

## **Changes in the Religion of the Nepalese of Manipur: Conversion and Acculturation**

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### **Introduction**

India has seen conversion backed by political regimes or worked as forms of resistance to particular social and political regimes. Both mass and individual conversions as well as conversions bolstered by varying degrees of duress and those caught in moments of dialogue and religious interchange has also been witnessed (Robinson, 2003, pp.13-14). This study explores the conversion to Christianity, the impact of Christianity, and the degree of acculturation/assimilation of the Nepalese of Manipur, a state in the north-eastern part of India. Human beings need to interact with one another. One, living along with different communities of people, need to know a lingua franca to communicate with the other. This multi-cultural aspect of a society could be seen among the Kukis, Meiteis and the Nepalese. Tremendous acculturation could be found regarding language among the three groups. All the three communities have adapted the language and dialects of each group to carry out their daily activities or trade.

For the study, sixty non-Manipur groups of respondents have been selected from the rural and urban areas of Churachandpur, Senapati and Chandel districts of Manipur where the group was found to inhabit along with the Meiteis and the Kukis in significant number. Through simple random sampling 60 representative respondents were selected and studied. In this group, the Nepalese who form the majority have been studied and interviewed. In order to analyze the impact of Christianity on the native religion of the Nepalese and the Kuki and the Meiteis cultural approach is adopted. Thus, an attempt has been made to study the mutual adaption between the Nepalese and

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Kuki religion of Manipur and Christianity through acculturation process. A brief description of the different groups of people in the state, their religious beliefs, conversion to Christianity and the acculturation process has been outlined here.

### ***People of Manipur***

‘Meitei’, also commonly called Manipuri, is the dominant ethnic group of Manipur, who mostly live in the valley. Other ethnic groups in the state are the Naga and Kuki tribes. The Scheduled Castes of Manipur are known as Lois and Yaithibis. And, other communities who inhabit are the Nepalese, Punjabis, Marwaris, Biharis, etc. The Nepalese, who came after the World War II, form a significant group among the non-Manipuri communities of Manipur.

### ***Nepalese of Manipur***

Nepali migration to India dates back to the 19th century, when many Nepalese migrated to Punjab and joined the British army in India. They also came to work on tea plantations in Assam and Darjeeling (Naujoks, 2009). Nepalese started settling in Manipur after the Second World War. Historians, like Khelchandra, Ibungohal, to name a few, claimed that most of the Nepalese entered Manipur as helpers and labourers who subsequently went into the interiors of the hills and started cultivating the land of the tribal chiefs as tenants. Some of them undertook cattle rearing and most of the settlers started dairies along with their agriculture. They are scattered and inhabit in the valleys and hills of Kanglatombi, Mao, Maram, Karong and Kangpokpi areas. The population of the various communities inhabiting in Manipur according to the 2001 Census report is presented below in table 1.

Table 1: Population distribution of the different communities of Manipur

Name of the community	Population	% of the community population to the total population
Meiteis	1,301,484	54.49
S. T.	713,814	29.89
S. C.	60036	2.51
Muslims	167,204	7
Non-Manipuris (Nepalese, Burmese, Chinese, other Indian nationals, etc.)	146,096	6.11
Total	2,388,634	100

### ***Religion***

Religion, one of the major subsystems of culture, has been a strong basis for an individual's social and cultural identity. It also functions as a common yardstick for people to compare themselves with others. As Billings and Scott have stated in their influential synthesis of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Berger, religion is both "World Maintaining" and "World Shaking" capable of legitimating or challenging power and privileges (1994, p.173).

In the contemporary scenario, though the importance of religion has been diminishing, it still continues to mould and regulate the ways of life. Religion has facilitated the formation of subjectivities, collective practices and customs. The ritualistic and performative aspects of religion are also used by people in different ways to ooze out their mental stress. People have been performing religious ceremonies and rituals by themselves or in groups in various ways such as meditation, singing and attending *bhajans*, *sat sangh*, etc. In a sociological perspective, religion is a social phenomenon and helps in establishing an

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interactive relationship with the other social units that constitutes a society (Johnstone, 1988, p.1). Religion provides a meaning for life; it provides authority figures, and most importantly for Durkheim, it reinforces the morals and social norms held collectively by all within a society (Durkheim, E. 1912). Far from dismissing religion as mere fantasy, despite its natural origin, Durkheim sees it as a critical part of the social system so much so that religion provides social control, cohesion, and purpose for people, as well as another means of communication and gathering for individuals to interact and reaffirm social norms (ibid). So, from a sociological perspective religion has been studied as a central theoretical problem in understanding social action, the relation between religion and other areas of social life- economics, politics, and social class, and religious roles, organizations, and movements (Sills,1968).

