

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND MOBILITY: A sociological study in Almora, Uttarakhand

INTRODUCTION: Fieldwork research was conducted at Almora town, Uttarakhand from 29th May 2013 to 11th June 2013. The fieldwork was conducted under the aegis of Krishna raj fellowship. A team of four members comprising of two male and two female researchers conducted the fieldwork.

The fieldwork was centered on the issue of religion conversion and its interconnections with other social aspects. We wanted to find out if there is any relation between the religion of the people and their socio-economic-political condition. If there is any relation between religion and socio-economic-political condition, then how are they related? Our focus was on the question if religion is a just a matter of faith and worship of God, or is it also a matter of socio-economic-political conditions. By interviewing the residents of the area, we tried to find out why people convert their religion from one to other. These are some of the questions we were interested at.

We reached Almora town in the morning of 30th May by bus. It is one of the most soothing and beautiful hill stations in Uttarakhand. This scenic hill station is visited by many tourists throughout the season. Low to moderate temperature of the region attracts many tourists both from within and outside the country. Due to the hilly landscape of the region houses were scattered on the slopes of the hills. After arrangements for accommodation for the day, we set out in the evening to mark the beginning of the first fieldwork of our lives.

METHOD EMPLOYED: The methodology was another issue which we assumed to be solved by centering on "Interview Schedule". The unstructured questionnaires were prepared and printed before coming to the field. During the course of our fieldwork, after conducting some interviews, we came to realize that the questionnaire we prepared was not doing the task it was supposed to do. People were not comfortable with the printed questionnaires in our hands putting questions after questions to them. Apart from the subject matter of the research being sensitive, consciousness of the wider social and political context of the subject among the people added to our difficulty in gathering data from the field. Though general information was shared by the interviewees with us, specific relevant data was not forthcoming.

At this point of time, we changed the manner in which we conducted the fieldwork. The questionnaires we prepared were left alone. We relied on the limited communication skills and people skills we had. We banked upon the extent to which we could establish rapport with the interviewees.

To collect our sample, we have employed a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling. Purposive as we were looking for people relevant for our research, people who have converted from one religion to another and snowballing sampling as one respondent led to another.

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED: Most of our interviewees were Christians. Heeradongri and Karbala are some of the few places where Christians live in clusters. These places are very peaceful places where people live in solidarity with each other. We had interaction with Fathers of local Churches, adult members of different households.

CONVERSION DUE TO SPIRITUAL REASONS: Our first interviewee was a woman who is wife of a Pastor. They live in a small mud-house in the church compound. They live a simple lifestyle. A part of their family income comes from her paintings. The paintings were all related to Christianity. She told us that she is a born Christian and she married the Pastor. While interacting with her, she told us that they follow Christianity for spiritual purpose, economic or political conditions have nothing to do with their faith in Christianity. She continued to argue that by having faith in Christ, they are choosing the right path of life. She argues that people adopt Christianity because the religion teaches them the right path. She believe that all humans are sinful, do various kind of sinful activities, so in order to relieve themselves from the sins and wrongdoings, they follow the right path i.e. accepting Christ as their personal savior.

Here is an interesting case which supports spirituality as one of the reasons for conversion. This is a case where conversion to Christianity took place due to attraction by the philosophies, ideas, ideology etc. which is mentioned in the religious text i.e. the Bible.

Mr. Kundan Bora is a 36 years old pastor living in Heeradongri. He got converted to Christianity from Thakur caste of Hinduism in 2001. He lives in a tin-roofed mud house with his wife and two children-a daughter and a son. His wife is the sister-in-charge of a local hospital and he does networking business. He carries out his business with the help of his laptop and mobile phone. Apart from these gadgets, he has got a TV and a motorbike.

