CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Problem

Religion is really a complex phenomenon in India. Religion has played an important part in Indian society from the earliest times. It has assumed numerous forms and nomenclatures in relation to different groups of people associated with it. India has for long been a poly-religious society. Transformations and changes in different religions have occurred from time to time vis-à-vis changes in intellectual climate and social structure. Religion in India has never been static. India has witnessed millions of cases of conversion and reconversion in its chequered history. Religious movements and religious conversions have been a perpetual feature of India's socio-religious and cultural life. Many studies have proved that, historically, conversion is part and parcel of the Indian tradition. So, conversion is an antique and presumably unique phenomenon in India (Michael: 1998, Raj: 1998)

Since ancient times, change of religion in India highlights the process of inclusion and exclusion in the mobility context. This change of religion or conversion has taken place among the lower Hindu caste groups at either the individual or the community level. It appears that the search for equality has been the principal incentive for lower caste conversion to other religions. So, religious conversion has become the subject of passionate debate in contemporary India. There has been growing contestation around
religious conversion among academicians, politicians and the media. Religious conversion opened up a wider debate since the arrival of European missionaries. A lot of conjectures, controversies and explanations have come up with the phenomenon of religious conversion in India. However, social scientists in India have paid only a little attention to the conversion phenomena (Lobo: 1991, Bayly: 1992). In the 1980s, there was an unprecedented restlessness among the Pallars, one of the dominant Schedule Castes or Dalit (henceforth Scheduled Castes, Harijans and untouchables will be termed Dalits) communities in South India. They were enlightened by the new ideas of equality and freedom that they acquired through modern education. Social exclusion of the Pallars under the Hindu social order along with their passion for equality (Deliege: 1997, Michael: 1999) led them towards Islam. Many Christian Pallars also embraced Islam as Christianity had failed them in matters of equality.

2.2 Meaning of Conversion

The nature and meaning of conversion has been under speculation and discussion for several decades. Despite the fact that the term conversion has never had an unequivocal meaning in its long history, one finds an even a greater proliferation of meanings, particularly in the twentieth century. Such widely diverse meanings have caused certain confusion about the precise definition and essential characteristics of conversion (Walter: 1993).

In modern religious metaphor, the word conversion has acquired a socio-spiritual sense; it has also acquired certain overtones which imply a sudden change of one's
religious faith. The English word *conversion* is the translation of the Greek word *epistrophei* and the Hebrew word *shub*. The basic meaning of the Greek word *epistrophei* is that of a turn, a change of direction, a reversal of life. The Hebrew word ‘*shub*’ means quite simply to return or to turn back, literally meaning turning back or returning to God biblically. In both Greek and Hebrew, the underlying meaning of conversion is to turn; in other words, it is a turning from sin and returning to God. Thus, the words *epistrophei*, and *shub* carry the central meaning of conversion (*Barclay*: 1978). The Latin word *conversio*, translating the Greek *metanoia*, literally means going away. Thus, the term conversion refers to a process of turning around or changing direction in life.

Conversion is a change of direction morally and spiritually. It is a turning to something definite and positive and specifically refers to a change of worldview. A turn involves two things: it involves a *terminus a quo*, a turning from something and a *terminus ad quem*, a turning towards something (*Barclay*: 1978). So, the central act of conversion is a change of direction in life, albeit, in modern terms, conversion implies a change of one’s religious faith to another faith. But real conversion means a change of religion from one faith to another with corresponding changes in attitude, motivation, character, morality and the way of life etc. (*Banerjee*: 1982). Thus, religious conversion is the adoption of a new religious identity, or a change from one religious identity to another. This typically entails the sincere avowal of a new belief system. Conversion occurs not only from one religion to another, but also occurs among different
denominations or sects within the same faith. English speaking Muslims sometimes prefer the term revert to describe converts to Islam, since Islam teaches that all infants are born Muslims until made members of another religion through ritual.

Man is not only a social animal; he is also a spiritual animal. Since time immemorial, humans have been incurably religious. As human nature is convertible, humans change their religion of birth due to various reasons. Conversion is also a part of the continuing process that goes on as civilization. Conversion is a process as well as a concept of change. Every stage in human society and changes in the needs of society have effected a change of Gods. Even the needs and the nature of the economy decide the type of Gods. Thus, conversion acquires a historical concept of change. The central meaning of conversion is, of course, change. Conversion is a more general term that applies to all changes that involve a transformation of opinion from one belief to another, like a change of political affiliation. While conversion is a term usually applied to religious change, it is in fact a more general term that stands for all significant life changes.

Lewis Rambo regards conversion as a process over time, not a single event; as contextual and thereby influencing and being influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and as a part of a continuing process that goes on as civilization (Rambo: 1993). For Frykenberg, 'Conversion is a change (either an event or a process) from one view of life to another; from one set of beliefs or opinions to another; from one party, religion, or 'spiritual' state to another. It normally leads to a change in
beliefs and group identification and to a complete reorientation in a person’s emotional condition and intellectual outlook’ (Wingate: 1997). According to Lancy Lobo, conversion normally implies (a) an individual or group of persons, and, (b) change in beliefs and group identification.

Conversion can only be properly understood in its cultural context; in other words, conversion is a culture-specific phenomenon (Warbug: 1986). ‘Conversion is the outcome of cultural contact between religions. Thus, conversion is a cultural migration; a journey from one faith to another possibly from one culture to another’ (Copley: 1999). Conversion itself is a crossing-over, a migration or travel from one country, culture, religion, and identity to another (Viswanathan: 1998). Conversion is not just transference from one faith to another but there is also the non-spiritual dimension to the phenomenon of religious conversion (Lobo: 1991). Conversion is the chief end of all teaching and preaching in some religions. One is either born in a religious tradition to follow the prescribed way or alternatively may give up the inherited tradition to adopt another prescribed way. Conversion is rarely an overnight, all-in-an-instant, wholesale transformation that is now and forever (Rambo: 1993). Christianity and Islam are major religions of the world which emphasize the desirability of conversion.

In a multi-religious, pluralistic society like India, the influence of religious ideologies upon the people of other religious faiths and its result of conversion is inevitable. The co-existence of different religions, inter-religious rivalries, sectarian developments within a religion and shifting from one faith to another indicate not only
the disintegrating effects but also give rise to the sociological phenomenon of religious conversion (Patak: 1987). Sociologically, the issue of conversion has always been of immense value for research interests. The term conversion is employed as a neutral sociological term to understand change of religious belief and practice (Robinson et al.: 2008).

1.3 Definition of Conversion

There is nevertheless widespread consensus on defining the term conversion that involves religious change or transformation. There is a congeries of definitions of the phenomenon of religious conversion. “Conversion, strictly defined, is a noun referring to the act of being converted in any sense from one position or conviction to another, from one party or form of religion to another, from one group affiliation to another” (Oates: 1973). George Matthew provides a working definition of conversion: ‘Conversion is a social process whereby people move out of one religious community into another with or without a spiritual transformation and the perceived advantage of adopting a new faith’ (Matthew: 1982). G.A.Oddie defines conversion as a process by which people move out of one religious community into another. For him, conversion means “shifting of camps” (Oddie: 1977). Warbug considers conversion as a rite of passage, where the transition period extends from the first encounter of the future convert with the new religion to the time when the convert becomes a full member of the religious community (Warbug: 1986). Peel considers conversion as “the process by which individuals come
to label themselves as Christian and Muslim. Conversion is therefore seen as a highly
discriminative process.

The word conversion has a laissez-faire character. Scholars have discussed and
analyzed it in different perspectives. Conversion, whatever form it takes is a profound
sociological/psychological experience with far reaching social and interpersonal effects.
With the exception of historians, social scientists have paid little attention to conversion
(to Christianity) as an agent of social change in India (Lobo: 1991)

1.4 Types of Conversion

1.4.1 Distinction between Conversion and Proselytisation

Ranga Rao made a distinction between conversion and proselytisation. While the
former refers to the inner change of faith and conduct of the individual, the latter refers to
persuading people to change their affiliation from one religion to another by economic,
social, and political inducements. Proselytisation has been a part of the programmes in
some major religions such as Christianity and Islam (Rao: 1982).

1.4.2 Vertical and Horizontal Conversion

Brojendra Nath Banerjee divides conversion into vertical and horizontal
conversion. In the former, God-ward conversion is possible. There is a change in the
level of character, way of life, corresponding changes in human nature. In the latter, there
is a mere change from one religion to another without corresponding changes in
character, way of life, and human nature. This horizontal conversion involves no changes
the quality of the life of the converted. Horizontal conversion is no conversion at all. Conversion cannot take place unless it involves a vertical conversion (Banerjee: 1982).

4.3 Jayaram’s Distinction between Individual and Mass conversion

In the analysis of conversion, a distinction is often made between the individual acceptance of a new faith (individual conversion) and the collective embrace of a new faith (mass conversion) as a movement (Jayaram: 1992). For those undergoing mass conversion, the adoption of the new religion is more a collective exercise which is the result of ‘a group decision’.

