Unveiling the Push Factors: Exploring Religious Conversion from Hinduism to Christianity among Dalit Community in Resunga Municipality, Nepal

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Abstract

This study investigates the push factors behind religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity within the Dalit community in Resunga Municipality, Gulmi, Nepal. The research specifically targets four wards of the municipality (ward No. 1, 2, 8, and 9) with a notable Dalit population, where three churches are established. The study identifies the primary push factors for conversion as dissatisfaction with the norms and values of Hinduism, idol worshiping (Murti Puja), the animal sacrifice system, showy culture, false stories, 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 push factors for conversion. Additionally, the Dalit respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the hierarchical caste system, which marginalizes and oppresses them, leading to a desire for social equality and justice. The prohibition of Dalit access to temples, the focus on idol worshiping, and the showy culture surrounding religious events further contributed to their disillusionment with Hinduism.

Moreover, the influence of Christian missionaries played a vital role in promoting alternative beliefs among the Dalit community, emphasizing the accessibility of God through prayer rather than animal sacrifice. The perceived lack of truth and credibility in Hindu religious texts, the influence of specific castes in power and politics, inability to comprehend Sanskrit scriptures, and the absence of a clear concept of eternal life in Hinduism also contributed to the push factors for religious conversion.

Despite the presence of anti-conversion laws, the number of Christians in the Dalit community continues to rise. The findings of this study shed light on the factors influencing religious conversion and highlight the Dalits'

quest for equality, inclusivity, and a more fulfilling spiritual experience in their transition from Hinduism to Christianity.

Keywords: Conversion, Hinduism, Christianity, Equality, Inclusivity

Introduction

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

Most of the people in this world are followers of God, although there are some atheistic people too. This diverse landscape 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 practitioners 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.

In antiquity, 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 contemporary society, 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 respective religions, seeking to spread their beliefs and strengthen their communities. The intricate tapestry of faith systems continues 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 religious differences. Conflicts among different religions arise when certain groups seek to govern others

through religious influence, attempting to expand 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, highlighting the evolving nature of religious dynamics in different societies.

Nepal historically embraced Hinduism as its dominant religion, functioning as a Hindu Kingdom until the monarchy's abolishment and the establishment of the 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, seeking to reinstate Nepal as a Hindu state after its declaration as a republic and secular country. Society is continuously evolving, and everything related to it, including perceptions on religion, is changing day by day. Resunga Municipality is located in Gulmi District, Lumbini province, and is characterized by a diverse population, consisting of residents from Brahmin, Chhetri, Vaishya, and Shudra communities. This shift from Kingdom to secular created a favorable environment for religious conversions among individuals dissatisfied with their current beliefs or those 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.

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

The Political Context of Religious Conversion in Orissa (2009) by Harish S. Wankhede has explored 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 interrelated in the recent incidents of communal clashes in Orissa. There are five important observations made by this study in this context (Wankhede, 2009).

Conversion as a Thematic Site: Academic Representations of Ambedkar's Buddhist Turn by Shane P. Gannon (2011) takes into consideration the particular case of Ambedkar and explaining why he turned into Budhdhism. 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 for long. 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 the source of hopes for the individuals undergoing some problems and trauma in their lives. Literature suggests that people are likely to trust in the new 'faiths' as a solution to their problems. The results in the study by Peter Halama and Julia Halamova (2005)[1] show that the presence of problems, stress, and tension at the time preceding conversion as the most significant factor inducing conversion. 17 converts mentioned the presence of some serious problem, traumatic event or difficulty and 20 experienced negative feelings at that time. Conversion reduced or resolved these difficulties as evident from the converts' description of conversion outcomes. 15 experienced a greater or lesser improvement in mental life, 16 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. (Peter Halama, 2005)

Conversion and Urban Minorities Conversion in the context of migration has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. They are looking into the causes that lead to the conversion. Pierre Beaucage, Deirdre Meintel and Géraldine Mossière (2007)[2] have given different examples analyzed by various scholars in digging out the causes of converstion. For example, in Canada, Winland (1994) has described the group conversions of Hmong refugees in Ontario as a result of the help they received in resettlement from Mennonite groups. She sees these conversions as a mode of integration to the host society. On the other hand, Ng (2002) has shown how Chinese immigrants who have converted to an American Reformed Church create new syncretism between their traditional symbols and practices and the religion they have adopted in the United States. Two of the studies presented in this issue consider the religious transformations experienced by migrants in different national contexts. Canton describes how a long-established minority, the Gypsies of Andalusia, have been able to renegotiate social relations within the group and re-establish community solidarity through conversion to Pentecostalism. (Pierre Beaucage, 2007)

