

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Impact of Conversion to Christianity: An Ethnographic Study on Lower Hindu Castes of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the socio-cultural implications of conversion to Christianity among lower Hindu castes in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, through the analytical lens of Victor Turner's Social Drama Model (1974). Employing an ethnographic approach, the research draws upon in-depth interviews, group discussions, and direct observations conducted between April and June 2024 with twenty-five individuals, ten of whom were interviewed intensively. Turner's four-stage framework—breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration—serves as a valuable tool to interpret the transformative processes and tensions that accompany religious conversion. Findings reveal that conversion is not merely a shift in faith but a complex negotiation of identity, health, and community belonging. Health crises often act as the initial breach prompting individuals to seek spiritual alternatives, while the ensuing crisis phase exposes converts to social ostracism and familial conflict. The redress phase, marked by baptism and new ritual practices, facilitates social and emotional healing within Christian congregations. Reintegration, however, remains partial, as many converts oscillate between their former Hindu identity and newly adopted Christian practices to avoid social exclusion. The study highlights how conversion serves as both resistance against caste-based marginalization and a pursuit of spiritual and social empowerment. This research contributes to the anthropological understanding of religious change in India by demonstrating how Turner's model can elucidate the dynamic interplay between faith, health, identity, and community in post-conversion life.

KEYWORDS

• Religious Conversion • Lower Hindu Castes • Victor Turner's Social Drama Model • Ethnography

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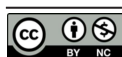
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INTRODUCTION

The word 'conversion' comes from the Latin words 'con' and 'vertere', which means 'to turn about', 'turn around' (Paul 2003). To Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999) conversion is a kind of standard for identifying a genuinely religious person, that is to say, an individual choosing his/her religion and engaging them in a fully conscious way. What would characterize religion in the postmodern context is precisely this assertion of the believer as an autonomous subject. Religious conversion is an extremely sensitive topic for a society. Oates (1973) states that conversion is not exclusively religious because the psychological, interpersonal and social dimensions carry major roles. Rambo (1993) proposes a holistic model for the study of religious conversion. There are four components in conversion viz., cultural, social, personal and religious systems. Conversion is a fundamental human right and therefore needs to be protected by all available means. However, for some people conversion from one religion to another is essentially wrong, such acts cannot be sanctified by them (Lacroix 2016). The phenomenon of conversion, particularly from Hinduism to Christianity, has been a subject of interest for scholars across various disciplines. However, the specific impact of conversion on lower Hindu castes remains relatively underexplored in the context of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. This research proposal aims to investigate the socio-cultural implications of conversion to Christianity among lower Hindu castes through an ethnographic lens. By conducting in-depth qualitative fieldwork this study seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of religious conversion dynamics in the Indian context. This research proposal aims to investigate the impact of conversion to Christianity among lower Hindu castes using Victor Turner's Social Drama Model (1974) as an analytical framework. Turner's model offers a valuable lens through which to understand the dynamics of conflict, and transformation within communities undergoing religious conversion.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand conversion to Christianity as a social drama, with particular attention to the stages of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration to explore the

tensions, conflicts, and negotiations that arise within families, communities, and broader society in response to religious conversion.

2. To understand the performances that shaping the collective identity of converted individuals.

Theoretical Framework:

Victor Turner's Social Drama Model (1974) could provide a conceptual framework for understanding transformative processes within social groups. The model identifies four stages: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration. During the breach stage, existing social norms and structures are challenged or violated, leading to a sense of disorientation and uncertainty. The crisis stage involves intensified conflict and polarization as different parties seek to address the breach and restore social equilibrium. Redress involves the resolution of conflict through rituals, symbols, and performances that reaffirm collective values and identity. Finally, reintegration marks the restoration of social order, albeit with potential transformations in power dynamics and group cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

This study will employ an ethnographic approach, combining semi-structured in-depth interviews, direct observation, and group discussions to gather rich, qualitative data on the conversion experiences of lower caste Hindus who have embraced Christianity. Fieldwork has been conducted in rural areas of Purba Medinipur. Total twenty-five individuals have been contacted and ten participants have been interviewed in depth during the month of April to June 2024. Data collection will focus on capturing the lived experiences, narratives, and symbolic practices associated with conversion, as well as the social dynamics and conflicts that emerge within and beyond the converted people. For collecting data researcher followed three techniques. Using of multiple technique enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the qualitative data.