The discuss the consequences from these two types of conversion

The individual converts have to defy the members of their local caste groups, and accordingly experience isolation from caste, kin, from their resources, the status, and their connubial alliances.

In mass conversion, the converts belong to the same caste within a religion, and they do not experience any significant changes in the traditional social norms and relationships. They retain their caste pedigrees.

According to Asghar Ali Engineer, conversion could be of four types;

Conversion through conviction,

Conversion on the account one’s social situation,
Conversion through inducement, and,

Conversion through coercion or fraud.

According to him, the whole history of conversion in India—and it is a long one—now that conversions in the first and last categories are very few and far between (Eaton: 1999).

5 Theories of Conversion to Islam in India

According to Richard M. Eaton, most of the explanations of conversions to Islam in India can be reduced to three basic theories (Eaton: 2004).

The Sword Theory of Conversion to Islam

It is the oldest of theory of conversion to Islam in India. Peter Hardy argues, Indian Muslims were forcibly converted but he fails to define either force or conversion having to presume that a society can and will change its religious identity simply because has a sword at its neck with the extension of Turko-Iranian rule in North India between 1200 and 1765 and the Islamic conquest of India. Eaton argues that a glance at the geographical distribution of Muslims in the subcontinent reveals an ‘inverse relationship’ between the degrees of Muslim political penetration. He argues that Bengal and North Western Punjab, the outer layers of the fringes of Indo-Muslim rule, have a greater concentration of Muslim population, whereas the heartland of that rule, the Upper angetic Plain, saw a much lower incidence of conversion to Islam. Hence, he rejects the
world theory of conversion to Islam as inappropriate to explain conversion to Islam in India.

The Political Patronage Theory of Conversion to Islam

The second theory commonly advanced to explain the conversion of Indians to Islam is the political patronage theory or the view that Indians of the medieval period converted in order to receive some non-religious favours from the ruling class, relief from taxes, promotion in the bureaucracy, and so forth. The Kayasthas and Khatris of the Gangetic Plain, the Parasnis of Maharashtra, and the Amils of Sind cultivated Muslim culture by virtue of their filling the government’s great need for clerks and administrative servants at all levels. Eaton argues that the patronage thesis may be acceptable in accounting for the relatively light incidence of Islamization in the political heartland; it cannot explain the massive conversions to Islam that took place along the political fringe, especially in the Punjab and Bengal. For political patronage, like the influence of the word, decreases rather than increases as one moves away from the Delhi heartland towards the periphery.

Social Liberation Theory of Conversion to Islam

The social liberation theory was elaborated by British ethnographers and scholars Indian Muslims. The substance of the theory is that the Hindu caste system is a rigidly discriminatory form of social organization and that the lowest and most degraded castes,
Recognizing in Islam, an ideology of social equality converted to it en masse in order to escape from Brahmanical oppression.

This theory too, according to Eaton, has serious problems. On the contrary, it seems that Hindu society of medieval India was more influenced by what Louis Dumont finds the principle of *homo hierarchicus*, or of institutionalized inequality, than by the principle of *homo equalis*. Beyond that, a careful reading of Persian primary sources suggests that, in their presentation of Islam to Indians, Muslim intellectuals did not stress the Islamic ideal of social equality as opposed to Hindu castes, but rather Islamic monotheism as opposed to Hindu polytheism. Moreover, even if it were true that Islam had been presented as an ideology of social equality, there is abundant evidence that former Hindu communities failed upon conversion to improve their status in the social hierarchy and that, on the contrary, they simply carried over into Muslim society the practice of birth-ascribed rank that they had had in Hindu society.

According to Eaton, East Bengal and West Punjab were the two areas of the continent possessing the highest incidence of Muslim conversion among the local population. In Bengal, Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal, or other indigenous groups which had but the lightest contact with the Hindu religious or caste structure, and in the Punjab the same was true for the various Jat clans that came to form the bulk of the Muslim community. Since the greatest incidence of Muslim conversions occurred among groups that were not fully Hindu in the first place,
for the vast majority of South Asian Muslims, according to Eaton, the question of liberation from the oppressive Hindu social order was simply not an issue.

This research strongly rejects Eaton's arguments that Islam does not liberate lower castes from the oppressive Hindu social order. Eaton's arguments were based on his study in north India where the existence of caste like stratification among Muslims is clearly evident (Singh: 1977, Dube: 1990, Fanselow: 1996, Ahmad: 1997, Alam at al: 1997, Risely: 1999). But many scholars refuted such caste like division and stratification among the Muslims of South India particularly in Tamil Nadu (Mines: 1977, Khan: 1983, More: 2004). The findings of this research strongly proves that Islam has been and continues to liberate many lower castes from the clutches of caste system.

6. B.R. Ambedkar's Theory on Religious Conversion

Ambedkar aggressively advocated the conversion of Dalits to other non-Hindu religions which treat them equally and proved his advocacy by converting to Buddhism with half a million followers in 1956. In his view, there are two aspects of conversion: social as well as religious, material as well as spiritual. He held that understanding the beginning and the nature of untouchability and how it is practiced will help to understand conversion. In his conviction, untouchability is a permanent phenomenon and no change is possible as long as Dalits are at the lowest rung of the society. There is no way out for Dalits. Those who wish to live a life of self-respect and equality will have to think over conversion.
To survive through this struggle against untouchability Ambedkar emphasized the need for types of strengths for Dalits i.e., manpower, finance and mental strengths. Historically, Dalits lacked these strengths. He conceived that the strength required to face this tyranny needs to be secured from outside. He pleaded that unless Dalits establish close relations with some other society, unless they join some other religion, they cannot get the strength from outside. It clearly meant they must leave their present religion and assimilate with some other society. Without that, they cannot gain the strength of that society. So long as Dalits do not have strength, their future generations will have to lead lives in the same pitiable condition. Hence, conversion is necessary for material gains.

He pointed out that no living example of inequality is to be found anywhere in the world except in Hindu society. Dalits have been thrust into this condition because they continue to be Hindus. Those who have become Muslims are treated by the Hindus neither as Dalits nor as unequals. The same can be said of those who have become Christians. Thus, Dalits are not low in the eyes of the Hindus alone, but are the lowest in the whole of India because of the treatment given to them by the Hindus. To get rid of this shameful condition, there is only one way and that is to throw off the shackles of Hindu religion and society in which they are bound. In short, so long as Dalits remain in a religion which teaches a man to treat another man like a leper, the sense of discrimination on account of caste will continue. For annihilating caste and untouchability, change of religion is the only antidote.
The change of religion followed by the change of name will be more beneficial to Dalits. To call oneself a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist or a Sikh is not merely a change of religion but also a change of name. The Hindu religion is not the religion of the Dalits’ ancestors, but it was a slavery forced upon them. He was convinced that Dalits cannot achieve equality by remaining as Hindus but only by leaving it through conversion, because, it is difficult to achieve equality under the caste based Hindu social order. Through conversion, the equality of treatment can be achieved and affinity between the Hindus and the untouchables can be brought about. Conversion is the only right path of freedom, which ultimately leads to equality. It is neither cowardice nor escapism.

Ambedkar did not agree with the view that economic progress will alleviate the sufferings of Dalits. Untouchability is a permanent handicap on the path of progress for Dalits. Without conversion, this hurdle cannot be removed. To make them valued with education and other qualifications, the Dalits must throw away the shackles of untouchability, which means change of religion. He also denied that the Dalits would lose their political rights and safeguards by conversion. In his opinion, conversion is the only way to eternal bliss. However, the Dalits’ conversion will be for material as well as for spiritual gains. He maintained that religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, he asked his followers to convert themselves (Ambedkar: 1982).
7 Acculturation, Reference Group Behaviour and Conversion

In a dynamic and a pluralistic society, the process of acculturation and reference group behaviour stimulates and encourages these feelings among lower caste groups. People of lower and marginal status may strive hard for social mobility and crave for various means of identity formation and upward mobility. This may result in amalgamation of two groups or incorporation of the membership group into a large non-member valuation group (Berreman: 1964). India is a multi-religious plural society and so is the Hindu society. In a process of thorough social change, upward mobility and downward social mobility go hand in hand.

A caste or a category of people having acquired some means of power or some symbols of social status in certain spheres feels ‘status inconsistency’ or ‘status incongruence’ in case they fail to achieve the symbols of prestige and power in other spheres of social life. Accordingly, an educated lower caste person protests against the discriminatory behaviour meted out to him by the upper castes and this explains the anxiety on the part of the educated to get out of the rural areas of the Hindu society, if possible. This anxiety becomes particularly evident in situations where caste conflicts in some form or the other continue to take place and caste groups try to exploit the situation of low status of certain sections of the population. Of course, the same thing may happen to a category of people experiencing downward social mobility and that category may equally take to various means of retarding their downward mobility as such. This
explains why in some places the upper castes including Brahmans took to Christianity and Islam (Fernandes: 1981).

