CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION INDIA--THE SCENARIO

Religious revivalism and communal feeling are gripping the country today against the Indian values like communal harmony and secularism. Religious conversion has become a sensitive, even an explosive issue. Though conversion is nothing new to Indian society but is deeply rooted in the past, it creates political, cultural, and social problems. The invasion by Islamic armies resulted in changes in the Indian social structure. Christianity came to India immediately after Jesus’ followers visited to the coastal areas of South India, particularly Kerala and Tamilnadu. Even today we can see 1500 year old churches in this part of India. It is an evidence of the existence of Christianity in India for centuries.

Christianity spread in India through the Portuguese, the French, the Dutch and the Britishe. The Britishers actively worked for the conversion of people to their religion by providing government jobs and promotions and to some extent social status. The lower strata of Indian society were attracted by foreign missionaries.

In their long struggle for equality, India’s Dalits or untouchables, have often exchanged their Hinduism for Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism, believing that they will better their lives by doing so. They have been persuaded that Hinduism, with its Varna ashramas (caste distinctions), has been solely responsible for all their ills. But when they switch to other religious faiths and
experience the same distinctions--albeit in different forms--they realise that such a change neither improves their social status nor remedies their economic problems of unemployment and poverty--the real sources of their social discrimination.

So, in the recent past, hundreds of Scheduled Caste people in Tamilnadu have converted to Islam and get great publicity and attraction all over India. This mass conversion creates sensation and attracts public attention. In Kootam Village of Ganjan District in Orissa and in Srikakulam District of Andhra Pradesh, thousands of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe people got converted to Christianity. The number of conversions increased over the years. Conversion may be influenced by ideological, economical, social and other factors.

2.1. Religions of India

India has a positive kaleidoscope of religions. There is probably more diversity of religions than anywhere else on the earth. Apart from having representation from almost all the religions of the world, India was also the birthplace of two great religions of the world, namely, Hinduism and Buddhism. It was also the home to one of the oldest religions of the world, Zoroastrianism, and also to an ancient religion unique to India, Jainism.
### Distribution of Religions in India

#### Table No. 2.1.0

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*Source: www.indiami.rror.com*

2.1.1. Hinduisam

India's major religion, Hinduism, is followed by approximately 80% of the population. Hinduism is another name for what is known as Sanatana Dharma or the Religious Preennis. Any one person did not propound Hinduism. Hinduism is a collection of the religious beliefs and practices of many cultures extending over six or seven millennia, if not more. The main reason for the present polytheistic nature, the presence of so many Gods, Goddesses and forms of worship and beliefs can be attributed to this mixing of faiths and cultures. Known as the mother of all religions and considered to be the oldest religion its origin is shrouded in the mists of the distant past.
Hinduism has a number of holy books, including the Bhagavad-Gita, which is credited to Krishna, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas. The Vedas are the basic texts that the Hindus hold sacrosanct. These include the mantras, Brahmanas, the Aranyakas or forest treatises, and the Upanishads or philosophical dissertations.

Basically the religion postulates that we will all go through a series of rebirths that eventually lead to moksha, the spiritual salvation that frees one from the cycle of births. With each rebirth, one can move closer to moksha, the deciding factor being your karma. Bad actions result in bad karma, which leads to a lower reincarnation. Dharma or the natural law defines the total social, ethical and spiritual harmony of your life.

Hinduism is not a religion but a dharma which means a way of life based on universal values of humanism. Within Hinduism there are various panths or religions. Dharma has been incorrectly interpreted as religion and consequently dharma-nirpeksh construed as secularism, leading to the present confusion in concepts.

Self-seeking priesthood in most religions, with intent to establish its hegemony, distorted the values preached by all faiths, and divided society. Hindu priesthood converted castes based on profession to birth, made a section of society untouchable, and introduced exploitative customs. The Muslim priesthood till today sanctifies four wives and abuses religious dictates called fatwas. Christian priesthood claims superiority and entices the poor of other faiths to conversion.
The Hindu religion does not undertake any conversion activity all over the world. But it tolerates all the principles and religions in the world. The members of the Hindu religion may visit other religious places for their worships. Unlike other religions, the Hindu religion is not an organized religion; even within the religion itself teaching of religious values is not common among Hindus.²

2.1.2. Christianity

Christianity came to India early, several centuries before it reached Europe. Today’s Syrian Christians in Kerala claim to have been converted by St. Thomas and thus to follow the earliest traditions of the Apostolic Church in India. The saint is believed to have landed at Kodungallur in 52 AD and converted a few Namboodiri or Brahmin families there. As St. Thomas came from Syria, they are known as Syrian Christians. Today they are the aristocrats of Kerala. Down the centuries the Syrian Christians of Kerala have thrived in commerce, culture and politics. St. Thomas then went on to Mylapore near Madras where he converted some locals before Hindus martyred him in 68 AD.

Later, the Portuguese commander Alberque brought missionaries to Cochin in 1510 after Vascodagama's visit in 1498 to build the first Christian church. The Syrian Christians said their prayers in Cyriac, not Latin, and Kerala's later converts came to be called Latin Christians. In the 19th century the Syrian Christians split over language; some retained the Cyriac language and the others changed to Malayalam and are called as Marthoma Syrian Christians.
Meanwhile, up the coast, Goa was established as the capital of the Portuguese maritime empire in 1510. With the Pope's blessings to convert en masse, the city became busy with missionaries and the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier made it his headquarters in 1542. During the twentieth century the Anglican church formed the Church of South India together with some free churches in 1947.

It was the Christian missionaries who brought printing to India. In 1556 some Jesuits taking a press to Abyssinia for Christian propaganda work broke their journey at Goa and failed to continue. St. Francis Xavier used this to print *Doctiina Christa*, a catechism used to teach children at Jesuit schools and colleges. In the 19th century William Carey and his followers Joshua Marshman and William Ward came to Serampore in Bengal and started the first printing press and newspaper in Bengali.

Kerala and Tamilnadu in the South and Arunachal Pradesh in the North account for 60% of India’s Christian population. A quarter of all Kerala people are Christians, following a variety of denominations, the main five being, Nestorians, Roman Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Marthoma Syrians and the Anglican Church of South India. Kerala churches are painted in bright colors, their architecture a mishmash of Portuguese, Dutch and British styles. Goa and Maharastra also have a huge number of Roman Catholics. Mizoram and Nagaland in northeast styles contain all sects of Protestants.
2.1.2.1, Christianity and Conversion

Christianity in India has a history of about 2,000 years. Beginning almost at the time of its inception, Christian missionaries have spared no effort to “save the souls of the idolatrous, superstitious Hindus”. They set up their missions, churches, seminaries and schools whenever and wherever they could gain a foothold. The missionaries learnt Indian languages, set up printing presses and published literature—both secular and religious—to propagate their faith. As of 1989, the church had 4.1 million full-time workers, 13,000 major libraries, 22,000 periodicals published, and 1,800 Christian Radio/TV stations being operated. Missionary activity is being carried out by 400 mission agencies with a huge apparatus manned by 262,300 missionaries with an annual outlay of $8 billion. There are 10,000 new books and articles every year on foreign evangelisation alone.

It is alleged that Christians receive fabulous amounts of foreign assistance to be utilized as inducement for conversion. The 3% Christians in India receive more foreign assistance for religious purposes than the 97% in other camp.

Christianity has targeted in India that every year at least 10 lakh Hindus should be converted to Christianity. In the recent past 100 thousand Hindus were converted to Christianity in Tamilnadu alone. The members of a particular church can get financial increment and promotion for this type of conversion.
Missionaries’ educational institutions admittedly provide good education but they, as is often reiterated, also generate a feeling that subtle methods are employed by them for the indoctrination of tender minds towards the Christian faith. Christianity has existed in India for almost as long as it has existed in the country of its origin. Thomas the Apostle is reported to have arrived at the Malabar Coast, preached the gospel and been martyred at Mylapore in the city of Madras on the east coast. Every account recorded of Christian missionary activity explicitly states the intention of the missionaries to convert those they saw as pagans or heathens. Since the beginning of such activity by St. Thomas to the later enhancements induced by such events as the discovery of the sea route by Vasco da Gama, western Christianity and later middle eastern Islam have sought to bring to India messages concerned either with soul saving or the destruction of infidels. St Thomas Xavier’s arrival in 1542 was one of the most significant advances of missionary activity with a reputed 700,000 converted by fair means or foul.