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 description about their life before and after the religious experience. Taking note of their statements: 'I could feel some happiness and

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[1] Process of Religious Conversion in the Catholic Charismatic Movement: A Qualitative Analysis, Peter Halama And Júlia Halamová , (2005)

[2] Introduction: Social and Political Dimensions of Religious Conversion, Author(s): Pierre Beaucage, Deirdre Meintel and Géraldine Mossière (2007)

peace of mind', 'I found something, which gave me joy and peace', 'I see my life got changed. My old habits, a lot of sinful habits got changed'. This change of outlook of his life was triggered by the religious experience in conversion. Here, 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 to any of his earlier experiences. There was a sense of experiencing the truth, a sense of newness and new affection for others. Positive emotion is attached with religious experience. Scholars generally agree that the conversion experience is preceded by some kind of emotional disturbance. However, the converts find their emotional turmoil is quietened in conversion through the religious experience. (Iyadurai, 2014)

Religious Conversion in 40 Countries by Robert J. Barro, Jason Hwang, and Rachel M. McCleary (2010) 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 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, Hwang, & Macle, 2010)

Socio-economic Causes of Interreligious Conflict: This research (source not specified) highlights how socio-economic factors can lead to interreligious conflicts and intolerance. It specifically mentions that economic success of one group, especially a minority, may lead to tensions and intolerance from other less successful groups, resulting in interreligious conflicts.

The research specifically focuses on the experiences of Dalit individuals, who constitute a significant portion of the Hindu community in Nepal and face various challenges driving them towards religious conversion. By addressing these issues, the study aims to create a more favorable environment for understanding the main drivers of religious conversion and its impacts on different aspects of life. Through this analysis, it aspires to foster a harmonious social structure and evaluate existing religious practices that act as push factors influencing religious decisions. This study seeks to shed light on the complex phenomenon of push factors of religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in rural Nepal, with a specific focus on the Resunga Municipality, Gulmi district. By exploring the push factors behind conversion and its social implications, the research aims to contribute valuable insights into understanding the dynamics of religion and its impact on communities. The findings are expected to provide useful information for state agencies, organizations, and community leaders to

address discrepancies and challenges faced by targeted communities, such as the Dalit community, and foster a more harmonious social structure.

In the Nepalese context, however, there remains a lack of effective studies on religion conversion. Such research could shed light on the underlying causes of conversion and its impact, particularly among marginalized Dalit communities in rural Nepal. Understanding these dynamics could help stakeholders take appropriate action to minimize conflicts and maintain social harmony. Thus, this study aims to fill this research gap by examining the causes and consequences of religion conversion, specifically focusing on marginalized Dalit communities as the subjects of investigation. Through this exploration, the study aspires to contribute valuable insights to support informed decision-making among concerned stakeholders.

Research Question: What are the primary push factors contributing to religious conversion among the rural population in Resunga Municipality, Gulmi district, Nepal?

Objective: The objective of the study is to assess the push factors of religious conversion in rural Nepal.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research designs to investigate the push factors behind religious conversion in Resunga Municipality, Gulmi District. Qualitative research serves as an exploratory method, delving into the deeper reasons, opinions, and motivations behind religious conversions through focus group discussions, individual interviews, and observations. On the other hand, quantitative research aims to provide numerical data from a larger sample population, facilitating result generalization, and involves interviews and systematic observations to collect measurable data and identify patterns. 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 are 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

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 strong, 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. Interestingly, Resunga Municipality houses 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.