Based on the study and literature, this study proposes a theoretical analysis of the problem of Pallars' conversion to Islam in the context of the process of acculturation and reference group behaviour. A theoretical summation of this notion is that the Pallars' lure to raise their status through Sanskritisation like the Nadars was probably the factor that induced them to embrace Islam. Unlike the Nadars, they did not have strong material conditions and strong caste associations to mobilize their caste members communally. Being marginal, they were quick to adopt Islam or Christianity in order to raise their social status. Christianity and Islam acted as alternative avenues to Sanskritisation to raise their social status and served as positive reference groups to be emulated. The Pallars took to Islam as a means of enhancing their status.

Of course, the Christian or Islamic model of reference group behaviour has also proved out to be a kingly model attracting a number of castes, lower and upper, to its fold. Circumstantially, it so happened that the religious group which was ready to accommodate the Pallars was the Islamic group which has a sizable number in the Tamil region, and which incidentally was also getting rich through its contacts with the Gulf countries. Probably their experience in Tamil Nadu and the adjacent state of Kerala made Pallars choose Islam rather than Christianity because the latter, in terms of continuation of caste stratification, was not socially or materially different from Hinduism and, at any rate, Islam was more egalitarian than Christianity.
In case of villages in the Southern districts of Tamil Nadu, it was the educated government employed Pallars who engineered the mass conversion phenomenon, because they felt the ‘status incongruence’ deeply and searched for a clear identification with a reference group which was ready to incorporate or absorb them into itself. Thus, their quest for identity, status enhancement and avoidance of the feeling of status consistency has been the major factor which has worked in drawing the Pallars to Islam despite the benefits proclaimed and extended to Hindu Scheduled Castes by the government. The conversion to Islam is a sign of protest against and hatred for the traditional membership group. The Pallars were in search of a stronger non-Hindu identity. The reference group theory here serves as an important theoretical frame of reference for understanding the process of mass conversions among the Pallars. (Fernandes: 1981, Rao: 1982).

A caste group which is not well integrated in Hinduism or is loosely integrated in the Hindu social order or is at the periphery of the Hindu order as a loose Hindu caste group may seek out groups like Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs as a reference group. A marginal caste like the Pallars would crave for an identity and find themselves need to choose any means for identity, including conversion. Among the Muslims, ratification is not that rigid as it is found among Hindus and Christians. The lower caste groups, failing to raise their status level in Hinduism and Christianity, may seek identification with the Muslims and seek conversion accordingly. In fact, Islam has been gaining in numbers due to caste based discrimination (Fernandes: 1981, Rao: 1982).
1.8 Dalits in India

Pitrim Sorokin has pointed out that all permanently organized societies are stratified. Most societies of the world have had their type of what Lester Ward calls “the Lowly”. The Romans had their Plebian, the Spartans their Hiatus, the British their Villains, the Egyptians their Slaves, the Americans their Negroes, the Germans their Jews and the Japanese their Burakumins, the Srilankans their Rodiya, the Nigerians their Osu and the Indians have their Dalits.

Today, in the most comprehensive and inclusive sense, the term Dalit includes all the oppressed and exploited sections of society. According to Eleanor Zelliot, the word Dalit refers to those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate way. There is, in the word itself, an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy (Shah: 2001). For her, the word Dalit indicates struggle for an egalitarian order (Zelliot: 2001). Pradeep K. Sharma says the word Dalit refers to broken, ground-down, down-trodden people who became subject to deliberate acts of exploitation by those above them in a hierarchical social system (Sharma: 2006). For some, it connotes an ideology for fundamental change in the social structure and relationship.

However, it has now acquired a new cultural context relating to Dalitness, Dalit literature and the Dalit movement (Shah: 2001). Hence, today the term Dalit signifies a militant expression of social protest. This notion is explicitly anti-caste and pro-emancipation. The claim of being Dalit has radically changed and eradicated the inferiority complex.
The concept of Dalitesses express resistance, protest and social emancipation (Beltz: 2004).

1.9 Dalits in Tamil Nadu

The total population of Tamil Nadu, as per the 2001 Census, is 62,405,679. Of this, 11,857,504 (19 per cent) are Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SCs). The Dalit population constitutes 7.1 per cent of the country’s total Dalit population. Seventy-six (76) Dalit groups have been notified in Tamil Nadu by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 1976. Of these, Adi Dravidas, Pallars, Paraiyars and Chakkiliars constitute the larger groups among the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Out of 76, five Dalit groups, namely Adi Dravidas, Pallars, Paraiyars, Chakkiliyars and Arunthathiyars together constitute 93.5 per cent of the Dalit population of the state. Adi Dravidas are numerically the largest Dalit caste with a population of 5,402,755, constituting 45.6 per cent of the state Dalit population. They are followed by Pallars 2,272,265 (19.2 per cent), Paraiyars 1,860,519 (15.7 per cent), Chakkiliyars 777,139 (6.6 per cent) and Arunthathiyars 771,659 (6.5 per cent) (Census of India: 2001). Mumtaj Ali Khan divides Tamil Nadu into 3 concentrations, namely, Paraiyar concentration in northern Tamil Nadu, Pallar concentration in southern Tamil Nadu, and Chakkiliar concentration in western Tamil Nadu. In every concentration, a caste from the above three caste groups outnumbers the others (Khan: 1983).
The Pallars are an ancient community, engaged extensively in wet land farming and distributed mainly in Thanjavur, Madurai and Ramanathapuram Districts. The Pallars rank themselves the second highest among the Dalits of Tamil Nadu, and number around 2 million (Census of India: 2001, Vijaya et al.: 2008).

Paraiyars

The term Paraiyan is derived from the Tamil word parai meaning drum, as some them act as drummers at funerals and village festivals. They are also engaged in cultivation, grass cutting and weaving. Fifteenth century literature indicates that the Paraiyars were also engaged in leather processing from dead animals, which isitionally considered to be defiling and polluting. They are also known as Sambavans, Ambavars and Sambans (Singh: 1998), and their number is estimated to be around 1.8 million (Census of India: 2001, Vijaya et al.: 2008).

Chakkiliyars

The Chakkiliyars are also referred to as Arundhatiyar, Madari, Madiga and gadai, and represent the lowest strata even among the Schedule Castes. No literature isailable to indicate their historical origin, although it is thought that they might be migrants from the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh as their mother tongue is ilugu. They are mainly a landless community. Their traditional occupations are eeping, scavenging, removing dead animals, making and repairing footwear as well as
working as farm labourers (Singh: 1998). The size of their population is estimated to be over 0.7 million (Census of India: 2001, Vijaya et al.: 2008).

1.10 Socio-historical settings of Pallars in Tamil Nadu

The Pallars are the largest agricultural community in Tamil Nadu. In numerical terms, the Pallars are second largest Dalit caste group in Tamil Nadu (Khan: 1983, Wyatt: 2010). They are largely concentrated in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. Historians consider the Pallars are descendents of Mallars, portrayed as warriors and experts in agriculture (Vellalars) in classical Sangam Tamil literature but had undergone downward mobility due to some historical events particularly after the arrival of the Nayakas in Tamil Nadu (Hanumanthan: 1979, Oppert: 1972). Historian Hanumanthan holds that the Pallars (Low Pallis) and the Vanniyars (High Pallis), another most backward caste in northern Tamil Nadu, belong to the same stock hailing from the descendents of the Pallava rulers. According to Manikumar, ‘The Dalit intellectuals hold the view that the Pallars or Devendrakula Vellalars were once the land holders enjoying a pre-eminent position in the Tamil society. Only Nayaka rulers confiscated their land and forced them into servitude’ (Manikumar: 2001). Later, they were treated as untouchables, pushed to the periphery of the Indian social structure and included in the list of Scheduled Castes. Today Devendrakula Vellalar is the dignified nomenclature used to denote the Pallars as a part of an attempt to justify the divine origin of their birth, from Devendra, the king of Gods (Manikumar: 2001).
The name Pallar is said to be derived from Pallam, a pit in which they were said to be standing when the castes were originally formed (Thurston: 1993). According to another school of thought, which appears more probable, the word is derived from “low ground” or “wet cultivation” in which Pallars were expert (Mani: 2009). Pallars are divided into five sub-castes: some claim to belong to the Ayya Pallars division, for they call their fathers ayya, whereas Appa and Agna Pallars call their fathers appa and agna. The last two divisions are Atta and Amma Pallars, named according to the way they address their mothers (Deliege: 1992). Each of these Pallar sub-castes is again divided into matrilineal clans (Kilai). The headman of the Pallars is called Kudumban and he is assisted by a Kaladi. The caste messenger sometimes called Variyan whose business is to summon people to attend caste meetings, marriages, funerals etc. The common titles for Pallar chiefs are generally Mupper, Kudumbar and Mannadi. The system of chieftainship (Kudumbar and Kaladi) still exists among them (Mani: 2009). The Sasthravali is a sacred specialist like Brahmin priest and solemnises marriage, and conducts death and other ritual ceremonies among the Pallars.