### **Emergence of Christianity**

The emergence of Christianity can be due to different reasons among different groups in India. Firstly, it is due to the sense of brotherhood and equality, and also the lack of resistance gave the right environment for Christianity to take its root among the tribal people. Secondly, many Brahmins, especially in the South, who had either developed strong conviction in Christian doctrine or tasted the progressive nature of the western civilization desired to welcome Christianity (Sema, 1980, p.72). However, Christian churches in India have found the most fertile ground for expansion among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups during the twentieth century; the fastest growing Christian communities have been located in the northeast, among the Khasis, Mizos, Nagas, and other hill tribes. Christianity in India offers a non-Hindu mode of acculturation during a period when the state and modern economy have been radically transforming the life-styles of the hill peoples. Missionaries have led the way in the development of written languages and literature for many tribal groups. Christian churches have provided a focus for unity among

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 different ethnic groups and have brought with them a variety of charitable services (Indianchild.com, 2000).

### *Emergence of Christianity in Manipur*

The mass conversion to Christianity has taken place in most of the hill regions of North-East India since 1836. While the hill people were fully engrossed with their religion based on nature and supernatural, Christian Missionaries penetrated into their existing belief. During the British rule the Christian Missionaries came to India and started converting the hill people. Manipur was not exception to this. The Christian Missionaries who first entered into Manipur, as Gangte has remarked, were Rev. William Pettigrew, an educationist and Watkin Roberts along with Dr. Peter Fraser, a medical man (1993).

The condition in the state, especially the feud in the royal family, accounts significantly in the emergence of Christianity, coming of the Christian Missionaries, and the spread of Western education in the history of Manipur. The British Government seemed to have declared war against the state as the seed had already been sown. In the Anglo-Manipuri war, the forces advanced to Imphal, the capital, after heavy fighting. Manipur's long preserved independence and sovereignty was lost. On 22<sup>nd</sup> of *Langban* (September), 1891 AD, the Political Agent in Manipur called the Maharani and Jubaraj Churachand, who was 8, made him the king. Imphal, the capital (Kangla) had been a centre for all literary and intellectual activities of Manipur for centuries. The Kings of Manipur were great patrons of learning and learned men. The Meiteis had their own script and scriptures written in leaves and barks of trees. In the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century during Meidingu (King) Pamheiba (Maharaja Garibaniwaj), the King accepted Hinduism as a royal religion in place of the original Meitei faith of *Sanamahi* (the indigenous religion of the Meiteis) and ordered the burning of all religious scriptures related to *Sanamahi*, which is still remembered as "*Puya Meithaba*." A

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number of Hindu Brahmins from Bengal replaced the Meitei *Maichous* in the *Loisang* and temples, and with time, Bengali script and language were introduced. More than one hundred years later, when the British took over Manipur in 1891, the King and his assembly was devoted Hindus, and the Meitei population had embraced Vaishnavism after decades of resistance (The Internet Association for the Promotion of Manipur History Art Culture Tradition and Literature or IAP\_MHA\_CTL).

The British religious policy was determined by their understanding that the Princes of Manipur were staunch Hindus and almost all in the valley had accepted Hinduism. Knowing that Hinduism was the faith of the biggest section of the society, the Britishers did not want to propagate any other religion in Manipur. Conversion of the Meitei Hindus of the valley was the goal of the missionaries. But the Political Agent, who was responsible of governing the state until the Hindu Raja could come of age, did not permit to preach among the Hindu subjects. Pettigrew was advised rather to work in the hill areas or leave the valley alone. He opted for the second alternative. Permission to enter the state was given in January, 1894 by a British Officer in charge of the State at that time, since the newly appointed Raja, who succeeded the usurper who was executed, was but a young Hindu lad. Until then no Christian missionary had ever been allowed into the state, and nothing has been stated in the annals or histories, whether written by Indians or by British officials, that Christianity was known or not.