Push factors: In the convert's perception, push factors for religious conversion from Hinduism were explored through respondent interviews. Social, economic, and cultural aspects were cited as the main reasons for their decision to convert. Dissatisfaction with Hindu norms and values, idol worship (Murti Puja), the practice of animal sacrifice, a showy culture, and stories deemed false were among the mentioned causes. Additionally, the influence of specific castes, lack of understanding, and uncertainty about the concept of eternal life played roles in driving their conversion.
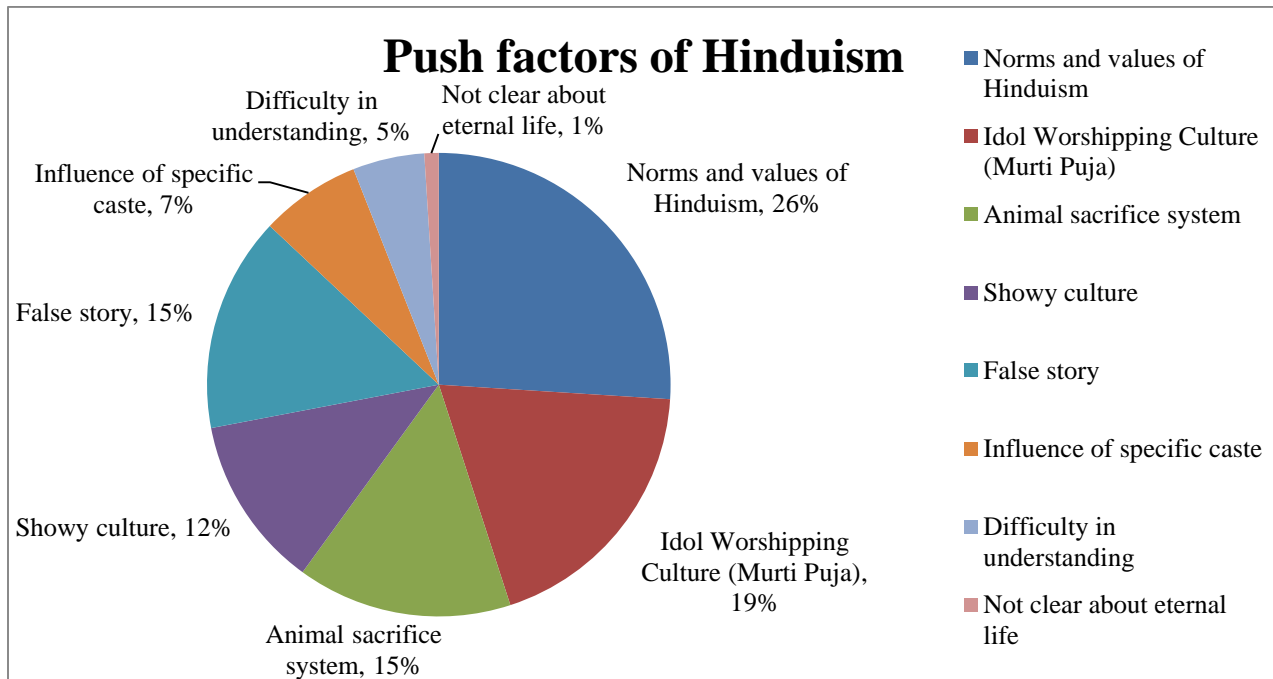
Figure 1: Ratio of responses on push factors of Hinduism.

Analysis: The majority of 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 particular caste groups, such as Bramhins, 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 the medium/person who guided them to convert. The findings are as follows:
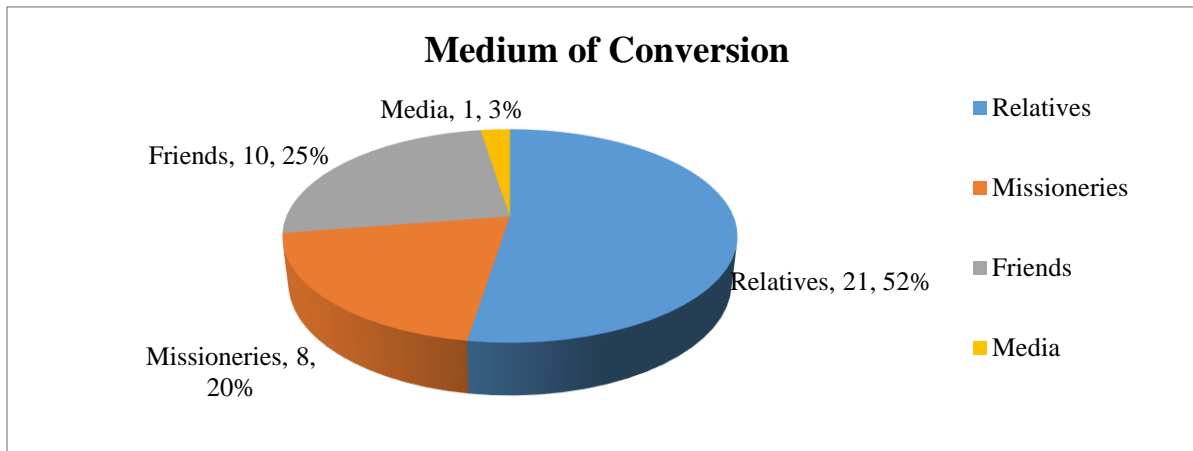
Figure 2: Ratio of medium through which converts were influenced to convert

The majority of the converts were converted by the relatives (52%) and friends (25%). The relatives and friends are already converted and have been guiding their relatives and friends for conversion. 20% of the converts were guided by the missionaries for the conversion.

Conclusion

The study explores 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-samachaar), 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, Bises Veti, and Muthi Daan, 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.

In summary, 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 religion 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 still 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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