While most instances of conversion to Christianity were primarily the result of coercive persuasion as ordained by biblical authority, conversion to Islam was thirsty. “Both branches of the Syrians as well as Roman Catholics suffered in the 18th century during the invasion and the prosecutions of Tippoo Sultan and the aftermath of the Mysore wars. Many, perhaps as many as 10,000, were executed while others reverted to Hinduism or were even forcibly converted to Islam.”
The news from around India is that Dalits also plan to move to the Christian faith. The Indian church, is therefore presented with a challenge of enormous proportions. It will either stand or fall by the stand it takes during the coming months. If the church is true to Christ and His message it will have to accept all those who turn to the Christian faith. The church will need to evolve a method and ministry of discipline and develop all those who come into the Christian community. The vast majority of Indian Christians are converts from the lower classes: 40 percent from a Scheduled Caste/Dalit background, 30 percent from Scheduled Tribes/Adivasis, 20 percent from other backward classes: and 10 percent from a upper classes. Similarly, 90 percent of the community is based not in the Indo-Gangetic plain but in the five states of Goa, Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, the North-East and the Chotta Nagpur region. So, not only are predominantly Christian converts from the lower classes, they are also based in the periphery of the country.

The church will also have to support the larger move of the Dalits because it represents freedom of choice. The church has vigorously fought for this during the last few years through the All India Christian Council and other alliances, and now will have to respect and support whatever choices the Dalits make. Their choice is a deep cry for human dignity, equality and liberation.

The supportive stand of the Christian church will be a fitting reply to the extremists who have lied about the church with regard to forced and fraudulent conversions. The church
has always argued, for the right of freedom, of conscience and choice for every Indian. And the choice of the Dalits is a free choice and not because of any coercion or manipulation.¹⁰

It is also the hour for the Indian church to once for all rid itself of the caste system in some sections of the church. Only caste free Indian churches will be relevant to the India of this new millennium. This will mean a firm determination to encourage and allow for inter-caste marriages within the church, giving many more opportunities for the Dalits and the other Backward Caste Christians for leadership in the Indian church. It will also mean a firm resolve to work for the economic and educational development of these people for whom Jesus died. Indian churches have made efforts in all these areas in the past decades.¹¹

Christianity and Islam are two religions that encourage preaching their faith in order to convert non-believers. In both cases, this missionary activity has been used as an excuse for religious wars (crusades) on other countries.

In the year 1000, the Viking age parliament of Iceland decided that the entire country should convert to Christianity and that sacrifice to the old gods, while still allowed, should no longer be made in the open. Similar mass conversions in other Scandinavian countries were not as democratic. Christian efforts, in terms of both money and their network, to convert Indians are considerable.¹²
2,1.3. Islam

Islam is an Arabic word meaning both Submission to God and Peace. The followers of Islam, who are called Muslims, are found all over the world. One tenth of the total Muslims in the world live in India. India is one of the largest Islamic nations in the world.

The religion's founder, the prophet Muhammad, was born in 570 AD in Mecca, now in Saudi Arabia. He had his first revelations from Allah, in 610 AD and later these visions were compiled together to form what is today called the Holy Quran. Muslim teaching corresponds closely to the Old Testament of the Bible and Moses and Jesus are both accepted as Muslim prophets. The sayings of the Muhammad, which are distinguishable from the words of God, are collected separately and called the Hadith, the second most important source of Islam. The Arabs called him Muhammad Al-Amin or "the trustworthy man". 13

Opposition to Muhammad slowly started to creep in and so he fled to Mecca in 622 AD. It is from this year that the Muslim calendar starts. Muhammad arrived in Medina where the people accepted him as their prophet.

The Arabs, who first propagated the faith, developed a reputation as ruthless opponents but reasonable masters. So people often found it advisable to surrender to them.
Muhammad died in 632 AD. The death of the prophet posed a serious problem of succession. The third Caliph, the successor to Mohammed, was murdered and followed by Ali, the prophet's son-in-law, in 656. The Governor of Syria, who set himself as the Caliph, assassinated Ali in 661 AD in preference to the descendants of Ali. Most Muslims are called Sunnites, followers of the succession from the Caliph, while the others are Shias, who follow the descendants of Ali.14

2.1.3.1. Islam, and Conversion

Conversion in Islamic thought is not synonymous with proselytism in the formal sense. It is an event which takes place in a person's life as a result of an intellectual revolution or spiritual transformation. It is not simply leaving one religious tradition for another. What is meant by conversion is that the individual has discovered the truth after an exhaustive search for it and then, by his own choice, abandoned one religion for another.

During his final phase, in the Prophet of Islam sent invitation letters to the neighboring rulers of his time, by which they were directly invited to accept the message of Islam. For instance, in his letter to the Byzantine emperor Heracles I, the Prophet wrote these words: "Accept Islam and you will be blessed with peace." At first glance this was an invitation to people to change their religion. But the study of the Koran tells us that it was in actual fact an invitation to a transformation in thinking, instead of a change of religion in the simple sense.
In the first phase of Islam, some Arab Bedouins had accepted Islam just by reciting the Kalarna, the creed of Islam, while they had not undergone any change in character at a deeper level.

From this we learn that conversion, according to Islam, means a thorough transformation of the person and not just a change of religion in the everyday sense. The Koran refuses to give its seal of approval to conversions, which are mere formalities. In ancient Madina about three hundred people had become Muslims by reciting the Islamic creed. Apparently they even said their prayers, and fasted, but they did all this in a hypocritical manner paying only lip service: their inner state did not correspond to their outward pronouncements. They claimed allegiance to Islam by word of mouth but, as regards the state of their hearts, the Islamic spirit was lacking. The Koran brands the Islam of such people a falsity.

What is meant by true religious conversion is illustrated by an incident: when some verses from the Koran were read to a gathering of Christians, about seventy of them were so deeply moved that they abandoned their ancestral religion and converted to Islam. As the Koran puts it: When they listen to that which was revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes filled with tears as they recognize its truth.

Religious conversion, in actual fact, is the result of a realization. When the individual’s search for truth finds a convincing answer, this is such a profound experience that his heart is intensely moved. His eyes are filled with tears. His whole existence is moulded in the hue of truth. It is then that he emerges a new and altogether different person, having undergone a transformation.
That is why the Koran uses no synonym for conversion. To express the act of conversion, other more meaningful words have been used, for instance, the dawah mission (the communication). Real conversion is one which has taken place when the convert is aware that he has entered the phase of gnosis and has left behind the phase of ignorance. That is why a tradition of the Prophet speaks of the period prior to Islam as a period of ignorance.\footnote{15}

According to the Koran a Muslim is anyone who believes that Allah is the only God and that Muhammad was His prophet. A person is considered a Muslim from the moment he makes this confession, which is one of the five pillars of Islam.

Muslims, however, generally do not use the term conversion. They believe that every person is born in a state of perfect relationship to God, already a Muslim, and becomes corrupted to other religions through the influence of parents and society. So, a person who becomes a Muslim is said to have reverted to Islam.

\textbf{2.1.4. Jainism.}

Jainism is primarily an Indian religion and it is doubtful whether it ever crossed the frontiers of India. The Jain religion is contemporary with Buddhism and bears much resemblance to it. It was founded around 500 BC by Mahavira, the 24th and the last of the Jain prophets, called Tirthankars or finders of the path. Mahavira cannot be called the founder of Jainism but rather its reformer.
The first Jain prophet was Rsabha who is mentioned in the Vedas and hence Jainism, can be considered to be of great antiquity. The Jains number a few millions in India and are predominantly found in the west and the southwest.

