



Religious conversion among the Dalit community in Resunga municipality: Push factors from hinduism to christianity

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Abstract

This research investigates the factors behind religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity within the Dalit community in Resunga Municipality located in Gulmi, Nepal. This research specifically targets four wards of the municipality (ward No. 1, 2, 8, and 9), where three churches are established with a notable Dalit population. The research identifies the primary factors for conversion as dissatisfaction with the norms and values of Hinduism, idol worshipping (Murti Puja), the animal sacrifice system, showy culture, false stories, and the influence of specific castes, inability to understand, and lack of clarity regarding eternal life.

The discriminatory cultural norms and values embedded in Hinduism, such as the dominance of higher castes and the prohibition of Dalit participation in religious activities, are significant factors for conversion. Specifically, the Dalit respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the hierarchical caste system, which marginalized and oppressed them, due to a desire for social equality and justice. The prohibition of Dalit access to temples, along with the focus on idol worship and the culture surrounding religious events, further contributed to their disapproval of Hinduism.

Furthermore, the influence of Christian missionaries, who emphasized the accessibility of God through prayer rather than animal sacrifice, played a vital role in promoting alternative beliefs among the Dalit community. More factors, such as the lack of truth and credibility in Hindu religious texts, along with the inability to comprehend Sanskrit scriptures, lead to conversion. Furthermore, the influence of specific castes in politics and power, and the absence of a clear concept of eternal life, were major factors behind conversion.

Despite the presence of anti-conversion laws, the number of Christians in the Dalit community continues to rise. The findings of this research shed light on the factors influencing religious conversion and highlight the Dalits' quest for equality, inclusivity, and a fulfilling spiritual experience in their transition from Hinduism to Christianity.

Keywords

Conversion, hinduism, christianity, equality, inclusivity

Introduction

McNamara (2009) stated that attempting to define religion often leads to contention. This is due to the complexity of religion, causing resistance to a singular definition. Various philosophers have shared different viewpoints on the matter. Karl Marx perceived religion as a response to human suffering, dubbing it the "opium of the people" (Marx, 1844), while Emile Durkheim saw it as a cohesive force, uniting individuals through sacred beliefs and practices within a moral community known as a Church (Durkheim, 1912). In essence, religion involves belief in supernatural powers, fostering social cohesion, and creating a structured society.

Although there are many atheists in the world, most people identify as followers of a religion. This includes various faith systems such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto. Among these, Hinduism, also known as Sanatan Dharma, holds a significant place as one of the oldest religions, with its roots dating back approximately 5000 years.

Hinduism traces its origins to the ancient Aryans who migrated from Iran and settled around the Sindhu (Indus) River in South Asia, near Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in present-day Tibet. These settlers, known as Sindhus, were believers of Sanatan Dharma, venerating nature and adhering to its principles. Over time, they came to be known as "Hindus" due to linguistic variations, and this name eventually became associated with their religious identity.

Prior to the emergence of many present-day religions, people primarily worshipped the fundamental elements of nature, recognizing their profound impact on human livelihood. Water (Jal), fire (Agni), air (Bayu), trees (Brikshya), earth (Prithvi), and sky (Aakash) were revered as divine manifestations. As diverse religions emerged, individuals began to critically assess their beliefs, leading to religious conversions based on personal choices.

In society today, religion not only serves as a matter of faith but also plays a significant role in shaping individual and communal identities. Some individuals actively engage in efforts to convert others to their religions, seeking to spread their beliefs and strengthen their communities. The intricate beliefs of faith systems continue to evolve, reflecting humanity's ongoing quest for spiritual meaning and connection.

Unfortunately, in some societies, different religions are viewed as rivals, fostering negative interactions based on differences in beliefs. Conflicts among different religions arise when certain groups seek to govern others through religious influence, leading to the expansion of the size and dominance of their faith. Nepal, for example, was once a Hindu country until the Constitution of Nepal was promulgated in 2072 BS, declaring it a secular nation, conforming to the evolving nature of religious dynamics in different societies.

Nepal historically embraced Hinduism as its dominant religion, functioning as a Hindu Kingdom until the fall of the monarchy, leading to the transition to a secular state through the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 2047 BS. Since then, there have been various groups advocating for the amendment of the Constitution of Nepal in 2072 BS, hoping to reinstate Nepal as a Hindu state after its declaration as a republic and secular country. Society is continuously evolving, alongside so are perceptions on religion. Resunga Municipality is in Gulmi district, and is characterized by a diverse population, consisting of residents from Brahmin, Chhetri, Vaishya, and Shudra communities. This transition from a monarchy to secular government created a favorable environment for religious conversions among individuals dissatisfied with their current beliefs and led to them seeking better opportunities in another faith. Subsequently, Khristriya Church, Believers Eastern Church, and AG Churches were established in the municipality following the implementation of democracy.