Semi-structure interview:

This method minimizes rigidity of both the structure interview and non - structure interview. Some account of detailed description has gained from this method. Few questions

had created focusing on religious behaviour, beliefs, why the convert and what issues they are facing. In view of their answers, some questions came to researcher's mind again and this way a detailed interview going on.

Group discussion

There was a group discussion with 5 people who converted their religion. Researcher also act as a moderator in the discussion. The conversation was audio-recorded for one hour. The themes were suggested by the moderator, and the conversation went on. Discussion topics included about the new challenges faced by converts.

Direct Observation

Researcher went to the Church to see the converts. The reason is that this would be the ideal way to record the real behaviour and interactions of converts because the subjects might comfortable in the space where surrounding people are same like the converts. The researcher believed that direct observation was the most efficient method for observing the activities and interactions while the research participants remaining unnoticeable and yet a part of the study. Even if the researcher engaged in verbal communication and interaction at one time throughout the study, it is reasonable to claim that this involvement was not fully active and that the researcher acted more as a "participant as an observer".

Sampling Technique:

Snowball sampling, also known as Chain-referral sampling, is used for this current research. This sampling method used recommendations from current subjects to find the necessary sample sizes for the study. This seems very effective for this kind of sensitive issues.

Data Analysis:

Data analysis will involve an interpretive approach considering Turner's Social Drama Model. Themes related to each stage of the social drama (breach, crisis, redress, reintegration) will be identified, interpreted and analysed.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical guidelines will be followed throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring

confidentiality, and respecting cultural sensitivities. Participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without repercussion, and efforts will be made to minimize harm and maintain the integrity of the research process.

Significance of the Study:

This research has the potential to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical interventions related to religious conversion and social dynamics in India. By applying Turner's Social Drama Model (1974) to the study of conversion among lower caste Hindus, this study seeks to illuminate the complex interplay of social, cultural, and religious factors shaping individual and collective identities.

Research Findings

The conversion to Christianity among lower Hindu castes in Purba Medinipur is a multifaceted phenomenon with deep-rooted social and cultural implications. Historically, the lower castes in India have faced systemic discrimination and social exclusion under the caste system. Conversion to different religion has often been perceived as a means to escape caste-based oppression. Through the lens of Victor Turner's Social Drama Model, this study reveals the complex interplay of motivations, impacts, and reactions associated with religious conversion. While offering a pathway to social mobility and spiritual fulfilment for many, the process also engenders significant social tensions and ethical debates. Many converts cited the desire and the appeal of Christian spiritual accomplishment offered by the new faith were significant motivators. A notable number of converts reported experiencing significant improvements in their physical and mental health after conversion. They attributed these improvements to the support systems within Christian communities and the spiritual practices they adopted, which they believed contributed to their wellbeing and even recovery from severe diseases which they didn't get by practicing their original Hindu religion. The message of universal brotherhood and the compassionate nature of Christian theology resonated with many converts.

The Breach

A breach represents the initial rupture in the community's social norms and values. This stage is characterized by the first signs of

conflict arising from the conversion process. The initial breach occurs when individuals or groups from lower Hindu castes begin questioning and resisting the existing caste practices and religious performances. Shiuli Bhuian (F, 18y) a college going lady narrated

"From childhood I used to suffer from various physical health problems since and had to visit doctors many times. Till 2021, I worshiped God and Goddess of Hindus, used to give Anjali (offering flowers to God with folded hand and chanting Vedic mantras), took Prasad (The offering food to God is distributed after the worship and eaten by the worshippers for the grace of God) and observed Hindu rituals and always prayed for my good health. Even my mother also did that. During the Covid-19 period in 2022, I and my mother was suffering from poor health tremendously. There is a person in the neighbourhood just next to our door talked about Jesus to us. Although neighbour did not tell us anything about Christian religion. She then told us pray in the name of Jesus and assure us for our better health. I and my mother started praying in the name of Jesus and also started going to the church. After few months I and my mother have accepted the Christianity since 2022. For this conversion a number of diseases diminished from our body."