According to him, before conversion he was used to alcohol and couldn't talk to anybody without abusing them. People used to call him 'goonda'. "log mujhe goonde kehte the,kisise gali diye bina baad nahi kar pata tha" are some of the words he used to narrate his story. He believed in casteist practices and cleaned himself with cow urine if a person of lower caste happens to pass nearby him. He hated lepers and spitted the whole day when he went to give food to the lepers once.

He told us that at a point of time in his life he got many problems that he was about to go mad. At this point of time a friend of his gave him a bible, he read it and liked it so much that he converted to Christianity and changed his life for once and all. He gave up taking alcohol, he no more abuses people, and he eats and mixes with the people of lower caste. He later became a pastor.

This case serves as a perfect example of converting to Christianity for spiritual reasons. Seeing his present conditions i.e. living in a mud house, supporting his family by networking business etc., the possibility of conversion for economic benefits is ruled out in this case. Any connection with political and social benefits is not visible in this case of conversion.

Spirituality undisputedly is one of the reasons for conversion to Christianity but it is not the only reason for conversion to Christianity. Marriage is also an important reason for conversion to Christianity. Below we discuss an interesting case of conversion due to marriage.

CONVERSION DUE TO MARRIAGE: Sanjay Valmiki is a 25 years old man belonging to the valmiki caste of Hinduism. He works as a part time cleaner in “nagar pallika”. His task is to take waste outside the town. He has studied up to 8th standard. He married Sheetal De Costa (24 years), a Christian in 2012. Sheetal changed her name to Sheetal Valmiki after marriage. She is pursuing her bachelor’s degree in arts at a college in Pithoragar. Sheetal’s grandfather adopted Christianity from Hinduism. Most of us would think that they might have eloped since they belonged to different religions. We anticipated the same and asked if they had love marriage and his replied shocked us. They met each other through his relatives who acted as mediators in arranging their marriage. Their marriage was arranged by their parents and relatives and they had no problems in their marriage. They married both in the temple and the church. Sanjay claims that though he doesn’t stop her from going to the church, she doesn’t go to the church anymore after marriage. Her in-laws asked her to convert to Hinduism and she agreed. Though they are officially Hindus now, her husband orders cake for the family in Christmas and also goes to many Christian programs.

This case of Sheetal De Costa converting to Sheetal Valmiki leads us to the conclusion that marriage is also one of the reasons for conversion. Yet another case of interreligious marriage leads us to another important conclusion that marriage doesn’t always leads to conversion. Let us get ourselves familiar with the case of Ms. Shipra Joshi.

Ms. Shipra Joshi is a lady in her fifties. She is a native of Heeradongri and lives with her daughter, Pushpanjali who is pursuing her B. Tech. She is a M.Sc. from Kumaun University. She is a Teacher at Adam’s school. Her father was a Hindu and her Mother adopted Christianity. Her parents followed different religions and her choice was left to her. She chose Christianity for herself and later married a Hindu Brahmin PCS officer (late) from ranikhet, a far off village,

where there is a lot of caste based discrimination according to them. They had problems during their marriage from husband's family and relationship with the husband family was broken. They had their marriage according to the Christian norms. In this case neither his husband nor she converted their religion. They followed their respective religion which they followed before marriage and their daughter was given the opportunity to choose the religion of her desire. Their daughter chose Christianity for herself. When her husband was alive they use to go both to the temple and the church. She and her daughter perform the Hindu rituals just to make her husband happy.

This case reveals to us that though marriage is one of the reasons for conversion, marriage doesn't always lead to conversion. The two cases i.e. the case of Sheetal De costa and Shipra Joshi is interesting from another point of view. Sheetal De Costa's arranged interreligious marriage gives us the impression that people have begin to have a very secular outlook. According to most of our interviewees, interreligious marriages are more often than not prone to obstructions and sanctions from the parents and relatives of both the bride and the groom. But in her case it wasn't so. Their marriage was arranged and they married with the full support of the parents and relatives of both the bride and the groom. Ms.Shipra Joshi's case also illustrates about the increasing secular outlook of the people. When her husband was alive she used to go to both temple and church. She and her daughter perform both the Christian and Hindu rituals. They celebrate both Diwali and Christmas in their home. Their story indicates a very secular type of ideology. Their family follows the secularist notion of tolerance and freedom of religion.