The Constitution of Nepal (2072) prohibits acts that promote conversions from one religion to another; however, the number of Christians in Nepal is steadily increasing. Despite this phenomenon, there is limited literature about religious conversion and its driving factors from Hinduism to Christianity in Nepal. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to identify the factors behind religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity.

The Political Context of Religious Conversion in Orissa by Harish S. Wankhede has discovered that Dalit tribal unity, religious conversion, struggle against the Brahminical caste system, and exploitative capitalism are the basic issues that should drive Dalit social and political movements. All these aspects are present and related

in the recent incidents of communal clashes in Orissa. There are five important observations made by this study in this context. (Wankhede, 2009): first, religious conversion among Dalits and tribal is a form of resistance against caste oppression; second, Hindu nationalist forces perceive conversion as a threat to the traditional caste hierarchy; third, communal violence is often a reactionary tactic to suppress Dalit assertion; fourth, state machinery often aligns with dominant caste interests, marginalizing Dalits further; and fifth, Dalit political mobilization must focus on both cultural identity and economic justice to challenge systemic exploitation.

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Conversion as a Thematic Site: Academic Representations of Ambedkar's Buddhist Turn by Shane P. Gannon takes into consideration the case of Ambedkar and explains why he converted to Buddhism. The study has identified that Ambedkar preferred Buddhism because he found the religion of the Buddha to be the epitome of morality, liberty, equality, and fraternity." Ambedkar made this point very clear. In his words:

"I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination, which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Pradnya (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna (love), and Samata (equality)" (Gannon, 2011).

Converts were also found to change their religion due to the caste system in the religions they had been practicing. Steve Taylor (2014) found that religious conversion from Sikhism to Christianity and neo-Buddhism clearly facilitates feelings of greater self-respect and strength among our UK Dalits, and they articulated the process as one in which they are able to escape from transnational Punjabi caste-based oppression, social exclusion, and humiliation.

Conversions also emerge as a source of hope for individuals who are undergoing problems and trauma in their lives. The results in the study by Peter Halama and Julia Halamova show that the presence of problems, stress, and tension at the time preceding conversion is the most significant factor inducing conversion. Seventeen converts mentioned the presence of some serious problem, traumatic event, or difficulty, and twenty experienced negative feelings at that time. Conversion reduced or resolved these difficulties, as evident from the converts' description of conversion outcomes. Fifteen experienced a greater or lesser improvement in mental life, sixteen reported solving or experiencing support in their problematic issues. It can be said that the consistent presence of this factor in research studies of conversion makes the coping perspective on conversion the most plausible and valid theory of conversion. (Halama & Halamova, 2005)

Studies have also recognized transformation as the central effect of religious conversion. Joshua Iyadurai (2014) has looked at the conversion experience of the converts and found contrasting descriptions about their life before and after the religious experience. Taking note of their statements: 'I could feel some happiness and peace of mind', 'I found something, which gave me joy and peace', and 'I see my life has changed. My old habits, a lot of sinful habits, got changed. This change of outlook in his life was triggered by the religious experience in conversion. Here, the converts also talked about the change of behavior, which they could not manage on their own earlier. They claimed that their prayers were answered, which was unparalleled by any of his earlier experiences. They stated that there was a sense of experiencing the truth, a sense of newness, and a new affection for others. Positive emotion is generally associated with religious experience. Scholars generally agree that the conversion experience is preceded by some kind of emotional disturbance. However, the converts find that their emotional turmoil is calmed in conversion through the religious experience.

Religious Conversion in 40 Countries by Robert J. Barro, Jason Hwang, and Rachel M. McCleary calculated country-level religious-conversion rates for 40 countries. These conversion rates apply to religious adherence classified into eight major types. In a theoretical model based on rational individual choice, the frequency of religious conversion depends on factors that influence the cost of switching and the cost of having the "wrong" religion. Empirical findings for a panel of countries accord with several hypotheses: religious-conversion rates are positively related to religious pluralism, gauged by adherence shares; negatively related to government restrictions on religious conversion; positively related to levels of education; and negatively related to a history of Communism. Conversion rates are not much related to per capita GDP, the presence of a state religion, and the extent of religiosity.

Effects from the type of religious adherence are minor, except for a negative effect from Muslim adherence (Barro et al., 2010).

A study of Ted Robert Gurr in *Why Men Rebel*, introduces the concept of relative deprivation, suggesting that conflict arises not from absolute poverty but from perceived inequality. When groups see themselves as disadvantaged compared to more successful ones, especially along religious lines, resentment may lead to protest or violence, fueling interreligious tensions (Gurr, 1970).