The breach in this case occurred when the informant and her mother began experiencing severe health issues, which led them to seek alternative forms of spiritual and physical relief. An introducer of them to Christian beliefs, suggesting that prayer in the name of Jesus could improve their health. In the same way Gouri Maity (F, 37y) shared

"My aunt was suffering from cancer. The doctor said that she could not be survived anymore. Then my aunt went to the house of Pitaparameshwar (an appellation for God within the local Christian community) and prayed and she is in better health condition now."

Again, Savitri Majhi (F, 30y) also narrated

"My husband was bedridden, even after seeing many doctors he did not go well. The doctors couldn't understand what happened and they just gave him many kinds of medicine. Though we are poor, it was not possible for us to buy medicine all the while. I used to provide as much as possible. Then one day I came to know about Lord Jesus from one of my sisters started praying in the name of Pitaparameshwar (Jesus). When I told the prophet about my problem, the prophet told me

in front of about 400-500 people who are present in that church that my husband would be cured within a few days. And it worked. Fortunately, my husband becomes cure. Our economic suffering has been removed."

The above narratives clearly depict that persistent health issues created a sense of vulnerability and dissatisfaction with their current religious practices. The breach became evident when Gouri Maity's aunt, suffering from terminal cancer, and Savitri Majhi's husband from unidentified disease found unexpected recovery through prayer to Pitaparameshwar (Jesus). This miraculous event challenged the existing beliefs and introduced the possibility of a new spiritual path that could offer tangible benefits. So, there was a rupture in their old religious belief.

The Crisis

The breach escalates into a crisis when individuals decide to convert to Christianity, leading to heightened tensions within the community. This crisis phase is characterized by a deep personal transformation and a shift in spiritual allegiance. The informant's decision to adopt Christianity leads to significant changes in life, including the establishment of a prayer space in the home and hosting gatherings to worship Pitaparameshwar (Jesus). This phase also involves a social crisis, as the informants navigate the tension between new beliefs and the expectations of the wider Hindu society. The crisis is also characterized by significant internal and external conflicts. Savitri Majhi (F, 30y) reported

"The Prophet told me to follow many customs after the acceptance of Christianity. I should not go for the pujas like Hindus. Puja Prasad cannot be eaten, Alta (a red dye that is applied to the feet of Hindu women, mainly during religious occasions) cannot be applied and Mehndi (Heena plant dye that Hindu women apply during religious festivals) cannot be done. Maduli (a small square or cylinder-shaped silver material filled by worshiped flower gives more positive energy and protect from evil energy) cannot be taken. Many of my neighbours do not show any respect as I follow these. Some even say that when I will die, there would be no place for my family in crematorium ground. Some even compare with Muslims, and said body should be buried in Muslim cemetery when I will die."

The informants began adopting Christian practices, praying to Jesus, and attending

church, which conflicted with their long-standing Hindu identity. The new religious practices prohibited them from participating in traditional Hindu rituals, causing further tension within the household and community. They faced social ostracism and threats of expulsion from their community, as well as insults and comparisons to other religious (Muslims) person from relatives and neighbours. Converts allowing themselves to practice new faith while avoiding the full public declaration that might lead to social exclusion. This adaptation enables them to experience the benefits of their faith without the immediate backlash from the community. Additionally, the communal celebration of Christian festivals like Christmas further integrates them new religious practices into a familiar social context, providing both spiritual and social fulfilment.

