hillary Maxwell's report in a June 2003 edition of the online "National Geographic News":

India's untouchables are relegated to the lowest jobs, and live in constant fear of being publicly humiliated, paraded naked, beaten and raped with impunity by upper-caste Hindus seeking to keep them in their place. Merely walking through an upper-caste neighborhood is a life threatening offence.

Human rights abuses against these people, known as Dalits are legion. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story: "Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flower;" "Dalit tortured by cops for three days;" "Dalit witch paraded naked in Bihar/U.P.;" "Dalit killed in lock-up;" "5 dalits burnt alive in caste clash;" "3 dalits lynched in Haryana for cow slaughtering", "Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked" etc. such news show that among a no. of Atrocities done, the majority news are somewhat related to oppression of Dalits by upper caste Hindus.

Religion and its ritual aspect have not only been instrumental in the formation of asymmetrical relationships between different groups but also accorded legitimacy to such a form of social organization in India. This system of stratification contains within it a law of inherent social inequalities in the field of social, economic and political life of people. In such a system conversion does not only mean getting out of one religious system and joining another but it also means getting out of the boundaries of the caste system.

The Hindu caste system has been characterized by a rigid system of ascriptive hierarchy, by the existence of polarity principles of purity and pollution, the determination of social rank by ritual criterion and by endogamy in matters of marriage. Being a member of one or the other lower caste one was subjected to all kind of discrimination. They suffered economically, politically, socially, and even religiously. They were not allowed to enter temples and also to worship Hindu gods. They were denounced for their claim that they were Hindus. This system for elevating and debasing human beings in rigidly separated compartments developed as the actuality of Hindu life while Hinduism was holding itself to the most open and the most tolerant of any on earth.

The extent and magnitude of the victimization is such that a system of social relations exists and operates in such a way as to deprive the lower castes of a chance to share in the desirable material and non-material products of a society (Patwardhan, 1973). Consequently, the low caste people were subjected to all kind of discrimination. They suffered economically, politically, socially, and even religiously. They were not allowed to enter temples and also to worship Hindu gods. They were denounced for their claim that they were Hindus. This system for elevating and debasing human beings in rigidly separated compartments developed as the actuality of Hindu life while Hinduism was holding itself to the most open and the most tolerant of any on earth.

When we deal with religious conversion we have to go through three specific questions- the first questions addressed to is what is religious conversion, the second question refers to why religious conversions take place and the third question relates with the consequence part of religious conversion.

Sociological understanding of the concept of religious conversion highlights three major aspects related with earlier raised three questions. One, religious conversion is transference from one religious faith to another. Two, it occurs as a result of inadequacy of the social situation in the fulfillment of individual's or group's social, psychological, economical, and spiritual need on the one hand and due to the conflict which takes place between existing two or more than two social situations (religious faiths) on the other hand. There the act of religious conversion follows certain consequences which have been described as having positive dimensions. If the three aspects stand the empirical reality then why the religious conversions of ex-untouchables (scheduled castes) during the nineteenth century to Islam, Christianity and even Sikhism did not result into the uplift of the social status. This question arises in the face of vast majority of scheduled castes who continue to live in the debased socio-economic conditions. The contemporary situation in relation to scheduled castes social status raises certain doubts with regard to the third aspects of religious conversion mentioned above.

Accordingly three logically related but hypothetical issues emerge. First, religious conversions are not simply an act of transference from one religious faith to another. Because besides its social, psychological or theological connotations it has possibly political moorings too. Second, if it is so then the causes of religious conversion also contain some element of politics. Third, the consequences which follow religious conversion can also have negative aspects for the individuals or the groups undergoing conversion.

Mandelbaum (1972) pointed out that the converts were mainly made from low jatis, from those who had nothing to lose and perhaps could gain something in status and livelihood. In Punjab, as Khushwant Singh comments, the word 'Christian' came to be synonymous with 'sweeper' despite some conversions from Sikh elite.

Mandelbaum further said on religious conversion and social mobility issues that new social ideas were offered under the aegis of religion. Movements to reorganize society in India were, therefore, expressed mainly through indigenous sects and through introduced religions. Arguing further on the nature and goals of various movements were initiated for the so-called purposes of raising the social position of the lower caste men, he observed that equality rather than hierarchy among all believers was a common theme and in almost all these movements the devotees finally came to sort themselves into Jatis and to act like other jati members of their local order. Recurrent changes through religion have typically been sparked by personal quests for salvation rather than by sheer mobility aspirations, but the social outcome of these personal quests has consistently turned out to be quite like the outcome of the mobility drives (Mandelbaum : 1972).

Conversion to various religions took place because of structural and economic conditions in which people wanted to avail themselves of temporal gains and material benefits and also wanted to escape the stigma of untouchability attached with their status. This is what the converts thought while getting themselves converted although in the case of conversions in Buddhism the motive was purely spiritual and to gain respect in this unequal society also they want such a religion where they are equal among the equals and no place for castes in that.

#### **Conclusion:**

Dalits are the most vulnerable section under the Indian caste system, due to their low ascriptive social status. They face discrimination and oppression in social, religious, economic front in their everyday life in some or other way although the present level of oppression has decreased to a level, it still continues especially in rural areas, marriage preference is still given to similar caste peoples only. The available empirical literature shows that conversion has not brought about vertical social mobility for the converts though we find instances of horizontal mobility. The converts, especially the Buddhists, have been able to attain high education, occupation and are

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economically better off; same can be said of dalit converts into Christians. In the urban areas educational, occupational attainments have given them a bit high status. Although conversion is a debatable issue in India but it also gives impetus and thought provokeness to researchers and general public to think over the issues which gave rise to such conversions especially in the case of dalits whom they call part of Hindu religion but deny social and religious rights to them. Although changes to a small level are coming in the society due to modernization, constitutional provisions and exposure to new modern liberal thoughts but it will take a lot of time to get completely get over from the shackles of caste system which is tyrannical and inhuman in sociological sense.

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