This study explores the complex phenomenon of religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity among Dalit communities in rural Nepal, with a specific focus on Resunga Municipality in Gulmi district. Dalits, who constitute a significant portion of the Hindu community, often face entrenched social, cultural, and economic discrimination, which may serve as push factors influencing their decision to convert. Despite the growing relevance of this issue, there remains a lack of in-depth research on the drivers and consequences of religious conversion in the Nepalese context, particularly among marginalized groups. The research aims to fill this gap by assessing the primary push factors that contribute to religious conversion among the rural Dalit population and examining how these factors impact various aspects of individual and community life. By investigating these dynamics, the study seeks to generate valuable insights into the broader relationship between religion, marginalization, and social transformation in Nepal.

The central research question guiding this study is: What are the primary push factors contributing to religious conversion among the rural population in Resunga Municipality, Gulmi district, Nepal? In addressing this question, the study aims to identify and analyze the social, cultural, and economic challenges faced by Dalit individuals that may drive religious conversion; examine how conversion affects the social status, identity, and community relations of Dalit converts; and evaluate the role of existing religious practices and societal structures as push factors in the conversion process. Furthermore, the study seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can help state agencies, organizations, and community leaders address the concerns of marginalized groups and foster greater social harmony. Through this analysis, the research not only contributes to academic discourse but also aspires to support informed decision-making and policy formulation aimed at reducing discrimination and promoting inclusive social development.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the factors behind religious conversion in Resunga Municipality, Gulmi District. This exploratory

approach aimed to uncover the deeper reasons, opinions, and motivations driving religious conversions. Data were collected through focus group discussions, individual interviews, and observations, enabling a comprehensive understanding of personal experiences and social dynamics influencing conversion. This method provided rich, descriptive insights into the complex interplay of cultural, social, and personal factors involved in the process.

Stratified sampling is employed for representative data collection, categorizing respondents based on caste, age, sex, and education, with a specific emphasis on ensuring over 50% representation from the Dalit community. Primary data is gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, while secondary data from published and unpublished sources is used as references. Data collection techniques encompass observing religious sites and events, conducting structured and unstructured interviews, and engaging in focus group discussions. The data is presented and interpreted in a master table, categorized by social status using the caste system, income, and education. To facilitate effective representation, statistical tools such as pie charts and tables are utilized to visually depict the findings.

The rationale for selecting Resunga Municipality is due to its history as a predominantly Hindu area experiencing frequent religious conversions. The presence of diverse castes within the community allows for a comprehensive analysis of the issue from different perspectives. Particularly, the study targets the Dalit community, which constitutes a significant proportion of the population in the municipality.

The study has limitations due to its focus on a specific Dalit community in just four wards (1, 2, 8, and 9) of Resunga Municipality. With only 43 cases of religious conversion in the sample, it doesn't represent the entire population of the area. The research mainly centers on push factors of religious conversion within the chosen study area, so its findings may not be widely applicable to other geographical regions. Nonetheless, the study aims to achieve theoretical generalization on push factors of religious conversion, adding valuable insights to existing knowledge on the subject.

Results & Discussions

The study investigates the conversion phenomenon from Hinduism to Christianity among the Dalit community in Resunga Municipality. In Charikhola, many local Dalits are actively adopting Christianity and engaging in church activities. However, in Dhagithum and Khanigaun, the commitment to Christianity is less prevalent, with most Christians being migrants, including non-Dalits holding significant roles

in churches. Some respondents cited curiosity and the desire for a new experience as reasons for their conversion. The Believer Church in Ward No. 2 has an average of forty attendees, the AG Church located in Khanigaun sees an average of thirty attendees, and the Christian Church in Ward No. 9 has an average of sixty attendees. Surprisingly, even though Resunga Municipality has three churches, and despite anti-conversion laws, the number of Christians is steadily rising.

By exploring these causes of religious conversion, the research sheds light on the dynamics influencing religious choices in the Dalit community. Understanding these factors can aid in addressing the growing number of conversions and provide valuable insights for religious and social harmony within the region.

Analysis

Most respondents identified Hindu norms and values as the primary push factors for religious conversion, with 26% of converts specifically mentioning them as influential. The dominance of caste groups, such as Brahmins, in religious activities and the exclusion of the Dalit community from religious access and involvement were significant contributing factors. Discriminatory cultural norms and practices persist, with some higher castes still treating Dalits derogatorily as "untouchables," despite the constitutional prohibition. Additional reasons for conversion included issues with idol worship, animal sacrifice, a showy culture, influence of specific castes, and perceived lack of truth and clarity in Hindu holy books, which are often written in difficult language (Sanskrit) and challenging for followers to understand. Dissatisfaction with the use of donations and offerings in social service, instead of benefiting the community, also played a role in the decision to convert.