### ***Conversion to Christianity***

Conversion to Christianity began after the Christian missionaries established themselves in the tribal areas in North-East India in 1894, three years after the British Chin-Lushai Expedition and the Anglo-Manipur War. However, the progress of conversion up to 1911 was slow. The converts were mostly young men studying in the school established by the

missionaries. Subsequently students of the school, who accepted Christianity established churches in their villages. Most converts were Tangkhuls, a Naga sub-tribe, initially. By 1921 conversion rate picked up. So long the converts included individuals as well as groups and even whole villages came into the fold (Ansari 1991). Pettigrew documented that 1916 saw petitions coming from a small group of Thadou Kukis praying for teachers and pastors to come over and help them organize themselves into companies of believers based on the training and teaching of the parent church at Ukhrul. Only the valley with its Hindus and Mohammedan population of over 280,000 is still closed to the missionary and his message (1915, pp. 40-43).

Among the 60 respondents from the three selected districts selected for the study, 10.2% are Christians, 25.2% are believers of the traditional religions, and 0.6% are believers of Judaism. Among the converted Christians and Judaism respondents, the Roman Catholic Church, Church of Christ, Seventh Day Adventist, Revival Christian Church, etc. are the common denominations. According to the converts there are no criteria to become a member of any of the denominations. But one needs to have faith in Jesus, believe in His words, accept the doctrines and Jesus as one's Lord and only then can be baptized and become a member of any denomination one chooses. Table 2 represents the respondents' conversion/non-conversion from the three selected districts.

Table 2: Conversion to different religions

Name of the group	Converts				Non-converts		Total
	Christianity		Judaism				
Non-Manipuris	17	10.2%	1	0.6%	42	25.2%	60

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***Knowledge about Christianity***

Majority of the converts believed that Christianity is a religion for all-the poor and the rich for they have never felt the difference and people are treated equally. Some believed that it is for the poor only because it helps the poor people. 18% rural and 9.6% urban respondents are also of the opinion that the general impression towards Christianity is indifferent in the society at large. Another 1.2% rural converted respondents feel that the general impression towards Christianity is positive. While 6% urban and 1.2% rural converted respondents asserted that the impression of Christianity according to the general population is negative. According to the respondents they would not have followed Christianity if it was not preached in their village, society or in the family. Even now mostly the evangelists are doing the preaching of the Gospel to the people and among the converts very few take up the responsibility of preaching the Gospel .According to the converted respondents, any religion could be made acceptable through preaching or explaining.

***Conflicts and acceptance of Christianity***

The North-Eastern states are generally believed to be dominant believers of Christianity. But Manipur, being a Hindu state where the Meiteis and the Nepalese are staunch followers of Vaishnavism, Christian preaching of the Gospel contradicted the established faith in Hinduism. Christianity threw a challenge to the old faith. Hence, preaching and conversion is marked with rivalries and conflicts between the champions of the old order and the new converts.

Religious conversion implies accepting a set of beliefs and practices which is quite different from the system of truth and religious commitment previously experienced (Heirich 1977). In other words, conversion is change of religion from one faith to another with corresponding change in beliefs, values, attitude, motivation, character and morality. In the context of



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Manipur, the idea of conversion has characteristically been discussed in relation to Christianity, 'conversion' often being synonymous with 'conversion to Christianity' (Pauw 1975).

The respondents came in contact with Christianity through their Kuki friends and eventually accepted it when preachers came to their villages, and told them about the Gospel of Jesus. The varied reasons which made the respondents convert to Christianity or Judaism can be summarized in the following.

1. 5% of the converts claimed that having started reading the Bible and begun to realize that Jesus is the only True God, they got convinced and thus accepted Him.
2. 1.7% of the respondents said that even though they came to know about Christianity they were not convinced. But got convinced only after attending the Gospel preaching sessions of the evangelists.
3. 3.33% said that they were searching for the Truth, without realizing that they were enjoying the sins in a way, being lost in life. Once they heard the redemptive doctrine preached by the evangelists, they accepted Christianity.
4. When 1.7% of them got cured and saved from grave dangers with the help of evangelists and the Church, they started believing Jesus.
5. 1.7% said that after believing Him, they were at peace with everything as they began to believe that after death their souls will be one with God.