They believe that the universe is infinite. In Jainism, God as such does not exist. A liberated soul is God. A voluntary death by penance is considered highly esteemed. They also believe in reincarnation and eventual spiritual salvation or moksha. One factor in the search for salvation is ahimsa or reverence for all life and the avoidance of injury to all living things. Due to this belief the Jains are all vegetarians and some monks even cover their mouth with a piece of cloth to avoid the risk of accidentally swallowing an insect. They also walk in the streets with a tiny duster that clears their way of any tiny creatures that they might accidentally hurt.16

2.1.4.1. Conversion to Judaism

Jewish law has strict guidelines for accepting new converts to Judaism (a process called giur) • According to Jewish law, which is still followed as normative by orthodox jews and most of conservative jews, potential converts must want to convert to Judaism for its own sake, and for no ulterior motives. A male convert needs to undergo a ritual circumcision and there has to be a commitment to observe the 613 commandments and the Jewish law. A convert must accept Jewish principles of faith, and reject the previous theology that he or she had prior to the conversion. Ritual immersion in a small pool of water, known as a mikvah, is
required and the convert takes a new Jewish name and is considered, to be a son or daughter (in spirit) of the biblical patriarch Abraham, and a male is called, in that way to the Torah.

The Reform Judaism and Conservative Judaism movements are lenient in their acceptance of converts. Many of their members are married to non-Jews, and these movements make an effort to welcome the spouses of Jews who seek to convert. This issue is a lightning rod in modern day Israel as many immigrants from the former Soviet Union are technically not Jewish.

The most famous Jewish King, King David, was descended from the convert Ruth (who, according to the Talmud and the Midrash, was a Moabite princess). Joseph, the father of the most famous sage of the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva, was a convert.

Christians were forbidden to convert to Judaism on pain of death during most of the Middle Ages. In the 1700s a famous convert by the name of Count Valentin Potoski in Poland was burned at the stake. He was a contemporary and a disciple of Rabbi Elijah, known as the Vilna Gaon.

Some Jewish people are also descended from converts to Judaism outside the Mediterranean, world. It is known that some Khazars, Edomites, and Ethiopians, as well as many Arabs, particularly in Yemen, converted to Judaism in the past; today in the United States, Israel and Europe some people still convert to Judaism. In fact, there is a greater tradition of conversion to Judaism than many people realize.
The word *proselyte* originally meant a Greek who had converted to Judaism. As late as the 6th century the rump Roman empire (i.e. Byzantium) was issuing decrees against conversion to Judaism, implying that conversion to Judaism was still occurring.

To Jews, Jewish peoplehood is closely tied to their relationship with God, and thus has a strong theological component. This relationship is encapsulated in the notion that Jews are a chosen people. Although many non-Jews have taken this as a sign of arrogance or exclusivity, Jewish scholars and theologians have emphasized that a special relationship between Jews and God does not in any way preclude other nations having their own relationship with God. For Jews, being chosen fundamentally means that Jews have chosen to obey a certain set of laws (Torah and halakha) as an expression of their covenant with God. Jews hold that other nations and peoples are not required or expected to obey these laws, and face no penalty for not obeying them. Thus, as a national religion, Judaism has no problem with the notion that others have their own paths to God (or salvation).\(^{17}\)

2.1.5. Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism is not a religion in the sense that it does not contain the ingredients which are supposed to make up a religion. It is rather a scientific and rational explanation of the existence of man, his duties, and the destiny assigned for him according to his conduct in the world, which are put together to what is called the immutable Law of Nature, which
Zoroastrianism is essentially based upon knowledge and illumination and so its emblems are the fire and the sun. The word, *Zourashtm.*, is composed of *Zarath* which means golden, and *Ushtra* which is light and so Zaurashtra means “of the golden light”. This is one of the oldest beliefs in the world and was founded in Persia by the prophet Zaurashtra in the 6th or 7th century BC.

He was born in Mazar-I-Sharif, which is now in Afghanistan, Tradition says that Zaurashtra laughed when born, which is contradictory to the norm. He spent several years in meditation. The religion called Zoroastrianism is today found in Shiraz in Iran, Karachi in Pakistan and Bombay in India. The followers are called Parsis, since originally they fled to India to escape persecution in Persia. They are the best-known immigrants in Bombay. Zoroastrianism is one of the first religions to postulate an omnipotent and invisible God. Their scripture is the Zend Avesta, which describes the continual conflict between the forces of good and evil. Their God is Ahura Mazda, the god of light, who is symbolized by fire.

Parsis concentrated in Bombay are a few hundred thousands and they are successful in commerce and industry and have become noble philanthropists. They also do much charity work. Because of the strict requirements that a Parsi should marry a Parsi only, their numbers have started to dwindle. Because of intermarriages some even have slight deafness. The Parsis are excellent weavers. They gave India three ancient crafts, which are surti ghat, garo and the tanchoi.
The surti ghat is a soft silk with a satin finish on one side. The garo is a fine silk with elaborate Chinese embroidery all over the saree. The tanchoi is fine silk brocade with floral designs woven in. The three Parsis closely associated with the Indian National Movement are Dadbahai Navroji, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta and Sir Dinshaw Wacha. After the house of Tatas, the next major industrial barons are the Godrej family. 18

2.1.6. Sikhism

The word Sikh goes back to Sanskrit shisya meaning disciple or learner. However, the term Sikh in the Punjab came to be used for the disciples of Guru Nanak and his nine spiritual successors. The Sikhs are a few million in India and they are chiefly found in the state of Punjab. They are the most visible of the religious groups because of the five symbols introduced by their Guru to make them stand out in a crowd.

Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469, founded the Sikh religion. He was born at Tainandi Village near Lahore in Pakistan, and it is the core of any Sikh pilgrimage. He came from a Hindu-Shatriya family. He was one of the many 16th century poet-philosophers known as Sants, who formed cults that introduced Islamic elements into Hinduism. Nanak advocated one God who is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, but simply Sat meaning truth.
He rejected distinctions between men on the basis of castes and creed and asked people to look forward beyond these barriers. The Sikhs are opposed to caste systems and pilgrimage to rivers. Like Hindus and Jains the Sikhs prefer meditation to rituals. They worship at temples called gurdwaras, baptize their children when they are old enough to understand the principles of the religion in a ceremony called Pahul and they cremate their dead. Their holy book is the Granth Sahib, which contains the words of the 10 Sikh Gurus. Arjun, the 5th Guru, in the early 17th century, wrote the holy book, the Granth Sahib. Sikhism owns ten Gurus who were one in spirit, though different in body. They shared the same light and revealed the same truth.

Like Hindus, Sikhs have no fixed congregational worship except on Ekadasi, the 11th day of the lunar month and on Sangrand or New year’s Day. Worship can be at the gurdwara or the house as long as there is a copy of the Granth Sahib. They practice tolerance and love of others and their belief in hospitality extends to offering shelter to anyone who comes to their gurdwaras. They are one of the better-of groups in the Indian society. They have a well-known reputation for mechanical aptitude and specialize in handling machinery of any type, from auto rickshaws to jumbo jets.19

2.1.7. Judaism.

The Jews arrived on India’s west coast as traders, supplying Rome, Constantinople and the rest of Europe with valuable spices. They first came to Kerala as refugees from Jerusalem when it first fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC.
Jews have been a strong community in Kerala for at least a thousand years, first at Kodungallur until their expulsion in 1568 and then at Cochin where there used to be 8 synagogues. The white Jews retained their purity and distinctive community, while other Jews intermarried with the locals and came to be called Black Jews.