Kathleen Gough studied the Pallars of South India and found that Pallars have a distinctive social and cultural sub-system. She noted that the Pallars show an almost anatical passion for equality within their caste group. She also found equal and omradely style of life, solidarity, egalitarianism etc. among the Pallars which might be expected to pre-adapt them to radical anti-caste political action (Deliege: 1997, Michael: 999).
1.11 Pallars Conversion to Christianity and Islam

Historically, the Dalits in general and Pallars in particular converted to many non-Hindu religions. Tamil scholar Tho.Paramasivam mentions the 100 percent conversion of the Kora Pallars who were experts in procuring the reeds along the river banks and making mattresses in southern Tamil Nadu (Paramasivan: 2007). During the colonial period many Pallars, along with Paraiyars and Nadars converted to Christianity in groups (Manickam: 1988, Mosse: 1994, Jayakumar: 1999).

The Pallars began to convert to Christianity which promised self-respect to all outcasts in Tamil society. Manikumar points out that conversion to Christianity and emigration abroad were the two factors that caused an awakening among the Pallars during the British rule and the early decades of the twentieth century. Those who articulated the aspirations of the Pallars initially were religious converts and repatriates. Perumal Peter, a Christian convert and an Indian repatriate from Malaysia and Burma, founded Bhu Vaishya Indira Kula Sangam in the 1920s. It was the first organized effort, according to Manikumar, to awaken the Pallars. Perumal Peter advocated conversion to Christianity by his caste men with the conviction that it would enable them to earn self-respect and equality. His ground work laid the foundation for Pallar militancy which first emerged as self-defence from the physical attack by dominant castes. Large numbers of Pallars in Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli regions showed their protest by converting to Christianity and later in certain instances to Islam in the thirties and the forties. Those Pallars who rallied behind Perumal Peter later joined Immanuel Sekaran, a doyen among...
the Pallars who was publicly slain for the cause of the Pallars’ fight for equality, when he organized the state wing of the Depressed Classes League of Dr. Ambedkar in Ramanad District (Manikumar: 2001).

In the 1980s, there were more incidents of mass conversion to Islam among the Pallars in Madurai, Ramanad and Tirunelveli Districts of Tamil Nadu. Their conversion to Islam became a politically explosive issue in the 1980s (Matthew: 1982). The fundamental ideology that inspired these mass conversions among the Pallars was their passion for equality. In their core rejection of the caste system, the Pallars’ conversion to Islam represented a revolutionary alternative to Sanskritisation or Brahmanical Hinduism. Islam was an energetic response to important ideological developments sweeping among these educated Pallars. Their conversion to Islam, in an aggregate sense, can be seen as a social protest manifested through a religious idiom (Raj: 1981). This conversion movement is also most appropriately understood as a liberation movement among the Pallars, because, the Pallars were traditionally in a social limbo, highly dissatisfied with their position and intent on improvement. They met with humiliation at every turn and were less favourably situated in the local order. Hence, many of them turned towards non-Hindu egalitarian religions as an alternative to social mobility.

The conversion movement among the Pallars to Islam was the outcome of the ultimate culmination of mounting dissent, disaffection, tension and conflict generated in course of time by the Hindu social order. Mass conversion of Pallars in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu to Islam also had much to do with the tremendous socio-
economic and cultural changes brought about by education, renaissance, and enlightenment (Ahmad: 1984). Their mass conversion came after a long period of deliberation. Centuries of caste atrocities and all sorts of discrimination prepared the minds of the Pallars for conversion to Islam. They prepared to use the medium of religion to break away from the caste structure. After many years of secular attempts marked by social and political campaigns like temple entry, participation in the Dravidian Movement, agitation methods failed. They were convinced that they would never receive equal treatment in the Hindu Dharma and Hindu society.

Their choice of Islam was a protest against caste system. Their conversion to Islam was a strong protest for all that the Hindus failed to do. They conceived conversion to Islam as a perfect antidote to the Hindu caste society. They were very pragmatic in choosing their religion i.e., Islam. Thus, the Pallars’ conversion movement attempted to use conversion as an instrument of change for an enhanced status and a new identity as Muslims.

The conversion of the Pallars to Islam is significant because they changed their religion for freedom, self-respect, and dignity and did it as a group. The emancipation movement of the Pallars symbolized one kind of example of the struggle of the oppressed and depressed social groups in India. Thus, Islam provided a means through which the Pallars could accommodate themselves to the changes that were imposed through changing their social consciousness. When the Pallars faced a kind of identity crisis, namely status inconsistency, Islam provided new institutions, a new life style, a new way
of life and a new ideology which fortified the Pallars from the dangers of caste system. Thus, an idiosyncratic investment in Islam began to emerge among the Pallars (Matthew: 1982, Khan: 1983). After some time, this mass conversion of Pallars to Islam was arrested by the militant emergence of the Pallars under the leadership of John Pandian, Pasupathi Pandian, Krishnaswamy and others in the 1990s.

12 Pallars’ Militancy and Politics

Southern Tamil Nadu appears to be in a state of great social turbulence. These districts have recorded several incidents of caste violence in the last few years. Those involved in these clashes are Maravars, a dominant agricultural caste and Pallars or Nevendrakula Vellalars, a chronically oppressed caste. The continued violence which shocked this region, on closer study points to a deep social malaise. A small section of the Pallars have been recently empowered, to at least a small extent, as a consequence of access to education and government jobs and money from Gulf Countries. Recently, the educated Pallars have shown militancy against their oppressors. The Pallars’ political emergence and their militancy has been quite turbulent, and often violent from the 1990s (Manikumar: 1997, Wyatt: 2010). Manikumar observes: “The emergence of the Pallars as a militant caste group and their growing solidarity to secure a rightful place in the state hierarchy has been phenomenal”. He maintains that the recent caste violence in Tirunelveli district has to be seen against the changing power relations between the Dalits and the dominant agricultural castes as also among the Dalit castes. After 1995, the Dalit attempt to defend themselves and even counter-attack has led to caste violence and unprecedented
conflict in Tamil Nadu (Manikumar: 1997). According to M.S.S. Pandian, each new
bell of caste violence in southern Tamil Nadu took an increasingly longer time to
subside. While the conflict between the Thevars and the Pallars in Mudukulathur of
Nagapattinam District in 1948 lasted 5 days, conflict between them in same area lasted 15 days
in 1957. In Bodinayakkanur, clashes between the same caste groups happened for 23
days, while in 1995-96 they continued for nine months (Mani: 2009).

Another aspect to the assertion of the Dalits, mainly those of the Pallars, was the
emergence of political organization among them. Dr. Krishnaswamy’s Devendrakula
Vellalar Federation, John Pandian’s Davendrakula Vellalar Sangam and the Thiyagi
Emmanuel Peravai have, to a great extent, politicized the Pallars unlike other Dalit castes
like Paraiyars and Chakkiliars (Manikumar: 1997, Wyatt: 2010). The emergence of
assertive Pallars has meant that they would not take discrimination lying down.
Dr. Krishnaswamy cultivated strong caste sentiments among the Pallar youth and
popularized the new assertive caste name ‘Devendrakula Vellalars’ though the seeds of
insolent and militant attitudes against caste oppression among the Pallars were sown by
Emmanuel Sekaran and John Pandian.

1.13 Pallars’ Conversion as part of Dalit Movement

The religious conversion of the Pallars to Islam should be understood as a part of
historical movements among Dalits who rejected the caste order. Ghanshyam Shah
(2004) classified Dalit movements into reformatory and alternative movements. The
former tries to reform the caste system to solve the problem of untouchability. The latter
tempts to create an alternative socio-cultural structure by conversion to some other religion or by acquiring education, economic status and political power. The reformatory movements are further divided into Bhakti movement, Neo-Vedantik movement and Sanskritisation movement. The alternative movements are divided into the conversion movement and the religious or secular movement. The latter includes the movement related to economic issues. This study considers the Pallar conversion to Islam as part of Dalit movements.

13.1 Reformatory Movements among Dalits

According to Ganshyam Shah, reform movements try to reform the caste system to solve the problem of untouchability. Reform movements include (a) Bhakti movement, (b) Neo-Vedantic movement, and, (c) Sanskritisation movement

a. Bhakti Movements

The Bhakti movement of the medieval period was the first spiritual reform movement for the Dalits. It was a spiritual egalitarian movement which opposed high ritualism, caste based discriminations and Brahmanical supremacy. This movement emphasized personal relationship with god through devotion (Bhakti) without the mediation of priest class, i.e., the Brahmins. Ramanand and Raidas in the north, Chaitanya and Chandidas in the east, Eknath, Chokkamela, Tukaram and Narasing Mehta in the west and Ramanuja, Nimabarka, Basava and Nandhanar in the south were important Bhakti saints. Raidas, Chaokhamela and Nandanar were Dalit saints who altogether emphasized spiritual equality and evolved as
spiritual liberators of Dalits during the medieval period (Patwardhan: 1973, Shah: 2001, Zelliot: 2001). There are many sects within Hinduism which also opposed Brahmanical hegemony and emphasized spiritual equality. They attracted more Dalits to their fold. Veerasaivism was one such Bhakti sect in the medieval period (Parvathamma: 1989). Sikhism was another sect (as it was initially called) which attracted a large number of Dalits to its fold (Juergensmeyer: 1988, Jones: 2003).