Given below are the narrations of few respondents about how they eventually converted to Christianity:

A middle aged man from a very orthodox family, a higher secondary pass, narrated the process of his search for the true God and how he found it. Since his childhood he has been in

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search of truth. He believed in Hindu Shastra taught by his uncle that the sun revolves around the earth. But when he was in VI<sup>th</sup> standard, in his geography book, he came to know that it is not the sun but the earth which revolves around. When he could not get a clear idea what actually is the truth about the Universe. One of his Kuki friend gave him the *Bible* and said that it might clarify his doubts. Then, he started reading the *Book of Genesis* in the *Bible*. The view of *the Bible* about the creation of sky with planets, elements, human beings and other forms of life on earth and sea seemed convincing than the Hindu Shastras eventhough his doubts about sun and earth was not clarified. After reading the book daily at midnight, hiding from his family, he felt that this new faith was true and wanted to follow it. He accepted it on his own and started praying stealthily everyday in bed. According to him Jesus is the savior of all, and faith in Him has become stronger day by day. He asserted that his faith, after reading *the Bible* and other stories which according to him are proofs of the relevance and superiority of Christianity, became firm. He was convinced by the view of the *New Testament* that God is the Holy Spirit and came in the form of human being, Jesus to save us. One can get salvation through faith in Him. According to him, Jesus' sacrifice would give salvation and save all the sinners.

Another man, who claimed that he was an orthodox Hindu, initially challenged the evangelists thinking they were foreign agents. In 1987, he heard a message from *the Bible* which said- "there is a God, a living God." When he learnt God was alive and present, reincarnated as Jesus, he wanted to test Him by praying and finding out whether his prayers could be answered. After he started praying, he felt bliss, peace, enlightenment which changed his life from that moment. After that he knew God is alive and accepted and believed in Him. In many cases the converts' families are the only ones following Christianity. But a convert said all his family and in-laws are converted after he explained to them about the Creator of all, the True God. In general the converts feel that their life has been changed. They are happy with their decision. They are at peace with life and

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have learnt to be more patient, co-operative, and have developed love for all human beings.

The Christian converts celebrate no Hindu festivals. They no more follow their traditional ceremonies, rituals, festivals, religious and social practices. Instead now they celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter.. They perform their marriages in the church, bury their dead, etc. But one middle aged man said he still lights the lamp, though no pujas are performed on Diwali with his friends and family. He also celebrates the Meitie festival of *Ningol Chakouba* (a festival of inviting the married sisters and daughters at the maternal home for a grand feast two days after Diwali). He feels that all these festivals should be preserved, since they represent the culture of their society and encourages others to do so. What he does not strongly believe in or do is offering and worshipping of the idols.

According to the converts, their society considers them of defying the social norms and are ostracized and sometimes even threatened by their own families or relatives. Some native beliefs have been incorporated into Christianity. The converts have not identified any traditional God with Christian God. And none of them do any appeasing rituals or offer prayer to the evil spirits. But both converted and non-converted respondents stated that Christianity has not affected their native religion.

According to the convert the benefits they got after conversion are mainly the changes in their attitude towards life. They felt that after conversion they have become more friendly with others; peaceful at heart; developed harmony within the group and with others; become very cooperative and disciplined; developed patience and control over their anger; learnt to forgive others and overcome fear about life after death. Interaction, mingling with others have also increased which helped them in learning many new things and enriching their knowledge. This has helped them to work for God by conveying the message to others. Besides these, in materialistic

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terms the church helps those families who cannot afford the education of their children by giving textbooks or monetary help

***Reasons for not converting to any other religion***

Majority of the respondents have not converted to any religion and continue to follow their own religion. The reasons for not converting to Christianity/Judaism are that they have their own religion which has been followed by their forefathers. They believe that the traditional religion is not inferior to Christianity. Hence, they do not develop a liking for or affinity to Christianity in particular. Some of them even attended a preaching sessions and liked what was preached, in principle. But never considered of converting to any other religion and never can be inspired to convert.