Further up the coast the heyday of Indian Jewry was under the British. The largest community lived in Bombay. There was also quite a large number in Calcutta and trading expanded to manufacturing, administration and the army. The last wave of Jewish immigrants fleeing from Nazi genocide was mainly doctors and professionals.20

2.1.8. Buddhism

Although there are only a few million Buddhists in India, the religion is of great importance because it had its birthplace here. Buddhism is not a religion, since it was not created centered with a god, but is a system of philosophy and a code of morality. Buddhism was founded in northern India about 500 BC when Siddhartha Gautama, born a Prince, achieved enlightenment. Buddha means the awakened one- He was bom into a wealthy kshatrya family in Lumbini in the lower Himalayas in today’s Nepal. He renounced his wife, family and other comforts to go in search of peace and a way out of this world’s sufferings.

In India, Buddhism developed rapidly when Emperor Asoka the Great embraced it. His capital was Patna and he declared Buddhism the state religion. He put up monuments associated with the Buddha and erected the Asoka Pillar.
In modern India, both the Theravada and the Mahayana traditions of Buddhism, are prevalent. Of the total number of Buddhists in India, 94% follow the Theravada tradition and the remaining 6% who live in the Himalayas are Mahayanists. Maharastra has the largest population of Buddhists in India. The other states that account for about 1% of the Buddhist population are West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim.21

Buddhists targeted the Dalits to convert to their religion. The bhikkus are conducting religious propaganda in village of Tamilnadu. Their aim is that at least 5000 people should convert to Buddhism from each district of TamilNadu in the name of Thimathecha.22

2.2. Conversion in India

Conversion in India is equated with proselytism. But conversion, in its broadest sense, is much further reaching, in that it is a universal principle of nature. It is a historical process—healthy and inexorable—and attempting to put a stop to it would be like trying to put a stop to history itself. And who in this world has the power to do so? Conversion, in reality, is the birth of an entirely new entity resulting from the encounter between old and new schools of thought. This is a universal law established by nature itself.

Religious conversion is the adoption of new religious beliefs that differ from the convert's previous beliefs; in some cultures *conversion* also signifies joining an ethnic group as
well as adopting that group's religious beliefs. A person, who has undergone conversion is called a convert or proselyte. Conversion requires internalization of the new belief system.\textsuperscript{25}

The English language word \textit{proselytism} is derived ultimately from the Greek language prefix \textit{pros} (towards) and the verb \textit{erchomai} (to come). It generally describes attempts to convert a person from one point of view to another, usually in a religious context.

Many Christians consider it their obligation to follow what is often termed the \textit{Great Convdssion} of Jesus Christ, recorded in the final verses of the Gospel of Matthew: "Go to all the nations and make disciples. Baptize them and teach them my commands." The early Christians were noted for their evangelizing work.

In the Bible, the word \textit{proselyte} denotes a person who has converted to the Jewish religion, without overtly negative overtones. In our day, however, the connotations of the word \textit{proselytism} are almost exclusively negative. Nonetheless, many people use the words interchangeably. An Orthodox writer, Stephen Methodius Hayes, has written: "If people talk about the need for evangelism, they meet with the response, The Orthodox church does not proselytise\textsuperscript{1} as if evangelizing and proselytism were the same thing." \textsuperscript{24}

The history of the Arabs provides an example of religious conversion. By the sixth century AD, the Arabs were leading a confined tribal life under the idolatrous system. Then, in the beginning of the seventh century, Islam, the religion of
monotheism, appeared, hi. consequence, intensive dialogue began between the monotheists and the id.ors. This dialogue assumed, such. an. aggressive character that it came to the point of collision. As a result a new way of thinking was born among the Arabs, which went on growing till it took the form of a great intellectual revolution.

Religious conversion is only a small part of this whole process. When the dialogue-conversion process is set in motion it cannot have limits set to it. It is not possible to allow one kind of conversion and to prohibit another. Being a stormy process, it is boundless.

It must be appreciated that there are two major kinds of religious conversions--inner faith conversion and inter-faith conversion. Now let us take an example of inter-faith conversion. There was a multi-lingual. Bengali Doctor of Philosophy, Nishi Kant Chattopadhyaye, who, having first studied philosophy, then all major religions, faced an intellectual confrontation with different faiths. Finally he made an intellectual discovery in consequence of which he left his ancestral religion, Hinduism, in favor of Islam. His Muslim name was Azizuddin. He wrote a book, *Why I Have Embraced Islam* which describes in detail the story of his intellectual development.

To sum up, conversion is a universal and inescapable law of nature. A study of psychology and history tells us that in order to give a new impetus to an individual or a group and to bring about a moral revolution what is most effective is the sense of discovery. This feeling of having discovered some
truth which was as yet unknown awakens all the dormant powers of the individual. This feeling turns an ordinary man into a superman. It is such supermen who cross the ocean, who scale mountains, and who, by their heroic character, let history enter a new age.

2.3. Conversion in medieval India

The beginnings of the Indian Muslim community can be dated long before it was able to use force. The first contacts with Islam were in South India and date as far back as the seventh century AD when some Arabs landed on the west coast as traders. They traded in spices, ivory and gems, among other things, and acquired, in course of time, a monopoly over Indian foreign trade. The kings of South Indian territories were deeply interested in the export trade, for they levied a tax on every sale.

Consequently the Arab traders were more influential and respected in the country than their Indian counterparts. The Arab traders grew rich and lived in great comfort. Muslims and Hindus began to live together in complete peace and harmony. They tolerated and understood each other’s customs, beliefs and religion. But, Islam is definitely committed to converting non-believers to their faith and, at the same time, is more fraternal in practice. So when the Muslim settlers on the soil of India saw the oppressive tyranny of caste intolerance, it provided an opportunity for Islam to penetrate into these castes with a little persecution. Islamic equality along with the presence of rich Muslim merchants made conversion a daily occurrence. It is
estimated that, at the beginning of the 16th century, next, there was forcible conversion in times of war and stress. As late as 1789, Tipu Sultan in Malabar issued general orders that “every being in the district without distinction should be with Islam; the house of each that fled to avoid that honour should be burned; they should be traced to their lurking places and all means of truth and falsehood, force or fraud, should be employed to effect their universal conversion”. 25

2.3.1. Religious policy during Muslim rule

During the entire period of the Sultanate, Islam remained the religion of the state. Therefore, the Sultan performed a religious duty along with his political obligation while administering. That duty was to convert this dar-ul-harb (non-Muslim territory) according to his religious views, circumstances and power. All Sultans pursued a discriminatory policy between their Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.

Mostly, the Muslims were not engaged in agriculture but those who were in it had to pay less revenue as compared to Hindu peasants. In the same way, the Hindu traders paid double the trade-tax as compared to Muslim traders. Foreign Muslims alone were entitled to high offices of the state whereas the Hindus and even converted Muslims were not considered for them. Different temptations were offered to the Hindus to accept conversion to Islam. The Hindu was unfavorably discriminated against in the dispensation of justice. They had to pay the religious tax known as the jizya. Restrictions were imposed on the religious pilgrimages of the
Hindus. The Hindus drew no advantage from, the state charity hospitals, Magtabls and help in cash and kind by the Sultan. Hindu educational institutions, temples and the images were destroyed, mosques were raised in their places and religion of the Hindus was disrespected during the rule of most of the Sultans. Establishing the supremacy of their religion and converting the Hindus to Islam were done with a view to creating a majority of people of their faith.²⁶

2.3.1.1. Jahangir

Jahangir was a well-educated and cultured person. As regards religious beliefs and policy, Jahangir stands midway between his father Akabar and his son Shah Jahan. He believed in God and normally pursued the basic principle of Islam. But he was not deeply religious. He did not pursue even the principles of Islam tactically. However, a few events during his reign show that he sometimes showed marked favour to Islam. He punished the Hindus of Rajouri (in the state of Kashmir) simply because a few of them had married Muslim girls and converted them to Hinduism. There are a few other examples also, viz., when he conquered the fort of Kangaroo he celebrated his victory by killing a cow; he threw away the images of Hindu gods of the temple of Varna in a nearby pond; when he fought against the Portuguese, all Christian churches were closed; he punished the Sikh Guru Arjun most probably because of his religious belief; and, once, he ordered all followers of Jainism to leave Gujarat because he felt dissatisfied with them. But all these events happened in moments of rage and in certain particular circumstances. Guru Arjun was punished not only because of his religious
beliefs but also because he was magnanimous towards the rebel prince, Khusraw. Jahangir, otherwise, did not interfere in the religious practices of the Sikhs. The same way, he was enraged with the Jains because he felt that they had interfered in politics.  