CONVERSION DUE TO IDEOLOGICAL PREFERENCE: Here is another interesting case of conversion where a Hindu couple converted to Christianity from Hinduism because there is no visible caste distinction and hierarchy in Christianity. Pastor Praveer Singh David is a 47 years old man living in Heeradongri with his family. He owns a grocery shop which is attached to his small house. He converted to Christianity in 1997 from the thakur caste of Hinduism. During his youth he was in love with a girl, his present wife, who belonged to the Brahmin pant caste. They got married against the wish of their parents. After their marriage both of them converted to Christianity as they believe that the religion has no caste distinctions. Later he became a pastor.

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVITIES: Now let us have a look at the activities of institutes like Xavier SEVA Kendra run by Christians. A branch of Xavier SEVA Kendra is located in Heeradongri. SEVA stands for Social Education Village Animation. This is a Christian funded institution meant for providing basic health and education. There we met Father Akhil who was once a scheduled tribe before adopting Christianity. An interview with him gave us some data about the institution. The centre has two priest and some workers. This institution works for the

upliftment of the people in the region especially the poorer section who can't afford education and health. Even though this is Christian run institution, their aim is not only to uplift Christians but they are open to people of all religion. According to him, their task is to uplift people not religion. The staff and workers are from different religious backgrounds. They give loans to the poor. A part of the loan is not meant to be recovered and part of it has to be paid back with interest. It also provides coaching programs to primary level students (class 1-5) Almora has three such tuition centers. Such tuition centers are not confined to almora but its branches are spread in different parts of the district, Almora and the state. According to him, Xavier SEVA Kendra basically aims for upliftment of the weaker section of the society irrespective of religion or faith. He adds that this institute is not concerned about converting people to Christianity and people who come to them for conversion are asked to go to the church and other places.

Another place of our concern is the Leprosy mission center at Karbala. The center was started by Sir Henry Ramsey in 1985. We interacted with the Director, Mr. Akash Singh and the supervisor, Mr. Aveek Singh, of the center. They are Christian brothers from Bageshwar. Their grandfather who was a scheduled caste converted to Christianity.

According to Mr. Akash Singh, the Director of the center, funds for the leprosy center which came from abroad have stopped now. The centre runs on government and local support. Apart from these they get help from the likes of SBI and GAIL from time to time. He observes that the center is not a religious institute but a charitable institution. They need regular support from the government to sustain it as the Leprosy Mission Trust of India is not getting funds from its headquarters in London. The center performs Christian religious rituals like reading of the Bible and offering prayers as a part of their daily routine. According to them, people do come to them for getting converted to Christianity but they ask them to go to the pastors.

Our observation regarding the two institutes- Xavier SEVA Kendra and Leprosy mission centre- is that though it can't be established, with the limited data we have collected, that the socially beneficial activities of the institutes lead to conversion, there is a very high probability that people coming to them for conversion are the people whose lives are affected by the works of this institutions. The matter needs further research with long duration in the field.

CONVERSION PROBLEMS: Now let us deal with some issues related to conversion. This story is also about Pastor Praveer Singh David about whom we had discussed earlier regarding conversion to Christianity due to lack of caste distinction. After becoming Pastor, he started converting people to Christianity. He told us that he was once asked by members belonging to the RSS to have a conversation with them. During the conversation, they had some serious disagreements regarding religious issues and he was beaten up and thrown down from a hill but luckily he survived. When he gains consciousness he found himself in a very lonely hill. He was in the constant fear of being targeted by the RSS members and the Government. So he

made it sure that people had affidavits from the courts for conversion. He showed the affidavits and claimed that he had converted people by their own discretion and had not forced them to do so.