Redress

During the redress phase, efforts are made to address the crisis. The crisis involved adopting and solidifying their new Christian identity. The informants underwent a formal initiation into Christianity, which included submitting personal documents (like Govt. identity card, photo etc), being baptized, and receiving new religious guidance from their Prophet. Shiuli Bhuinya (F, 18y) reported

"After receiving the documents, the assistants of the Prophet left gave a date for initiation. On that day, Prophet took the candidate down in the water of a pond of the church and put his hands on the head of the candidate. That very day Prophet tells them 'We have been saved by confessing by our mouth that the Lord is Jesus, believing with our heart and soul that God alone protect his beloved son/daughter'... At the time of initiation, candidate has to dip in the water three times and chant the mantra and the Prophet himself dips his/her head with his hands, and then come out from the water and wears new clothes and then be seated inside the church. Then the Prophet came and pray on behalf of everyone, prayer has done in front of the cross and at that time Prophet tell the converts what rules to follow and what not to do. On those days Prophet used to wear pant-shirt and blazer and the women of that charge should wear long white gowns or white sarees."

The church provided a new social and spiritual support system, reinforcing their conversion and helping them navigate the challenges they faced from their previous community.

They began following new religious customs, advised avoiding Hindu rituals and adopting Christian observances, which helped them integrate more fully into their new faith community. The church leaders play a crucial role in providing spiritual guidance, and healthcare.

Reintegration (or Schism)

The final phase involves either reintegration into a new social order or a complete schism from the old one. But in present study the data portray that a partial reintegration occurs as the informant balances their new faith with the social constraints of their day-to-day life. Snigdha Manna (F, 20y) narrated

"I don't want to identify myself with any religion at present, because I believe that I am a human being first and I have to do good for people... At very beginning, my neighbours and even my relatives did back chats for my family as we used to go for Church. But now we generally avoid their words. We used to pray at home and occasionally go to the church either on Saturday or Sunday. There is no specific time for prayer and I do this whenever I want, may be three to four times a day... I didn't go through the initiation process yet but I believe God is there to protect his children."

Most of them continues to participate in Christian worship privately and occasionally attends church events, but avoids full initiation to prevent social ostracization. This cautious approach allows them to maintain their place in the community while benefiting from the spiritual and social support offered by their new religious faith. However, there remains an underlying schism, as full acceptance into the Christian community is hindered by the potential backlash from Hindu neighbours. The informants continue to identify as Hindus publicly due to societal pressure and fear of ostracism. They still engage in some Hindu practices unconsciously or out of habit. To them, if more neighbours convert to Christianity, they anticipate a full transition to identifying as Christians, as societal acceptance would reduce the stigma. This indicates a potential schism from their traditional Hindu community. Although the rest of their family supports them, the converts leading to a mixed religious household. This creates a nuanced reintegration where new Christian practices coexist with traditional Hindu customs.

Concluding Observation

It has become clear that conversion to Christianity among the lower Hindu castes in Purba Medinipur is a very intricate process of social and personal change, as depicted by the research participants. Victor Turner's Social Drama Model articulated these phases of change quite well by identifying the breach of the initial discontent, the crisis of faith and identity, the adaptive tactics of redress, and, finally, the balance between schism and reintegration. Turner's social drama model can be taken to identify the phases of conflict and resolution which define the informants' journey of conversion. In this way, this conceptualization will help in explaining how their traditional Hindu identity and their new Christian beliefs are constantly being negotiated at both a personal and social level. The findings highlight to a series of key aspects of religious conversion which is a process of continuous negotiation between their traditional Hindu identity and their new Christian beliefs, at both a personal and social level, in which personal and broader social experiences are situated. These are

- Health as a Catalyst: Anxiety over one's own health might be a strong incentive to look for alternative religious or spiritual resolution.
- Social Pressure: Converts must negotiate their new religious identity while dealing with fears of social rejection and desires for approval.
- Religious Identity: Due to a combination of force from the outside world and internal convictions, converts may have a flexible and changing religious identity.
- Community Support: Religious groups play a critical role in giving converts

a feeling of community and support, particularly in the early stages of their journey.

Unless policymakers, religious leaders, and scholars understand the dynamics brought about by religious conversions, they cannot successfully navigate the opportunities and challenges. It is in these dynamics that lies insightful knowledge about the lived experiences of the converts and the larger social implications for religious conversion in current India.

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