2-3.1.2. Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb’s ideal of kingship was based on the Islamic theory of kingship. Therefore, his chief aim became to convert his Dar-ul-harb (India: the country of kafirs or infidels) to Dar-ul-Islam (country of Islam). Aurangzeb became oppressive towards the Hindus. He stopped celebrating the Hindu festivals like Holi, Diwali, basant etc. He forbade the old temples to be repaired and ordered the Muhtasibs (law enforcing officers) and provincial governors to demolish the schools and temples of the Hindus. The temples within the territories of Hindu vassal chiefs were also destroyed and mosques were raised in their place.

In April 1679 AD, the jizya was imposed on the Hindus. The pilgrim tax on the Hindus was also revived and while the Muslim traders remained free from tax, the Hindu traders were asked to pay 5 percent of the value of their commodities as tax. As far as could be possible the Hindus were turned out of their services from the revenue department. In 1688 AD, restrictions were imposed on celebration of Hindu fairs and festivals and, the same year, all Hindus except the Rajputs were disallowed the use of palanquins and riding on good horses. All these disabilities were imposed on the Hindus with a view to forcing them to accept Islam. Besides
temptations in the form of services, promotions, money, land etc. were also given to the Hidus with a view to encouraging them to voluntarily accept Islam. It would be wrong to say that Aurangzeb imposed taxes on the Hindus with a view to improving the finances of the state. The primary motive of Aurangzeb was religious.\textsuperscript{28}

Aurangzeb imposed all these political, social, economic and religious disabilities on the Hindus with a view to forcing them to accept Islam.

2.3.1.3. Babmr

Babur was a Sunni Musalman. He had complete faith in God but he was not a bigot. He had agreed to propagate the Shia sect among his subjects when he had entered a treaty with Shah Ismail of Persia. Certainly Babur exhibited intolerance in India on several occasions. He declared wars against Rana Sanga and Medini Rai as jihads (holy wars), assumed the title of Ghazi (slayer of infidels), abolished stamp-tax on the Muslims and built a mosque in Ayodhya at a place which was regarded as the birth place of Lord Rama by the Hindus.\textsuperscript{29}

2.3.1.4. Sher shah

Sher Shah was an Afghan ruler. Historians have differed regarding his religious policy. He left Hindus undisturbed and allowed them to follow their own religion without let or hindrance. He destroyed the Hindu temple at Jodhpur and raised a mosque in its place.
2.3.1.5. Akbar

The religious policy of Akbar was that of complete toleration. His policy was based on the principles of Suleh-I-kul (universal peace). Akbar’s policy of religious toleration was based on his firm belief that there is truth in every religion. To put it into practice, he formed the following regulations.

1. People of all faiths i.e., Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Parsis, Jains were allowed to construct buildings for purposes of their worship, to propagate their faith peacefully and celebrate their religious fairs and festivals.

2. All those people who were forcibly converted to Islam were allowed to get back to their previous faith.

3. State services were thrown open to people of all faiths on merit.

2.3.1.6. Shah Jahan

Shah Jahan encouraged conversion to Islam throughout his reign. The war-captives were converted to Islam, culprits who accepted Islam were left free, Hindu women were forced to accept Islam before their marriage to Muslims and those who disrespected either the Koran or Prophet Mohammad were punished by death. He created a separate department for conversion of people of other faiths to Islam.30
2.4. Laws relating to conversion in India

Being a sovereign, democratic, socialist republic state, the Indian Constitution provided lot of scope for religious fundamentalism and religious conversion. So, the Government of India has passed a lot of legislation in India both prior to independence and after post-independence. The state governments have also passed laws related to anti-conversion before independence but the number has increased more after independence particularly in the last decades with a view to curbing religious conversions.

2.4,1. Anti-conversion laws pre-independence India

In order to acquaint ourselves with the laws relating to conversion in India, we may take a cursory look at the history of anti-conversion in India. We may take a cursory look at the history of the anti-conversion laws passed by various princely states in pre-independent India and at those bills which have been introduced in the Parliament and the Assemblies in post-independence India.

This will give us a clear idea that while, on the one hand, the princely states passed anti-conversion laws and implemented them, on the other, there has always been a group of people in Indian society which advocates and urges upon the state to take anti-conversion measures but has not succeeded at the central level. This also shows that a section of the Hindu society is not happy with the inclusion of the Articles related to the freedom of religion in Constitution^{31}.
The British rulers in India never imposed any restriction-on the right to propagate one’s own religion and converting others. They themselves professed a proselytizing religion and kept away throughout their rule from any measure that would have any adverse effect on their missionary activity. On the contrary, they greatly encouraged the evangelists and facilitated conversion to Christianity by introducing new measures in the domain of private law in order to remove hurdles in the way of conversion of others to the Christian religion and offered attractive legal reliefs to the converts to Christianity.

But, outside British India, a number of princely States did enact anti-conversion laws. Among these the prominent laws were Rajgarh State Conversion Act, 1936, the Patna Freedom of Religion Act, 1942, the Sarguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945, and the Udaipur State Anti-Conversion Act, 1946. Similar legislations were promulgated also in Bikaner, Jodhpur, Kalahadi and Kota.

To prevent conversion to Islam or Christianity during the regime of the princely States a number of anti-conversion steps were taken. The first anti-conversion law was the Rajagarh State Conversion Act, which was enacted in 1936. It was actually a threat from the government officials, Rajgarh and Maharajas to the missionaries and the oppressed classes of Hindus, such as Adivasis not to adopt other religions. That enactment banned preaching in the former kingdoms of Rajgarh, Jashpur, and Surgua etc. of the Chhotanagpur area. The Sarguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945 was the second
enactment regarding conversion from Hinduism to Islam and Christianity by vesting the power to allow or disallow conversion in the Darbar of the Rajas under the guise of maintaining law and order and establishing public peace. The Udaipur State Conversion Act, 1946 required all conversions from Hindu religion to other faiths to be registered officially.\textsuperscript{32}

2.4.2. Anti-conversion laws: post-independence India

In 1954 a member of the then ruling party moved in Parliament the Indian Converts Regulation Bill providing for compulsory licensing of missionaries and for registration of conversion with government functionaries. Mainly Christians opposed it; the Bill was eventually dropped at the behest of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1960 another Bill was introduced in Parliament, namely the Backward Communities (Religious Protection) Bill, aimed at checking conversion of Hindus to non-Indian religions, which, as per the Bill, included Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoarostrianism. It was rejected by Parliament for its apparent affront to specific religious faiths. No further attempt in this direction was made in Parliament till 1979, when the house witnessed the introduction and the imminent failure of a Freedom of Religion Bill seeking official curbs on inter-religious conversion, which was opposed, among others, by the Minorities Commission.