Pastor Kundan Bora also narrated his story about members of the confronting him near his house. The RSS members came to his house and called him out of house for a conversation and they had arguments with him. The RSS members left the place by warning him of dire consequences but luckily they have not done him any harm till date.

In light of the above developments, we would like to share with you an interesting experience with you. We interviewed father Samuel of Victory church in his posh house which was attached to the church. He is living in Heeradongri for the last twenty years. He interacted with us in a very cordial manner and offered us drinks and eatables. We talked about various issues related to our research topic. We talked about religious conversion, its present rate of conversion, differences between the upper caste and lower caste after conversion to Hinduism etc. etc. When asked to help us find the new converts in the area, he told us that he does not have the authority to do so and we have to find it ourselves. After seeking his permission to attend the church on the coming Sunday, we left the place after wishing one another. On Sunday, we went to the Church and he greeted us with a smile. After the church prayers we were served tea and biscuits at the church verandah. When we started interacting with the people he came up to us and told us that we were not permitted to do our research in the place and we can attend the church just for spiritual purpose. We stopped collecting data in the church but couldn't return immediately as that would be very inappropriate. So we had conversations with people, who were excited to talk to us for various reasons other than our topic, regarding matters not relevant to our fieldwork. During this period he came up to us thrice asking us not to conduct our fieldwork. We along with the people whom we were talking with convinced him that we are not talking about the research topic and left the place. Later we climbed down the Church stairs and met him. We shook hands with him and his companions wished one another and left the place.

After the interviews with Pastors Praveer Singh David and Kundan Bora and listening to the narratives about arguments with the RSS members we got some light on why Pastor Joseph has taken a U-turn from us. The issue of religious conversion to Christianity has been politicized and Christians have been targeted for converting people by giving economic benefits, job opportunities etc. In light of this larger social and political context, the Christians especially the pastors are in constant fear of being targeted. And that should be the reason for Pastor Samuel taking a U-turn from us.

The use of terms by the pastors and Christians are worth analyzing at this juncture. They refute that they have been 'converted' any claims that they have 'adopted' Jesus/ Christianity in their

lives. "I have not converted but adopted Jesus as personal savior", "people do not convert to Christianity but adopts Jesus in their lives" are some of the words they frequently use. In the whole course of our fieldwork, they bluntly refute us the moment we use the term "conversion" and they are comfortable to the word "adoption". This according to us is because of the politicization of the word "conversion" and the various connotations attached to it. It carries a certain connoted meaning of being converted to Christianity for reasons other than spiritual purposes. The fear of violence from members of other religions and the Government for "conversion" other than spiritual reasons also makes them comfortable with the word "adoption".

ISSUE OF SOCIO-POLITICO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS: The issue of converting people to Christianity by providing economic and social benefits, job opportunities is debated by all Christians. Many pastors and Christian argue from their knowledge that during British time, many Christian missionary came and offer some benefit either economical or social and try to convince people to convert to Christianity. And Christianity being a structurally egalitarian society, attracted many people mostly from lower caste. They argue that such benefits are no longer given to people who convert now. Let me share an interaction with a pastor regarding the matter.

Alan Moses is a 52 years old pastor from Tamil Nadu. He has studied up to 10th standard in a Christian school in Tamil Nadu. He has a daughter and two sons. He told us that he worked till 1985 in a spinning mill and later became a Christian missionary. He argues that people believe that they get economic benefits and job opportunities after converting to Christianity but they don't get it now. Scholarships which used to fund Christian children studying abroad are not there anymore. He told us that he also got some Christian scholarships which helped him during his study. He continues to say that 'but the time has changed' those scholarship and funding are not the same as before.

He argues that they don't force or give money to convert to Christianity but people come to them. He continues that still some people come and ask him that, they are ready to convert to Christianity if they can give some economic benefits. He puts it thus, "people use to ask 'if I convert, how much you will give me' I reply 'you have to give money, because I am converting you'." He also says that he can help people who are really in need and not everybody. He joked, "My wife account – no money, my account- no money."