Medium of conversion

The respondents were asked about the medium or person who guided them in their conversion. The findings show that most converts were influenced by relatives (52%) and friends (25%). These relatives and friends had already been converted and they themselves played a guiding role in encouraging others to convert. Additionally, 20% of the converts were guided by missionaries during their conversion.

Theoretical reflection

From the perspective of conflict theory, religious conversion among Dalits in Resunga Municipality can be viewed as a form of resistance against systemic caste-based oppression embedded in Hinduism. Rooted in Marxist thought, conflict theory explains how marginalized groups challenge dominant social structures to attain equality, dignity, and power (Marx, 1844). The Dalit community's shift to Christianity reflects a rejection of their historical exclusion and oppression, and a

strategic move toward a religion perceived to offer social inclusion, support systems, and equalitarian values (Wankhede, 2009). In this light, conversion becomes not just a spiritual decision but a political act of defiance and empowerment.

Conclusion

The study explores the socio-cultural dynamics influencing religious conversion in rural communities of Nepal. Prevailing social structures, inequalities, and discrimination have driven people towards conversion, seeking new aspirations and hope amid challenges and discrimination within their society. Negative perceptions of Hinduism, such as caste dominance in religious activities and lack of clarity in scriptures, have pushed some towards Christianity, seen as offering hope, equality, and support systems.

Conversions have led to mixed impacts in society. While access to social activities and human rights improved for converts, interactions in cultural and religious programs have decreased. Differences in beliefs have emerged, with Hindus revering cows as sacred while Christians do not. The perception of Christians as cow eaters has created opposing belief systems. Nonetheless, overall social harmony exists, and secularism allows freedom of religion. Hindus have also started reevaluating traditions and making temples less rigid to adhere to constitutional provisions and laws.

Perceptions about God and life vary across different religions, and Christianity and Hinduism offer contrasting beliefs and practices. Hinduism, with its belief in multiple gods, can create confusion among followers. However, some individuals, including Dalits facing social discrimination, are attracted to Christianity for its perceived newness and potential for equality, leading them to adopt it as a trial.

Christianity advocates eternal life, teaching that accepting sins and having faith in Jesus is the path to deserving it. Jesus is seen as possessing charismatic power, capable of solving any problem, and his sacrifice is considered to absolve human sin. The religion spreads its message through the "Good News" (Su-samachar), which is a duty of its believers. Access to religious knowledge differs between the two religions. Hindu scriptures, mostly written in Sanskrit, may be less accessible to the common people, while Christians distribute their holy books in understandable languages, making it easier to grasp their principles.

Perceptions of equality also differ. Christians organize regular interactive programs at churches, promoting a sense of equality among followers. In contrast, temples may be bound by traditional norms and values, leading to social stratification

and discrimination, particularly affecting the lower caste community. Christianity institutionalizes religious activities and provides support to its followers through offerings like Dusansha, BisesVeti, and MutthiDaan, which are circulated among related people and institutions. On the other hand, Hindu donations in temples may not be efficiently redistributed among the needy.

Christianity encourages a cordial environment and prohibits fornication. It provides financial support, including interest-free loans, to those in need. In contrast, some Hindu practices, like Dhami Jhakri Pratha, may demand money and offerings for curing diseases.

In conclusion, perceptions about God and life differ significantly between Christianity and Hinduism. While Christianity offers the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus, Hinduism's multiple gods and traditional practices may present challenges in understanding its principles. Both religions have distinct approaches to equality, institutionalization, and providing support to their followers.

Overall, the study highlights the complex interplay of factors influencing religious conversion in rural Nepali communities. Social inequalities and dissatisfaction with Hinduism's practices have driven some towards Christianity, seeking hope and equality. Conversions have led to both positive and challenging impacts, with differences in beliefs coexisting with social harmony. The country's adoption of secularism has further facilitated religious freedom and the reevaluation of traditional practices.

Recommendations

The study emphasizes several key points related to religious conversion and social harmony in rural Nepal. Firstly, the government and agencies need to ensure adherence to constitutional and legal provisions regarding conversion, preventing any illegal practices. Secondly, although the constitution prohibits discrimination, malpractices like the 'untouchables' and caste system, such practices persist, necessitating collaboration among community leaders and authorities to eliminate such traditions. Thirdly, promoting a culture of tolerance and controlling hate speech and misinformation is crucial to maintain social harmony among diverse religious groups. Additionally, religious preaching should focus on the positive aspects of each faith, avoiding any promotion of hatred or coercion for conversion. Finally, regular interaction and cooperation among community members are essential for fostering coexistence, and religious leaders should play a role in strengthening social harmony for the future.

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