5. Neo-Vedantic Movements

The Neo-Vedantic Movement emerged in the nineteenth century, when social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati attempted to revive Hinduism in its pure form, stripping it of meaningless rituals and superstition, untouchability etc. They established the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj respectively. These movements were examples for Neo-Vedantic movements since they emphasized the supremacy of the Vedas and attempted to revitalize Hinduism to counter the Christian missionary’s threat to Hinduism due to the reason that a large number of depressed castes’ conversion to Christianity during the later half of nineteenth century and early decades of twentieth century. They launched many reform initiatives to purge Hindu society of the stigma of caste and untouchability and tried to prove that originally Hinduism was casteless and untouchability emerged as an appendage of Hinduism due to corruption in later centuries. The Arya Samaj launched the Shuddhi (purification) movement to reconvert Hindu converts to Islam and Christianity back into the Hindu fold. Many critics held that these movements were not popular and their work of removal of caste was not commendable. These

**Sankritisation Movements**

Ganshyam Shah treats Sankritisation movements as an integral part of reform movements among the Dalits. M.N.Srinivas defines: “Sankritisation is a process by which a low’ caste or a tribe or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste”. He argued that caste system was not rigid as conceived by many scholars; rather it was a fluid and flexible system throughout Indian history. Sankritisation was one of the avenues to change the position of one caste particularly from middle and lower caste to a higher one within the caste system. Many lower and medium caste groups attempted Sankritisation, but only a few castes were successful in altering their caste positions within the caste system. The Nadars of Tamilnadu and the Ezhavas of Kerala were examples of successful Sankritisation movements among Dalits (Srinivas: 1995, Shah: 2001).

13. 2 Alternative Movements among Dalits

Alternative Movements among Dalits could be further divided into (a) Conversion movements and (b) Religious or Secular movements.
Conversion Movements

Historically, most Dalits have felt suffocated under Hinduism. The Dalits have been searching for avenues to enhance their position. They have made several tangible efforts to come out of the clutches of the dominant sections of the caste Hindu society. These include Sanskritisation (corporate mobility), conversion to Buddhism, migration, education, urban employment etc. (Sharma: 2007). Whenever an alternative opportunity came, they were quick to leave the Hindu fold. Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism are examples, followed by Christianity. In India, conversions have largely taken place among the lowest strata of society, the Dalits. The change of religion often emerges as a form of protest and struggle against the oppressive socio-economic religious order.

In their long struggle for equality, India’s Dalits or "untouchables," have often changed 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. During the Muslim period in medieval India, a large number of Dalit castes embraced Islam in groups for the purpose of escaping from the stigma of untouchability (Matthew: 1982, Amerjee: 1982, Omvedt: 2003). During the period from the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century a large number of Dalit caste groups across India converted to Christianity. Pickett called these mass conversion phenomena among Dalits as 'mass movements' (Forrester: 1991, Webster: 1992, Singhate: 1997, Clarke: 2008). The mass conversion of Dalits continued after

Religious and Secular Movements

Religious Movements

Many independent sects also emerged among the Dalits. The Satnamis of Chattisgarh are one such sect established by Ghasi Das, a Chamar, between 1820 and 1900 in Chattisgarh. Based on the conviction that ‘all men are equal’ which he got as inspiration from the medieval Dalit Bhakti saint Raidas, he said that there is but one god, the “true name” or satnam and he forbade the worship of Hindu deities (Babb: 1998, Dube: 2001). Mark Juergensmeyer noted how an untouchable community under the leadership of Mangoo Ram, a Dalit freedom fighter, established the Ad Dharm movement in the 1920s, and said that Mangoo Ram touted Ad Dharm as being separate and superior to both Hinduism and Sikhism. Its central motif was novel: the idea that the Chuhras, a Dalit caste constitute a quam, a distinct religious community similar to those of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and that the quam had existed from time immemorial. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, Ad Dharm’s history reflects the development of Punjab’s Dalit social consciousness (Juergensmeyer: 1988). Aloysious
<p>Out other religious movements among Dalits as follows: the Sri Narayananaharma Guru Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) among the Ezhavas of Kerala, the Ayya Vazhi of Sri Tathukuttyswamy among the Shanars of Tamilnadu, the Rajayogi and Narasaiah sects among the Malas and Madigas of Andhra Pradesh etc. (Alosious:1998).

Secular Movements

Secular Movements refer to attempts made by Dalits to claim a better status for themselves by acquiring education, improving their standard of living and trying to carve niche for themselves in the political sphere. The secular movements for Dalits began with Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule’s Satyashodak Samaj in nineteenth century. Mahatma Phule was considered the father of Indian social revolution as he initiated secular avenues for Dalits, Backward classes and women. Ambedkar, who got inspired by Mahatma Phule, became the doyen of Dalits’ causes. He saw the possibility of advancement for the Dalits through the use of political means to achieve social and economic equality with the higher castes in modern society. He founded the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) in 1954 and later the Republican Party for Dalits in 1956. Later, in the 1970s, the Dalit Panther movement, a militant movement among the Dalits, evolved first in Maharashtra and later in other parts of India to condemn and discard the dominant culture and it attempted to build an alternative socio-cultural identity for the oppressed classes (Shah:2004). Along with this Panther movement many Dalit literatures were published to propagate the ideas through poems, stories, plays etc.

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The Dalit upsurge then found varying issues: the desire for recognition as human beings, the urge for education and a share in development, and the aspiration for political power. The new movements among the Dalits across India showed that the Dalits were no longer willing to suffer silently. The challenge to caste and the rise of the low castes were put firmly on India’s political agenda. In 1985, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) emerged as the champions of untouchables with its slogan ‘jat todo. Samaj jodo’. After the 1998 parliamentary election, the Dalits have moved forward in politics in many states from simply being vote banks controlled by Brahman-bourgeois political parties to forming voting blocs-autonomous, acting on their own and bargaining with the larger parties (Omvedt: 2001, Pai: 2001).

With the growth of democratic institutions and the politics of numbers, the Dalits can to assume some importance in national politics in independent India. Today, Dalit leaders have successfully undercut the dominance of the upper castes and intermediate castes and have thrown up a new leadership reflecting a social resurgence from below. It provides, contemporaneously, an altogether novel complexion to democratic functioning. The current political initiative by the Dalit leaders only marks the beginning of a new era of democratic politics. Dalit liberation movements have become a force to reckon with. More and more Dalits speak out openly and courageously, and nobody can set their voice aside today (Michael: 1999, Gorringe: 2005).
Conversion is an Alternative to Sanskritisation

The sociological phenomenon of religious conversion, especially Dalits’ conversion to other religions, is a neglected field of inquiry when talked about social mobility and changes in Indian sociological tradition. Most of the studies on the mobility and changes in the Indian society have only focused on the changes within the caste system. The studies on Sanskritisation, Westernization, Desanskritisation, Brahmiyaisation, Rajputisation and Dominant caste are such examples. Eminent scholars like M.N.Srinivas and others have failed to recognise conversion as another avenue for change and mobility outside the caste system, especially for the Dalits. To describe the changes and mobility among Dalits, the term Sanskritisation was not sufficient. The process of Islamization, Christianization, Pali-ization, Syrianization should be added to the understanding of structural and cultural changes among Dalits in Indian society. The religious conversion of Dalits unfortunately never caught the attention of any sociologists other than scholars in social sciences barring some historians and theologians.

Ambedkar was the first to record the Sanskritisation (Moon: 1989) like process occurring before M.N.Srinivas discussed it in the Indian sociological milieu. While Ambedkar was discussing the formation of castes in Indian society in his seminal work Caste in India following the Laws of Imitation by Gabriel Tarde (that is, imitation flows from the higher to the lower levels), he concluded that ‘the whole process of caste-formation in India was the result of ‘process of imitation’ of the higher by the lower (Moon: 1989:20, 30). In his Annihilation of caste, he has noted the attempts of Sonars and Pathare Prabhus,
other castes in Maharashtra to adopt some ways and habits of the Brahmins. He has even
documented the higher caste Hindus’ deliberate prevention of lower castes’ attempt to rise to
a cultural level of the higher castes within the pale of Hinduism in the 1930s (Moon: 1999). Christophe Jaffrelot brings out the proto-history of Sanskritisation. He maintains
that Ambedkar advanced the basis of one of the most heuristic of concepts in modern
Indian studies - the ‘Sanskritisation’ process - that M.N.Srinivas was to introduce forty
years later. Jaffrelot concludes that while the term was coined by M.N.Srinivas, the
process itself was described by colonial administrators such as E.T.Atkinson in his
Bhāryan Gazetteer and Alfred Lyall, in whose works Ambedkar might well have
encountered it (Jaffrelot: 2005). The present study strongly proposes that the real credit
should go to Ambedkar with regard to the intellectual contribution on the Sanskritisation
process as an avenue for caste mobility within the caste system.