Christians claim that people are no longer getting economic benefits from Christian institutes for conversion to Christianity. The benefits Christians get today are from the Government as they are listed "minority" category by the government. Many of the Pastors in the local churches also comment that most of the people of other faiths live in the conception that they get lots of money and other benefits because lot of funds are coming to them from foreign countries etc.

They don't deny that they get some funds from abroad. But what they are arguing is that the present situation is very different compared to the past. They said that 'yes converting to Christianity' was beneficial at a time when funds use to come from abroad. But those funds are not coming as people believe, now those foreign funds has either stop coming or are in very minimal amount even it comes. Christians deny the claim that they convert to or adopt Christianity because of economic or political benefit. They claim that they do get benefitted by knowing the right path of life but not economically or politically.

At present there are very few cases of religious conversion. Most of the converts in the region are old converts, it means they are not converted but born as Christian. Christianity was adopted during their grandparents' or parents' generations. Christianity attracts people mostly from the Hindu religion. Though people from upper caste also convert to Christianity the religion attracts more people from the lower caste than the upper caste. While there may be several reasons one of the major reasons is the lack of caste based hierarchy in Christianity. A pastor who was once belonged to upper caste Hindu comments as a joke that "since Christian attracted many lower caste people, now Pastors in the church are occupied mostly by converts from lower caste, so we (converts from higher caste) get less chance to become Pastor."

According to a Pastor, who converted to Christianity from upper Caste Hinduism due to its egalitarianism, Christians in the region are not active or agile Christian; they live in their own selfishness. He also talks about the arguments he had with other local priests. He argued that there are also many priests who try to convert as many people as possible in to order to get favor from abroad. When those missionaries or officials from foreign countries come to the place, the local priests try to show maximum number of certificates of converts, so that they can get more funds for their upliftment.

We also interacted with people belonging to religion other than Hinduism and Christianity. Taladhania is a place where Muslims settle peacefully in large numbers. There are also people of other religions. They live together peacefully. In one of the interview we had with Muslim family, they asserted that they are satisfied with their religion. They strongly comment that they will not convert to any other religion. They said that they 'were born Muslim and will die as Muslim even they starve'. They believe that those Hindus who converted to Christianity are weak Hindus. Like many others, they also think that some Hindus convert to Christianity to gain social and economic advantages.

PEOPLES' NAME AND RELIGION: From this fieldwork we also got interesting information regarding the 'Naming' of the person after conversion. Generally people adopt English names and surnames after adopting Christianity. Here, we find many instances where converted Christians retain their old surname and have names peculiar to Hinduism after generations of conversion. Pastors and Christians argue that changing names after adopting Christianity is not

necessary and they can still retain their old names after conversion. They argue that their names have nothing to do with their religion.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS CONVERTS: According to our interviewees, the attitude towards people converted from lower caste depends from person to person. Yet it is rarely visible in Christianity and caste based attitudes among converted Christians, rarely, comes up during marriage which is also ignored if the families are well-off. Pastors claim that they do not allow caste based discrimination in their churches. Yet, they admit that it takes time to change people's attitudes regarding caste. Christians report that though caste based attitudes are not visible in Christianity and class based distinction becomes visible in marriage and other ceremonies, sometimes.

CONCLUSION: In the conclusion what we want to argue from our research finding is that religious conversion is minimally visible in the region; most of the converts are old converts. Most of the Christian in the region are converted during their grandparents' or parents' generation. At present, marriage and spiritual inclination are the major reasons for conversion to Christianity.

We regard our fieldwork as successful and hope that our findings will be useful for better understanding of the social relation in this region and can be used for further sociological research of the region.

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Note: All names of the interviewees in the report are changed but the surnames are kept intact.