During 1968-69 two Indian states, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, enacted local laws called Freedom of Religion Acts. The competence of the state legislatures to enact the aforesaid laws, as also their Constitutional validity, was disputed in the local High Courts and then in appeals before the Supreme
Court. The latter upheld both the laws. Two years later a similar law was enacted in a third state, Arunachal Pradesh. The three state laws on conversion have more or less identical provisions. They prohibit conversion by force, allurement, inducement and fraud, defining conversion as renouncing one religion and adopting another. They thus apply to all cases of change of religion. Contravention of the Act is a cognizable offence punishable with imprisonment, fine or both. Those who convert a person—by performing or participating in the necessary ceremony—are required to send an intimation of conversion to the District Magistrate of the locality. Failure to do so is also a cognizable offence as per these laws.33

Even in post-independence India there have been various attempts to check the conversion from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity. In 1954 a Lok Sabha Member of Parliament introduced an anti-conversion bill entitled Indian Converts (Regulation and Registration) Bill. In Kerala, the Communist government had passed an Education Bill in 1957 to control the educational activities of private bodies such as religious and missionary schools. The Madhya Pradesh Conversion Bill, 1963 was nothing but the retreating of the Niyagi Committee Report. The Bill declared the work of preaching to be against the interest of the nation. Again the Freedom of Religion Act, 1967, passed under the Swatantra Party in Orissa State, was actually an anti-conversion law, which was not repealed even after the outster of Swatantra Party government from power. The Congress Party that came to power did not dare to repeal the Act. However, its validity was challenged in the Orissa High court. The court struck down the enactment as ultra vires the Constitution in 1972.
On the line of the Madhya Pradesh Prevention of Religious Conversion Bill, 1958, the second Freedom of Religion Act was passed in 1968 by the Sanyukta Vidhayak Dal government, including the Jan Sangh as a dominant political constituent. It prohibited a minor to change his religion even where his parents did so. These Madhya Pradesh and Orissa Bills were passed at the behest of rich landlords who had a vested interest in poverty and unconstitutional bondage so that their vested interests would not be hampered on the surface. The aim and object of these conversion Acts was to prevent conversion by force, fraud and inducement but not to make genuine conversions illegal and therefore punishable, though, in effect, genuine conversions were also made difficult.

The point to be noted here is that the Supreme Court, in its judgment in 1977 in Rev. Stainislaus V. State of Madhya Pradesh, held that Madhya pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968 and the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1968 are valid and not ultra-vires the Constitution of India even if both these Acts were a hindrance in the propagation of one's religion. Therefore it seems that, the Supreme Court clearly denied freedom of conscience. Jurist Justice Hidayatullah expressed his view that the judgment deserves reconsideration. Justice Mathew, former Judge of the Supreme Court, observed that all considerations applicable to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(a) are applicable to the right to propagate one’s religion. The right to propagate one’s idea is inherent in the concept of speech and expression.
The threat to freedom of religion was seen further when the Legislative Assembly in Arunachal Pradesh enacted the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Indigenous Faith Bill in May 1978 and the Bill was sent for the President’s assent. Later on with some minor changes in its title, the Bill was passed again. The definition of the terms *indigenous people, fraud, inducement, prohibition of forcible conversion* and *punishment of contravention of the provision* were actually very close to denial of freedom of conscience, guaranteed by the Constitution. The Bill deliberately set aside the statutory right to religion. Tyagi Bill, introduced in December 22, 1978, was actually a Bill to destroy religious freedom. According to the Minority Commission report, Mr. Tyagi’s Bill could become a potent means of harassing honest persons exercising no more than their fundamental rights in regard to profess, practice and propagate their religion.

The Dharm Sansad (Religious Parliament) in session at Ahmedabad adopted a resolution condemning Proselytisation indulged in by the church and demanded enactment of a law to check conversion. The V.H.P leader Pravin Togadia told newsspersons “It is up to the states to see how they can check something which is violative of the Constitution”. He further said the Constitution gave the right to citizens to practice and propagate any religion but the same becomes void if it threatens public order. Citing a Supreme Court verdict of 1977, Togadia said, “Right to propagate does not mean the right convert”.35
The Gujarat BJP MIA from Mansa, in Mehsana, Mangalbhai Patel, moved a private member’s Bill in the Vidhan Sabha, seeking strict measures against religious conversions. Copies of the Bill which are in circulation have raised the hackles of the members of the minority community who have termed its provisions as obnoxious.

The Gujarat Freedom of Religion Bill 1999 was aimed at prohibiting conversion from one religion to another by use of force or allurement. But the United Christian Forum for Human Rights spokesperson Father Cedric Prakash said that the provisions of the Bill were not only unconstitutional but also bad in taste.

G.M. Banatwala introduced a Bill entitled Freedom of Religion (Removal of Restriction Bill, 2000), a private member’s Bill on religious freedom which provided for widening of religious freedom which has been unduly restrained by anti-conversion laws of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. The Bill sought to repeal their local legislations which had placed undue restrictions on the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion.

It emerges from the above discussions that both in pre-independence and post-independence India there have been several attempts to curb religious conversions. The laws of several princely states and several states in independent India did try to prohibit conversion from Hinduism but, since the same continues, it is submitted instead of framing an anti-conversion law, better conditions of life and equality be created in Hindu society which will put an automatic ban on conversion.³⁶
2.7. The reality of conversion:

Conversion does not mean just saying some formal words, changing one's name and leaving one cultural group to join another. It entails not just an outward change of religion, but also a profound alteration of the mindset after passing through many stages of soul-searching and self-analysis. Conversion, in essence, is the emergence of a new individual—one of the most significant events of human history, for it is only with the proliferation of such spiritually reformed personalities that any given society will attain true moral uplift, and reach the highest levels of achievement.

Conversion, in reality, is an event resulting from a sense of discovery. After making a great discovery, one does not remain as before. One becomes a new person. Only a truly revolutionary change of this kind merits the name of conversion. When it does take place, it stems from personal decision-making, and not from greed or external pressures. It causes those lacking in awareness to become intellectually receptive; the dormant come fully alive in all their senses; the morally blind gain a code of ethics; the incurious develop a questing spirit; those living in a circumscribed environment suddenly enter a world without limits, where they can breathe freely; creatures existing at the purely physical level rise above it and begin really to live on a higher conceptual plane; the aimless wanderer, becoming spiritually focused, learns the secret of leading a purposeful life.
In their long struggle for equality, India’s Dalits, or untouchables, have often, exchanged their Hinduism for Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism, believing that they will better their lives by doing so.

They have been persuaded that Hinduism, with its varna ashramas (caste distinctions), has been solely responsible for all their ills. But when they switch to other religious faiths and experience the same distinctions—albeit in different forms—they realize that such a change neither improves their social status nor remedies their economic problems of unemployment and poverty—the real source of their social discrimination.

A letter written by M. Mary John, President of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, to Pope John Paul II during his 1999 visit to India speaks volumes about the treatment meted out to Dalit Christians within the churches of India. The Dalits are oppressed and persecuted by "the hierarchy, the congregation, the authorities and the institutions of the Catholic Church." Despite the condemnation of such practices by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, casteism still persists among Christian communities. A State Commission on Dalits has pointed out that they are "twice discriminated against"—in society and within the church. At the time of conversion, they are assured that they are being inducted into a religious fold that is egalitarian and free from the twin curses of caste and untouchablity. But the reality is altogether different."
Sikh places of worship have separate quarters for Dalit Sikhs. High-caste Muslims do not marry Dalit Muslims. Dalit Christians can hardly hope to reach any high position within the church. (They are not even allowed to occupy the pews meant for higher-caste Christians.) And Buddhist monasteries have not been able to prevent their converts from continuing their earlier casteist practices.

At the same time, in breaking away from Hinduism, Dalits lose out on the basic safeguards provided to them in the Indian Constitution. In 1981, thousands of Dalits in southern India converted to Islam to escape social victimization—only to find that they had forfeited whatever state privileges they enjoyed earlier as Scheduled Caste Hindus. Converted Dalits are now fighting for these privileges, having perceived the age-old caste system still dogging their footsteps.

The very fact that they still have to label themselves Dalits even after conversion in order to seek special privileges exposes the futility of that exercise. Today, India’s Dalits are 82 percent Hindu, 12 percent Muslim and less than 3 percent Christian.

A mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in recent months in India poses the question once again whether religious conversion alone can improve the social and economic status of people who have been marginalized for centuries. Some 50,000 Dalits assembled in New Delhi in November to embrace Buddhism. In January another 25,000 followed suit in the southern state of Kerala.
Such conversions expose the hypocrisy of the religious and political leaders who exploit the socially and economically backward groups for their own ends.\textsuperscript{39}

In the November mass conversion, participants from both northern and southern states converged on India’s capital city. Ram Raj, an official working for the Indian Revenue Service, who also heads the All India Confederation of Scheduled Caste/Schedule Tribes Organizations, led them.