The present study proposes that the process of religious conversion of Dalits to
-Hindu egalitarian religions was an alternative to Sanskritisation outside the caste
system. M.N.Srinivas, in his book Social Change in Modern India defines
Sanskritisation as a process by which a ‘low’ caste or a tribe or other group changes its
customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently,
‘race-born’ caste (Srinivas: 1995). Whenever lower castes’ attempt at emulation and
rejection fails, conversion may take place. Andre Beteille observes: ‘When Dalits
(Kshatrijans) are thwarted in their attempts to sanskritise their style of life, they often
develop a spirit of resentment towards the entire traditional order, and seek to repudiate
ir identity as Hindus’ (Matthew: 1982). Duncan Forrester argues that traditional
possibilities of mobility within the caste system were increasingly effectively closed to
Dalits. For him, Sanskritisation was a cul-de-sac because of concerted and efficacious
stuffs from the higher castes (Forrester: 1991). Brahmins and other upper castes are
ever always emulated - in fact; they are losing their brand value day by day. The Dalits
protest their lowly positions or hierarchical dispensation by converting to other non-
Hindu egalitarian religions or sects. Islam, Christianity and Buddhism provide them with
alternatives for their emancipation. Many castes which did not succeed in achieving
higher status within the Hindu fold, which prompted them to embrace Islam or
Christianity. In a sense, mass conversion is the proxy in the process of upward corporate
mobility.

The fact was that, as mobility was impossible for Dalits under the closed system of
ratification based on caste, conversion allowed to the lower strata to come out and
achieve status. So, lower caste groups failing to raise their status level in Hinduism
sought identification with the Muslims and Christians and opted for conversions. Being
marginal they were quick to adopt Islam or Christianity in order to raise their status.
Islam and Christianity acted as alternative avenues to Sanskritisation to raise their status
and also served as positive reference groups to emulate (Fernandes: 1981). These
conversion, at least to Islam and to Christianity, represented a rejection of a hierarchy
which kept Dalits down. During the final quarter of the nineteenth century increasing
bers of Dalits saw this as the way of liberation and chose to follow it’ (Webster: 1992).

Conversion meant not merely a positional change like Sanskritisation but a structural change. Conversion is a ‘structural camouflage’ for lower castes to alter their social relationship with other upper caste Hindus. The idea of seeking enhanced status is always present in mass conversion. Dalits sought a religious expression to escape from oppression and to improve their status. While Sanskritisation was an ideological narrowing process, conversion of Dalits to non-Hindu egalitarian religions was an ideological rejection of Hinduism and its tenets like Karma, Dharma, papa, maya, samsara and moksha etc. Hence, conversion is an ideological process and it integrates the rejection of the dominance of the upper caste by Dalits.

There are many studies which projected Dalit conversion to other non-Hindu egalitarian religions as an alternative to Sanskritisation. Islamization, Christianization,arianization and Pali-ization are processes that Dalits have undergone as an alternative to Sanskritisation. Mosse argues that conversion is only one idiom for new and autonomous identities for dependent Dalits in India. He found that the conversion of the millions was part of an assertion of autonomy, a bid to define their identity in ways other than service to and dependence on high caste patrons. Crucially Islam provides a new social and religious identity which does not depend on its acceptance and recognition by the high castes. Conversion does not depend on its acceptance and recognition by upper castes as in the Sanskritisation process. Abstract egalitarian ideals were probably the
social factor in the conversion of Dalits. Dalits often resort to conversion with new equality and identity offered by Islam mark an escape from the hierarchical caste order (Mosse: 1994).

Islamization, the spread of Islam, in all of these contexts, may sociologically be equivalent to Sanskritisation in the little tradition of Hinduism (Singh: 1996). During Muslim domination in India, conversion to Islam was an easy and short route to status enhancement. As Muslim rulers offered security, many lower castes converted and might have been motivated by a psychological appeal for a sudden change in the cultural-social status. K.L. Sharma conceived that Islamization in one way was an upward cultural and social mobility in the status of groups. He adds that Islamization was a sort of Sanskritisation until the coming of the British (Sharma: 2007).

Yogendra Singh and others call the process of the spread of Islam as Islamization. Yogendra Singh uses the term Islamization to cover the upward cultural and social which during the Muslim rule also implied economic) mobility in the status of groups through conversion to Islam. T.K. Oommen also referred to Islamization in talks about Sanskritisation. His opinion was that there is a need to explore the link between Islam and Sanskritisation. Hindus, especially low-caste, down the century have found a way of escaping caste hierarchy by embracing or converting to other religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. So, understanding of the dynamics of change in Indian
Christianization is another process of conversion conceived by many scholars as an alternative to Sanskritisation. Augustine Kanjamala defines Christianization as a socio-religious process by which a large number of people from backward castes or tribes partly reject, at least in theory, their traditional supernatural system, ritual practices, code of life and ethics, and then, accept Jesus Christ and other supernatural beings and a new symbol system, a complex of rituals and sacraments, a new ethic and style of life, which in turn, create a new sense of community or Church. He demonstrated that the process of Christianization of tribals and Scheduled Castes in India is a legitimate alternative to Sanskritisation in order to improve their social condition and achieve better status. But through conversion to Christianity, they found opportunity for easy association with missionaries who were considered as superior even by most caste Hindus since Christianity was the religion of the ruling white men (Kanjamala: 1986). Duncan and Prestler held that though Christianization involves changes like Sanskritisation, it is a movement in a different direction, because Sanskritisation cannot fulfill the Dalits’ aspirations.

Dick Kooiman compared the indigenous process of conversion similar to Christianization and distinguished Sanskritisation from Christianization. He held that both Christianization and Sanskritisation are the process of adaptation to the customs and rituals of a prestigious great tradition and part of an attempt to achieve a higher status.
society. He also held that while Sanskritisation was an attempt at upward mobility within the caste system, mass conversion to Christianity, on the other hand implied a breakaway from Hinduism in favour of a new religion. While Sanskritisation results in institutional change within the existing hierarchy, Christianization holds a promise of more structural changes (Kooiman: 1989).

Antony Copley highlighted that becoming a Christian for Dalits was but one foot on the caste ladder (Copley: 1999). Sebastian C.H.Kim also maintained that, unlike Sanskritisation, conversion to Christianity was able to facilitate structural change, because conversion movements represented caste mobility (Kim: 2007). Christianization was one of several alternative possibilities for a caste seeking to escape from a status and conditions deemed to be intolerable within the Hindu social structure. Christianity was, of course, only one among a number of religious avenues explored by depressed castes, although there were more egalitarian sects which attracted depressed castes.

C.J.Fuller viewed that some kind of Sanskritisation-like mobility called Christianization was possible in Kerala to change one’s ascriptive status to that of Syrian Christian status. He held that if any lower caste Neo-Christian or Pulaya Christian and in Christian acquired land and had a fair complexion, his descendents would probably be accepted, publicly at least, as Syrian Christians after two or three generations. Thus, according to him, ownership of land and fair skin were regarded as vital for those aspiring to acquire Syrian status. This demonstrates that individual mobility between castes can occur within the Christian community. Due to education, Pulaya Christians
arnt cleanliness, hygiene etc. There was a dramatic change in the relationships between Syrian Christians and Pulaya Christians and the former were ready to accept the latter in certain areas of life where these lower caste Christians imitate the Syrian Christian lifestyles. To follow the Christian patterns of life in the socio-religious spheres, they had to eat, speak, and dress like Syrians in order to be accepted. Duncan Forrester also found the process of Syrianization among Pulaya and Latin Christians (Forrester: 1980, Muller: 1991). George Oommen found in his study that the Syrians Christians were ready to accept Pulaya Christians in certain areas, if they imitated the Syrian Christian lifestyle under the process called Syrianization (Oommen: 2002).

Pali-ization is another process of social change through conversion to Buddhism by Dalits. Eleanor Zelliot coined the term Pali-ization with reference to the conversion of Mahars to Buddhism. She said: ‘The conversion continues the “purifying process” that has been part of the movement all along, a “Pali-ization” rather than a “Sanskritisation” of practices, to use Buddhist equivalent for M.N. Srinivas’ useful word for the emulation of high caste practices’. Sunanda Patwardhan, another scholar who studied the Mahars of Maharashtra, also shared the same view (Burra: 1996). She also noted that Pali-ization as a process of accepting Buddhist way of life - had taken the place of Sanskritisation among Neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra (Patwardhan: 1973), the same process of discarding Sanskritic ritualism and adopting the Buddhist way of life noticed among the Buddhist revival movements by Pandit Ayothee Dass in Tamil Nadu (Aloysious: 1998). Deepak Kumar Samanta confirmed the same process by saying: “So instead of treading
ritual-rank path through the adoption of the mechanism of Sanskritisation, they (Shah Buddhists) chose an apparently secular rank path after the initial breakthrough with their conversion to Buddhism” (Samanta: 1991). From the above well-documented and empirical studies by eminent scholars on religious conversions of Dalits, the process of religious conversions to non-Hindu religions is thus, proved to be a real alternative avenue for social mobility and change outside the caste system.