On the other hand Evangelists insist on converting to Christianity. The respondents felt that Evangelists should not impose the new faith on them. Sometimes the evangelists try to forcibly convert people and are backed by terrorists. Some youths after training and learning the Vedas from Vrindavan came and were talking about the Vedas, after a while Christian believers came from the neighboring village and started threatening. They also said that in the village only Christian preaching should be given. They think Christianity was the only religion and does not even take Prasad from them, shared the respondents.

***Views regarding preaching of Christianity, conversion and Hindu religion***

According to the converts, preaching of Christianity should be increased. It should reach every nook and corner of the world. The respondents considered it as the only means to awaken a person's faith and spread Jesus' words. Through preaching the words of Jesus could be reached to a larger population and give them a chance to save their souls. For those illiterate lots it is

also a good way of communicating God's words to them; by spreading the words of Jesus the followers were doing their duty in delivering His words to the unknown; which is the duty every child of Jesus should do.

A convert married to a Kuki woman said that until he was baptized he was not behaving like a true Christian. But once he had developed faith in the Lord he became truthful. The following stanza of *the Bible* is said to have changed his life-

*O loving and kind God have Mercy  
Have Pity on Me and take away the awful stain  
of my transgressions  
Oh wash me, cleanse me from this guilt  
Let me be pure again, for I admit my shameful  
deed- it haunts me day and night.  
It is against you and you alone  
I sinned and did this terrible thing . . . . .  
You deserve honesty from the heart, yes, utter  
sincerity and truthfulness  
Oh, give me this wisdom  
Sprinkle me with the cleansing blood and  
I shall be clean again  
Wash me and I shall be wither than snow  
(PSALM 51: 1-16)*

This group of Christian believers, advocate conversion and said that all should know the Lord. According to them, if one has faith in God, one can be converted. Peace and love, faith in God, eternal life, are all there in Christianity. People should convert otherwise no savior would be there in their last journey. Only a believer can get an eternal life. Those people who are coming into the fold of Christianity are saving their souls. They have realized that they want to be with God even after death. In fact conversion depends on the individual. If one wants to accept Christ and free his soul from sins he should understand God first and have deep faith in Him. Conversion is open to all believers, giving oneself wholly to God, a step forward to

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salvation, believes the respondents. Those who want to accept Jesus and know Him should get converted without any hesitation and come truly to God.

On the other hand the non-convert respondents' viewed that preaching of Christianity sometimes becomes too much to listen to; felt that such preaching were being imposed on them. They asserted that Hinduism does not preach others or impose on others and it is no less than any other religions too. The non-convert respondents who are migrants from different parts of India have come to earn and do business. They are either living alone or with their relatives far away from their families. They go to their native places once or twice a year and have not married any Meitie or Kuki woman.

Regarding Hindu religion the respondents are of the opinion that Hindu religion is also good in its own place. Hindus believe in the rebirth and recycling of human life which is not there in Christianity. Many respondents find this idea fascinatingly optimistic. But Hinduism is also very vast and complex when it comes to the scriptures and doctrines. In the realm of social practices, it is imbued with notions of pollution-purity, hierarchy, inequality, etc. The path and conception of salvation in Hinduism is totally different from that of Christianity. Hindu religion is polytheistic; Hindus believe in so many Gods and Goddesses whereas Christianity believes in One God. Hindus cremate the dead body which is not liked by the respondents who prefer the Christian burial.

### ***After-effects of converting to Christianity***

According to majority of the converts there have not been any changes in their family or village educationally, financially or professionally. But few respondents from the rural set-up said that the church helped in their children's studies and supported when they had financial problems and as a Pastor one of them also got some stipend too. A respondent cited an example of an old Christian believer from Bihar who was living with his wife.