Giving himself a new name and identity after his own conversion, he used the occasion to lash out at the Bharatiya Janata Party led Government at the center, claiming that it had denied opportunities to the Dalits.

Subsequently, the converts recited the 22 vows taken by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, founder of the Dalit movement in India, who, in a similar exercise in 1956, had embraced Buddhism, along with half a million other Dalits, "to escape the tyrannies" of Hindu society. Senior monk Buddha Priya initiated the new converts into the Buddhist fold. Surprisingly, well-known Christian activists also participated in the conversion ceremony to provide "moral support" to the Dalit movement. Although no Christian literature was circulated, a Syrian Christian bishop who had traveled all the way to New Delhi sat through the ceremony, offering to convert to Christianity anyone who desired it.

Dalits seem to prefer Buddhism to other religions unless they are enticed with gifts or other allurements. The reason is that Ambedkar, who was also one of the main architects of the Indian Constitution, stated that of all religions only
Buddhism, advocates equality of all human beings as a fundamental principle. Declaring that Lord Buddha alone raised his voice against separatism, and that the religion he taught is the only one which does not recognize caste, the Dalit leader exhorted his followers to convert to Buddhism, "which is a religion of this country" rather than Christianity, which enticed the poor and the oppressed "by giving them porridge free of cost."

It has also been argued that Buddhists are accepted more easily in Indian society than other minority groups. Since Buddhism, like Jainism or Sikhism, is an Indian religion, it is not considered alien. Christianity and Islam are both perceived by Hindus even today as the religions of the conquerors and invaders.

The poorest sections of the same reserved categories are denied their due. It is not uncommon, especially in rural India, to find poor and illiterate Scheduled Caste workers serving as the bonded laborers of their rich and influential kinsmen. An insidious caste system has thus crept into Dalit circles as well. Privileged members of the community do not marry those doing menial jobs, since they consider them inferior. A few years ago, the Indian government reduced the opportunities of Dalits further by extending reservations to other backward castes. And lately the government in New Delhi has extended reservations in promotions to those who have already benefited by its policies. Consequently, almost every caste is seeking the backward tag to claim a piece of the pie. No wonder this poorest and most backward segment of India’s population is constantly exploited: by politicians for
their votes; by religious leaders for their numbers; by their self-styled advocates for power. Despite much touted policies of compulsory primary education, there are no proper school facilities for Dalit children. Family planning and other health-care programs rarely reach Dalit women. Illiterate, impoverished and vulnerable, the Scheduled Castes cannot even reach the jobs that are earmarked for them because they are not qualified. These crucial issues are completely ignored by their champions, who prefer to harp on caste discrimination and religious conversion rather than take the real measures that might improve Dalits’ lives.\textsuperscript{40}

Whether conversion is wright or wrong, that is a different issue. The fact that the majority community has to face is that the indignation of the upper caste Hindus smacks of their desire to assert their right to continue to dominate and oppress the lower castes, especially Dalits. Religious conversion does not bring any fortune to the converts; they still remain the poorest of the poor. The sweepers, after conversion, continue to remain sweepers and struggle for survival. Conversion marginally changes their social status in the form of entering into religious places.\textsuperscript{41}

2.8. \textbf{Why} conversion is a problem, \textbf{in} India

In the analysis of conversion a distinction is often made between the individual acceptance of the new faith (individual conversion) and the collective embracement of the new faith (mass conversion) as a movement. For the individual convert the adaptation of the new religion is a personal matter, and the circumstances under which it takes place are. Second conversion is totally different: some things go wrong in the welfare administration and Hindu social structure.\textsuperscript{42}
The missionaries are mostly working in the settlements of tribal of north-eastern states. The tribals are perceived as Hindus by the RSS. Conversion of tribals, be it in the north-east or Dangs, is perceived as conversion of Hindus to Christianity. It is highly doubtful whether tribals can be described as Hindus. Moreover religious conversion is the result of western chauvinism and intolerance, jeopardizing peace and harmony. The conversion motive inevitably springs from a sense of one’s religion as superior to another. Christians and Muslims think it is their spiritual duty to convert others to their faith. No one can deny that genuine conversion does not take place through the influence of one individual on another. But, highly organized missionary activities, supported by vast amounts of money and through using expensive mass advertising techniques, are a different matter.

2.8.10 Conversion attempts lead to social tension,

In January 2003 tension prevailed near Deva Raja market in Mysore when a religious congregation led by Christian missionaries made derogatory references against Hindu gods and made attempts to convert people from the economically weaker sections. The local MLA went to the police station and lodged a complaint and the police are investigating the case.

The recent attempt at mass conversion in Selaiyur (Chennai) should open the eyes of Hindus to the objectionable modus operandi used by foreign missionaries to collect a crowd for their ambitious programmes to convert 3000 Dalits
to Christianity. The Dalits were told that the meeting was being convened to celebrate Ambedkar’s birthday and they were unaware of the real purpose for which the meeting was held. When the Christian missionaries started preaching and made efforts to convert the Dalits to Christianity there were loud protests and confusion and the meeting abruptly ended with the conversion of a few Dalits to Christianity. This is an instance to show the fraudulent means adopted to convert Dalits to Christianity. This appeared as a news item in *the New Indian Express* published two months back.

US missionary Joseph William Cooper came to India on a tourist visa and was directed to leave India before 26.1.2003 on the charge of preaching Christianity and indulging in religious conversions near Trivandrum in Kerala. Cooper violated a 1955 Central Government order restricting foreign Christian missionaries from making speeches at religious conventions while visiting India on a tourist visa. Hence he was directed to leave India. Evangelical activities by foreign Christian missionaries in India are prejudicial to the interests of the country, affect social harmony and are a threat to maintenance of public order. The Joseph William Cooper incident must be an eye opener to other States in India.\(^{45}\)

### 2.8.2. Conversion

Conversion is created as an *issue on the* following grounds;

1. Conversion is an exercise of the right to propagate religion and thus a fundamental right.
2. Getting converted, is an exercise of the right to religious form of worship—also a fundamental right and a recognized human right.

3. Conversion is intrusion into one’s freedom of religion.

4. Conversions are done by force and inducements and therefore a crime and violation of individual freedom and freedom to follow one’s religion.

5. Foreign funds pumped in for religious conversions are in some places diverted to aid anti-national activities and should, therefore, be stopped.

6. Conversions provoke social conflicts and violence and disturb peace.

7. Conversions are generally effected en masse and upset social composition of a locality and create pockets of minority communities.

8. Mass conversions do not reflect any change in the convictions of the converted, but a response to material inducements.

9. Non-proselytizing Hindu religion is also absorbing many tribal communities in its fold which amongst to conversion.

10. Conversion controversy and conflict are likely to spread, to other countries disturbing inter-religious harmony.
The recent visit of Pope John Paul II to India for the Saian Papal Conference of the Catholic Church rekindled the debate that was in any case not dormant. The conference adopted a document “Ecclesia in Asia”, which states: "Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe and in the second on that of America and Africa, we can pray that in the third Christian millennium, a harvest of faith will be reached in the (Asian) continent’.

Apparently a peaceful exhortation to Papal organizations to progress in their mission, it sounded like a challenge to the major religions of Asia particularly Hinduism. Already under the fear of conversion of Hindus to Christianity, Hindu organisations have stepped up their campaigns and demand a Papal apology for all the conversions that have taken place in India. The Vatican officials are reported to have maintained a stand that conversion is more a human rights question than an inter-religious affair.

The right to propagate religion, guaranteed as a fundamental right in the Indian Constitution, doesn't mean the right to convert another person to one's own religion, but to transmit or spread one's religion by propagation of its tenets. The distinction between prorogation and conversion was clearly brought out by the Supreme Court in the reputed case of Rev. Stanlisaus versus Madhya Pradesh in 1977. The Supreme Court then upheld the validity of the laws passed by the Madhya Pradesh and Orissa legislations banning religious conversion by force, fraud or inducement.
It is said that the pressures of the Christian lobby, the political necessity to follow a policy of appeasement of minority communities, a prestigious stand of secularism in the sense of equal respect for all religions—all combined to accord a status of constitutional right to propagation of religion.