6 Islam in India

Islam is the second largest and the fastest growing religion in the world. India has the world's second largest Muslim population after Indonesia. Though Islam is not considered an indigenous faith, it spread to the Indian soil soon after it evolved in Arabia. The seventh century A.D. Islam is a strong egalitarian religion and attracts followers from many castes, Dalits and other downtrodden people across the world. Originally, Islam developed in a nomadic socio-cultural milieu and its social structure had a tribal military character (Engineer: 1987, Singh: 1996).

Islam is an important and sociologically very important tradition in India. The followers of Islam are called Muslims in India and, occasionally, as in the past, shahmedans. In Tamil Nadu they are addressed Sahib and Bhai. Islam spread to India in different ways and at different periods in history. There are many theories, debates, calculations and discussions among historian and social scientists regarding the spread of Islam in India. There are two theories of the spread of Islam in India. The first one holds that Islam spread in South India peacefully soon after the evolution of Islam in Arabia as
Arabian traders engaged in the spread of Islam on the east and the west coast of South India. The second theory speculates that Islam spread in North India politically during the Muslim period (Rizvi: 1991, Dale: 1991, Miller: 1992). Rizvi observed that Islamic proselytisation in India has been very a complex phenomenon and was very slow, extending over about twelve centuries. A large number of factors - political, economic, social and religious - influenced Islamisation.

Stephen Dale traces the evolution of Mappilas through conversion in Kerala. According to him, the growth and development of Islam in north Kerala attributed to the maritime trade, through which Muslim merchants came to Malabar ports precipitating the formation of indigenous population of Muslims, called Mappilas in Kerala (Dale:1991). He found that the Mappilas are the descendants of Arab Muslims - born out of the union between Arab men and indigenous women. Miller argues that the ninth century ruler Cheraman Perumal embraced Islam and allowed proselytisation activities in Kerala soil. Thus, northern Kerala became a fertile ground for conversion.

Conversion to Islam by political pressure began with the conquest of Sind and Sultani by Mohammad Bin Qasim between 711 and 713 A.D. Arab conquerors also assimilated non-Muslims of all sort. Sufis who came with these rulers were great preachers of Islam and were responsible for wholesale conversion. The Chistiyya order established by Chisti in Ajmer in 1206 AD attracted a large number of lower castes and converted them to Islam. In Bengal, Islamic saints resorted to militant evangelism and forcefully converted Hindus to Islam. In Kashmir, the influence of Rishis - indigenous Sufis -
tempted many poor and neglected Hindus to convert to Islam. The main instruments of conversion were government officials. The initial proselytization was confined to the upper class and the elite, who then converted lower caste Hindus (Rizvi: 1991, Eaton: 1997, Khan: 2003). Thus, conversion to Islam with a mixture of political and social pressures and incentives continued until Akbar banned conversion totally in 1564 AD.

According to Yogendra Singh, during Muslim domination in India, conversion to Islam was an easy and short route to status enhancement. As Muslim rulers offeredurity many lower castes converted. They might have been motivated by a psychological appeal for a sudden change in the cultural-social status. He divides Islamic traditions into little and great traditions. For him, the little traditions of India have one historical characteristic - it consists mainly of the converts from Hinduism. Conversion provided the bulk of Muslim population. For him, the use of force in conversion was more of an exception than the rule and the most popular sources of conversion were the Sufi saints who talked in an idiom very close to that of the popular Hindu saints and were rigid and orthodox in their approach to religion (Singh: 1996).

Aziz Ahmad also argues that “In the conversion of large masses of Indians to Islam the use of force was an exception rather than the rule. The conversion to Islam of over one-forth of the subcontinent’s population is due to a number of causes. Islam spread rapidly in Buddhist places like north-western and eastern parts of peninsula. The proselytizing activities of Muslim traders and settlers in southern coasts were not regarded as a serious challenge by the Hindu rajas, who imposed no restrictions on
conversion to Islam. While Brahmanical Hinduism offered a much more solid resistance to the spread of Islam but its Achilles’ heel that is caste system pushed the lower Hindu castes towards the acceptance of Islam which meant escape from the degraded status they held in Hindu society to a at least theoretical equality with the ruling community” (Singh: 25). Since the medieval period Islam appealed to Dalits with promise of an escape from social bondage and a possible way to a more respectable place in society. Islam is becoming an increasingly popular option among Dalits. Islam still continues to appeal to those lower castes like Pallars and Paraiyars and others in Hindu society.

**Muslims in Tamil Nadu**

Islam came to South India, the southwest and east coast of the peninsula, to be precise, long before the Islamic incursion through North West India during the 8th century AD. Islam established itself in the south from the seventh century onwards through the gradual transformation of the pre-Islamic Arab settlements, which had been founded during the flourishing maritime trade between Arabia and South India that had existed even in the time of Solomon, long before the birth of Christ.

J.B.B. More traces the origin and evolution of Muslims from the ninth century onwards in Tamil Nadu on the basis of references by foreign travelers’ writings, Islamic literature in Tamil, Urdu and also other academic works. Islam came to the South Indian coast with Arabian merchants and horse traders who settled in ‘Maabar’, the Eastern Coast of Tamil Nadu as it was called once. In the beginning Arabian traders were addressed as ‘Yavanas’ which denoted foreigners including Romans and Greeks. Later,
They were called ‘Sonakans’ in Tamil Nadu or Moors in Sri Lanka. He holds that Karrakayars were original Muslims who emigrated and settled in *Maabar*. But Labbai Muslims were local converts to Islam. As the Pandyan kings relied on Arabian horses, many rich horse traders emerged in the Tamil country. ‘Rout’ in Arabic meant horse. Subsequently Arabian horse traders were called *Routars*. Many Muslim soldiers during the colonial rule participated in many wars, accumulated wealth and became *Rowthars* as they mounted on horse for war and became affluent (*More: 2004, Paramasivam: 2007*).

The arrival of Malik Kafur in the fourteenth century in Tamil Nadu created another variant of Urdu speaking Muslims like Pathans, Deccani Muslims. Thus, we could find two ethnic Muslims viz., Tamil Muslims like Marakkayars, Rowthars, Kayalars and Labbai and Pathans and Deccanis speaking Urdu (*Bayly: 1992, Fanselow: 1996*). There was a speculation that steady and rapid enlargement of the Tamil Muslim population may be attributed to two factors: natural increase because of the practice of early marriage and increase by conversion. There are four caste like social groups among Tamil Muslims viz. Marakkayar, Rowthar, Labbai and Kayalar (*Mines: 1977, Fanselow: 1996*). The term *Labbai* is often used to refer to the Tamil speaking Muslim groups collectively. Historically, this term was used by the colonial administrators to maintain a distinction between the Urdu speaking Muslims and the Tamil speaking Muslims. But now all the converts from Hinduism are included in Labbai category in Tamil Nadu.

Linguistically and ethnically, Muslims in Tamil Nadu could be divided into Tamil and Urdu speaking Muslims. The descendents of Arab traders speak Malayalam and
Deccani Muslims and Muslim settlers from North India speak Urdu. Not only geographically, but also linguistically and culturally, the Tamil Muslims are for all practical purposes identified with Tamil Nadu. They are separated from the areas of Muslim hegemony and Urdu culture in the rest of India. Though Tamil Muslims speak Tamil yet they differ in food, diet, manners, mental outlook and philosophy of life. They place importance to Arabic because the Koran was written in Arabic. Their religious practices and theology are remarkably unaffected but some local customs like cross-basin marriage practices, dowry to bridegroom instead of mehr, marriage dress etc. were accepted by them.

7 Factors for Religious Conversion

Factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive and cumulative. Conversion is very difficult for those who feel completely secure in their religious beliefs and social customs. But it is possible for individuals or groups who have been already insecure, insecure and who doubt and question the validity of their religious ideologies. The greater the alienation, the greater the commitment to a new ideology, and the more imperative it is to defend that ideology. Jayaram argues that those who are subjected and placed under the lower rung of a particular religion will go for change of their religious identity by conversion to another religion preaching a different set of theological precepts which are expected to automatically emancipate them. He says that the promises of ultimate deliverance by the liberation theology of the proselytizing religions are the motivational magnet for conversion (Jayaram: 1992).
Dalits are less unfortunate adherents of Hinduism who are ready to change their religion. Over the centuries, Dalits felt suffocated under the Hindu social order which is organized around the caste system and its coterminus institution of untouchability. Historically, untouchability remained a tenacious and reprehensive social division for Hindus. Dalits were victims of a cultural crisis generated within the Hindu religion (Boppoly: 1999). Max Mueller, while he was discussing the future of Hinduism and caste, commented: “Indeed, Caste which has hitherto proved an impediment to the conversion of the Hindus, may in future become one of the most powerful engines for the conversion of the Hindus, may in future become one of the most powerful engines for the conversion of merely of individuals, but of whole classes of Indian society” (Dirks: 2002). He was correct in predicting caste-based conversions. Thus, caste and religion are the veritable noose cast around necks of Dalits.