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This person met with an accident while he was arranging for a church convention that left his whole body paralyzed. For his family the church committee sanctioned Rs. 1500/- every month. The converted respondents asserted that some specific changes could be noted in their society after conversion. These might be summed up as a new sense of self, exhibiting greater self confidence and self-respect as well as less fear, fatalism and passivity (Webster, 2007, p.370). Though conversion itself did not produce noticeable economic change, but it did mean some improvement in social status. These changes could be categorized as following:

1. Cleanliness and hygienic: After attending the preaching and coming in contact with fellow community people their lifestyle changed. They are now more concerned about cleanliness and hygien. The impact of it can be seen in the decline of the rate of illness and improved health of the family members.
2. Education: Children of the lower income convert families are provided a much subsidized rate from the mission schools which are considered to be good schools in the state and were hard to afford by the parents.
3. Employment: After the completion of their education in mission schools most of the children are being absorbed into jobs within the institutes of the mission. This also helps the family financially besides lessening the worries of finding a job after school or college.
4. Self-respect and greater liberality: A sense of confidence and self-respect could be observed among the converts and more liberal with regard to social and ritualistic customs. This helped them in curbing the expenditure and rigidity to perform social and religious rituals which cost them a huge sum.
5. Spirituality and participation in evangelistic work helped them to face the hurdles of life more reasonably.

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## Acculturation and its effects

Though the Nepalese have settled since 19<sup>th</sup> century in the same locality with the other ethnic groups in the state no major cultural traits have been adopted. Instead, they are found to be following strictly their culture and tradition in spite of living together in the same village or town and only wish and greet each other in the festivals. They like the values and ethics of the Meiteis and the Kukis. They mostly adopted the dress pattern and have cultural exchange with the Meiteis which may be because of the common faith-Hinduism. While the non-convert youth celebrate *Chavang Kut* (harvesting festival of the Kukis) and Christmas with their Kuki friends they did not like or want to accept anything from the religion of the other communities especially of the Kukis. Still, they like certain features of Kuki tribe such as-their unity, togetherness, no fixed timing for any ceremonies, no burden on the poor for any social obligations or ceremonies, etc.

The converted members of the community have cultural exchange with the Kukis regarding religion. 6.7% of them have got married with the Kuki women and have settled down in the Kuki villages too. Among the converted respondents four of them have accepted and converted to Christianity after marrying with Kuki women. They liked the Kukis' belief in one God, unity in the Church, concept of salvation and going to God after death and their practice of having no elaborate rituals, nor belief of pollution-purity, etc.

## Conclusions

The reasons for converting mainly to Christianity are twofold. Firstly, because of convincing preaching and strong belief in the True living God, Jesus; secondly, because of the financial benefits, health benefits, jobs, educational benefits as well as a sense of elevated status in their own community. It is also historically evident that any race or people, whose culture remained intact with an established system of philosophy and



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religion, strongly resisted foreign religions and never adopted them. Inter-community marriage is also a significant reason for the increasing number of conversion to Christianity. The benefits, guardianship, care, and certain benefits are reasons which cannot be overlooked. One remarkable finding is that no flow of converts to Hinduism, Islam or any other organized religion has been found. The reasons are obvious, as Misra posited that the majority of the converts have very much to gain and many things to lose in any other exchange of equation (1980, p.83). But, as the respondents are mature enough to rationalize and understand the religion, like it and opt for the new faith, the spiritual and material benefits they could acquire cannot be dismissed.

According to 50% rural and 26.7% urban the general impression of people towards Christianity is found to be indifferent; 3.33% rural found it to be positive and the 16.7% of them said the attitude was negative towards Christianity in the society. In the light of the data the monetary benefits, mostly kindly implied in Christianity, was found to be attractive. Due to the help and support from the Churches to poor and needy, some respondents who belonged to rural areas with limited income believed that Christianity is the religion of the poor and helps them. Their geographical location and the living standard seem to have influenced their opinion. Based on the above given statistical data it can be concluded that Christianity has not made an impact on the native religion of the Nepalese. Their participation has been only in each others' social festivals besides daily interactions. But they liked the unity of the Kukis, their least cumbersome social functions/rituals, and absence of pollution or purity.

Strikingly, interweaving and disentangling are the metaphors that most accurately describe the conversion experience, which meshes two worlds, two cultures, and two religions, only to unravel strands and cast upon each strand the estranged light of unfamiliarity. In short, conversion is primarily an interpretive act, an index of material and social conflicts. Such an approach

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does not reject the Jamesian model of conversion as epiphany or sudden “turning,” but rather locates religious subjectivity more precisely in relation to the culture that produces, inhibits, or modifies it. In this study, considering the quality and extent of acculturation of the respondents, adaptation of the culture, values and modes of life between the communities is not significant though they have been staying in the vicinity of each other.

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