The same pressures served to defeat a Bill in the Parliament introduced in 1955 to ban conversion by force, fraud or material inducement.

This legal position is in consonance with the political policy of toleration and encouragement of all religions, which is also considered suitable for a plural society. Mass conversions, whether to Islam at Meenakshipuram in Tamilnadu or to Christianity in the tribal belts of Orissa or in the northeast are superficially religious acts but suspected to carry social-political consequences. The Hindu, defense by way of reconversion or shuddi is weak and the Hindu organizations expect and insist on political and governmental action to contain the forces of conversion, for religion wise, the Hindus lack organizational unity and resources.

Hindu organizations seem to be worried only about the pull factors of conversion and want to fight them with law and authority. They tend to ignore the push factors, which are equally significant. To fight these, they should introspect and acknowledge the shortcomings in their own social, system and come forward to remove them. To fight the push factors such as caste disabilities and inequalities, which persist despite legal ban, what are required are social action and not a debate.
Conversions are one such issue. The abuse of innocents, particularly women and children, by persons claiming religious status is another. Both matters are urgent and sensitive, but an informed debate will be to the ultimate benefit of all concerned.

The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) felt the US missionary was probably an unwitting victim of public outrage against the “wrongdoings and immoral acts” of Rev Sam’s family (Tribune, 17 January 2003). NCM member John Joseph found that a local girl had allegedly been sexually abused and harassed for four months at the Bible Christian Centre, which had resulted in the issue of non-bailable warrants against Rev P.K. Sam and his son. The entire family had gone into hiding since October 2002, following wide reportage in the local media. However, when P.K. Sam’s son, Benson, suddenly appeared in public at a gospel convention with the foreign missionary (his financier), it “spontaneously aroused the fury of some who knew about the misdeeds of Benson.”

Local media reports about the sexual abuse of a poor Dalit orphan girl by Rev. Sam and his family make depressing reading, and the local anger is utterly understandable. It now remains to be seen how Indian church authorities react to the charges of sexual abuse in this and other instances. The police, of course, must now make all efforts to arrest Rev. Sam and other accused persons in the case.
Most citizens do not know that India was one of the countries investigated by a high-level fact-finding team from the Vatican some years ago, when worldwide charges of sexual abuse in parishes could no longer be ignored. The extent of abuse of both male and female devotees in the US, Europe, Australia and Africa is now known.

Yet there has been no introspection in India. It is time the church authorities took cognizance of the problem and initiated corrective measures on their own. Certainly they must not indulge in false tirades against others when some scandals come to light. It has, for instance, been established that the 1998 Jhabua nuns’ rape case was an intra-Christian affair, but, to this day, the event is presented in Christian rhetoric as a VHP/RSS-led attack on minorities. These canards must now end.

As for the American missionary, some newspapers took umbrage at the government’s decision to expel him; some reported his magnanimity in forgiving his assailants. But contrary to the genial image conjured up by such exuberant advertorials, the Reverend, alas, was up to no good in God’s own country. According to the residents of the Kilimanoor Dalit hamlet, Cooper spewed venom against Lord Krishna and attributed the modern scourge of AIDS to the avatar of a bygone yuga. If true, such a statement could legitimately explain local resentment against the group.

As the American missionary has departed, it is too late to ask for action against him. A few points, however, are in order. The statement attributed to Cooper smacks of extreme
religious intolerance, besides being overtly racist. Such conduct, if committed on American soil, would have led to Cooper being jailed for inciting religious hatred and prejudice among different communities. Indeed, this is the reason why the US Consulate dissociated itself from the case, though it initially said it would send an investigative team to the region.

In this context, the All India Christian Council has not helped to improve inter-community relations by labeling the RSS and its affiliates as “violent religious fundamentalist terrorist organisations, which need to be banned in the interest of global peace, regional stability and the unity and integrity of the Indian republic.” After the complete exposure of the real activities of both Benson and Cooper, it seems ludicrous to call the incident a “well laid conspiracy to terrorise and polarise the Dalit and tribal villagers in a state otherwise known for its inter-religious harmony.”

The Council has virtually arraigned the Chief Minister and district authorities for not charging the arrested RSS men with attempted murder and for asking the missionary to leave for violating visa rules. But its allegation that “the Atal Bihari Government fully supports religious bigotry and Sangh violence whether it is in Gujarat, Orissa or Kerala” is extremely irresponsible and deserves condemnation from all mature citizens.

Most mischievous, however, is the Council’s attempt to equate the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom with a carte blanche to missionaries, especially foreigners, to indulge in dubious conversion activities, often in the face of
local resentment and resistance. The Council has rightly noted that, through the centuries, Hindu dharma has spread to several parts of the globe and there is today hardly a nation that does not host temples and welcome Hindu gurus with open arms. But it has failed to draw the correct inference from this situation, which is that Hindu teachers have never traveled anywhere with arms, money or muscle power. They have not sought to eradicate any faith or creed, or to impose only one way of life upon resisting populace. 1,500 Dalits from the southern states embraced Buddhism in the presence of monks from Nagpur monastery in Perambalur District of Tamilnadu.

2.9. Reconversion

Probably almost all low caste conversion in India is not an ideology based conversion, but socio, economic, educational and other inducements based conversion. If their expectation is fulfilled, probably, they may remain in the converted religion. If not, they may reconvert to the original faith as early as possible. Reconversion is a process by which a converted person or family again changes religious faith and adopts the previous religion.

2.10. Religious Conversion, in Tamilnadu

Mass conversion has been taking place in Tamilnadu since the eighteenth century. While most of the conversions were from Hinduism to Christianity, during the post-Independence period, a few mass conversions of Hindus to Islam have taken place. The 1981 Meenakshipuram mass conversion was the first conversion of this type which has
attracted widespread reaction throughout society. Since, then religious conversion is a frequent matter either in the form of real conversion, or threat to the administrators. The issue of conversion is a regular feature in Tamilnadu. In many villages across South India, religion is turning out to be a question of money. Flush with funds from their headquarters in the United States, a number of Evangelical and Pentacostal church groups are converting hundreds of Hindus, especially low castes, to Christianity. Similarly, Muslim scholars are touring villages in Tamilnadu and Karnataka to lure locals to Islam. Hindu nationlist leaders claim that despite the hue and cry they have raised against conversion all these years, forced conversions are taking place at a brisk pace in Tamilnadu, Kerela, Andhra Pradesh and Karkataka.

Mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in recent months in India poses the question once again whether religious conversion alone can improve the social and economic status of people who have been marginalized for centuries. Some 50,00 Dalits assembled in New Delhi in November to embrace Buddhism. In January, 25,000 followed suit in the southern state of Kerela. Such conversions expose the hypocrisy of the religious and political leaders who exploit the socially and economically backward groups for their own ends.

In Tamilnadu conversion is taking place on the basis of the following types: i) Conversion through conviction; ii) conversion on account of social structure/ situations; and, iii) conversion through inducements, coercion or fraud. Conversion of the first type is the least. The second and third
type account for more in numbers in the recent past. There are also possibilities of re conversion. Conversion has become a real issue after reported incidence of conversion frequently especially among the Scheduled Castes in Tamilnadu. They prefer only Christianity and Islam, because Christianity is a religion of modernity and Islam too when compared to Sikhism and Buddhism. Moreover Sikhism and Buddhism are branded as north Indian religions; if religious rules are orthodox, in modern society people are not ready to adopt orthodox religions. Even among convets to Christianity lower rank Scheduled Castes are prepared to convert to specific denominations, were they can get equality and not to all the churches and denominations. The upper rank Scheduled Castes are prepared to convert mostly to Islam. In this context, the present study has been conducted in two district of Tamilnadu.
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