Dalits, in quest for social uplift, search avenues to enhance their position. Scholars show that depressed castes seek a religious expression to escape from the caste oppression and improve their status. It appears that the search for equality has been the dominant incentive for conversion (Lobo: 1991). Pickett says that one of motives for Dalit conversion is the desire for social liberation (Wingate: 1997). It is the caste predicament that influences the minds of Dalits to go in for conversion. Conversion is realization of caste consciousness reinforced by the Hindu caste order. It is their objective realization of their subjective condition which has led to mass conversion of Dalits to various non-Hindu religions (Jayaram: 1992). Others hold that conversion is the result of pent up anger and resentment against caste oppression which had been developed over
centuries. For some philosophers, social scientists and activists, untouchability is a religious phenomenon. Hindu ideology, they argue, breeds an inegalitarian social system values which are the root cause of untouchability. The best course for Dalits, therefore, is to renounce Hinduism and convert to a religion which proclaims equality (Bhagwati: 2001). Hence, all Dalits are potential converts.

Untouchability is perhaps one of the strongest reasons for their conversion to Islam and Christianity. It is the caste factor which gave Islam and Christianity a foothold among Dalits. Dalits, passive victims of the evil caste system, mostly opt for conversion to repudiate the caste system (Raj: 1981). George Matthew also viewed that "understanding social discrimination based on untouchability and the indifference of Hindu society at large towards the Dalits was the major cause for conversion". Jagjivan observed "A Dalit (Harijan) could live with honour and dignity only by changing faith" (Matthew: 1982). Webster argued that conversion to Islam and Christianity represented a rejection of a hierarchy which kept Dalits down (Wingate: 1997). Apart from the caste and untouchability factors, conviction on religious faith, ideologies, revolutionary and charitable works were other causes for conversion, particularly in the case of individual conversions rather than mass conversion.

Effects of Religious Conversion

The effects or consequences of conversion are complex and multi-faceted: social, historical, psychological, theological consequences for convert groups.
conversion is always accompanied by some consequences both positive and negative (Rambo: 1993).

8.1 Religious Conversion as an Instrument of Social Change

Change is the hallmark of living. Religious conversion is a viable paradigm of social change. Conversion or change of belief is the only available civilized method of social change. M. S. A. Rao says “Conversion of large groups and sections of society from one religious faith to another has been a major force of social change” (Rao: 1982). Conversion necessarily implies a change in one’s way of life. It involves an appreciable change of direction concerning religious ideas and behaviour. However, conversion to a religion generally results in change in socio-cultural status, and sometimes in economic advantage and psychic gratification. Conversion brings out many changes: socio-economic, cultural, material-technology, dress, food habits and non-material values, norms, ethos, attitudes, beliefs, worldviews (Lobo: 1991). Since the Buddha period, conversion has been an agent of social change in India. Among the people with a strong integrative culture, changes happen less, among the loosely integrated people changes happen rapidly. Dalits are such people loosely integrated with popular Hinduism (Wiebe: 1988). That is the reason why their conversion produced radical changes among them. Hence, conversion to Islam is the primary agent to bring about change among Pallars.

There have been some positive and negative developments after the change of faith. When people convert to other religions, they enter into a long process of change, from simple cultural elements like dress and more complex worldviews, social, political
economic reorganization. They are introduced to many new ideas, directions and opportunities for improving themselves. Change in philosophy of life (Karma and Dharma), worldview, religious practice, marriage, family, education, economic life, business, industry, language, literature, political institution etc. old beliefs and practices have been abandoned.

2 The Negative Impacts Religious Conversion

Religious conversion also produces negative effects among the converts. There are studies which have confirmed the continuity of caste elements after the conversion to non-Hindu religions. The continuity of some pre-conversion practices is obvious, at a subdued level. After conversion, the converts in India retain caste pedigrees (caste background, history, the life of an ancestor). A great degree of old fashioned casteism is still found among Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists. Even Muslims in India are bound by caste. Scholars profess that Islam and Christianity were already encapsulated in Hindu society. Louis Dumont admits that among Muslims and Christians in India castes live in more or less attenuated forms. He mentions that “egalitarian ideals among Christians or Muslims have been powerless against the hierarchical principles of caste, suggests, rather strangely, that this impotence is because Islam and Christianity did not offer or impose an alternative social order to that of caste” (Forrester: 1980).

Jayaram found that conversion of depressed classes mostly through mass conversion has not effected structural changes after a careful analysis of whether de-caste activism as a strategy for emancipation of depressed classes. Even after conversion,
Many converts remain *de facto* Hindus and not *de jure* Christians. Muslims continue to celebrate Hindu festivals, worship Hindu deities and even believe in rebirth after death (Miyakorn: 1992). He also noted that many a Christian conceals his religion for government benefits and concessions which he calls ‘Bridge action’ - alternation between original and changed religion. However, all Dalits, including those who have become Muslims or Christians, have not ceased to be untouchables in practice. Generally lower Hindu castes with their degraded status converted to Islam and in the recent decades to Christianity to achieve equality of status and economic gain. However, the converts have rarely been accepted either as equal to those whom they have theoretically joined or to those whose ranks they have left (Sharma: 2007). Thus, caste in non-Hindu religions continues thereby leading to a modicum of continuity and permanence of caste system.

Many scholars of Dalit conversion to Christianity complain that conversion to Christianity made Dalits more docile, quiescent, supine thereby destroying their spirit of resisting against the caste system. Wilson observes that Dalit Christians are alienated from both Hindu and Christian religious *dharma*, the former being social and the later structural alienation. He criticized that the Church miserably failed in establishing an autonomous culture among Dalit Christians. Instead they have made Dalit Christians cul turized in an anti-progressive Christendom. Overall, scholars conclude that Christianity suppressed the conscientization of the oppressed (Wilson: 1982, Lobo: 1981, Webster: 1992).
3 Religious Conversion and Demographic Impact

Lancy Lobo considers religion an important variable that plays a significant role in social, economic and demographic and cultural lives of those who subscribe to it (Lobo: 1991). Gauri Viswanathan says that change of religious belief reconstitutes the geographic shape of the nation. Conversion has threatening capacity to alter social metrics and generates the internal conflicts that bring state intervention (Viswanathan: 1998). Religious conversion alters the demographic equation within a society and produces numerical imbalances. Thus, religious conversion has implications for the demographic aspects of diverse religious groups which in turn affect the political equations based on adult franchise and majority-minority considerations.

The religious choices of Dalits have had serious demographic repercussions. The geographic balance will be decisively disturbed, if Dalits go to other religions. Numerically the strength of Islam and Christianity have so far developed mainly among historically most oppressed segments of Hindu civilization and among those at the base of the Hindu civilization. In fact, Islam has been gaining in numbers due to caste and discriminations. The conversion of Dalits made Hindu nationalists apprehensive about the loss of numbers within the Hindu fold (Webster: 1992). According to Hindu nationalists, conversion to Islam and Christianity is a calculated threat to Hinduism. They contemplate with alarm that conversion of Dalits to other religions annually increases mutation in their numbers. They emphasize the urgency of Dalit uplift efforts in order to stem the tide of conversion. Thus, conversion becomes a heated issue in the politics of
numbers. Hinduism is strongly defended today. The census reports also usually become
sheets recording the progress or decline of each religious community. Hindu leaders
themselves slipping in numbers decade by decade. The Census also contributes to a
widening of religious lines. The Census reports heighten an awareness of numbers - they
create a contest of numbers.

Today, democracy is nothing but a game of numbers. Every community in a
pluralistic society wants to increase its numbers as a higher number can bring
bigger share of power. In such a situation, every conversion to Islam and Christianity
strongly resented by the Hindu rightists in the majority community as it amounts to
loss of numbers and, hence, less of political weightage. So, the conversions of Dalits to
other religions have caused hysteria and furore among such people. Sometimes this issue
is politicized. When the Dalits swelled the ranks of churches and mosques, it shrank the
donot take the Dalits for granted. Dalits have already left the Hindu fold in large
numbers and will continue to do so if not treated properly (Engineer: 1999 Jatava:
2000).

3.4 Religious Marketing and Conversion

Religious pluralism, a coexistence of various religious traditions, made marketing
religions and thereby, conversion taken for granted in India. Historically, competition
among diverse religions has been an increasing feature of Indian society. Proselytizing
sects seek to convert and in fact claim universal appeal for their faith. There are different
cies who try to either draw people away from Hinduism (Islam and Christianity) or towards it (Arya Samaj). Identification with political power, with material and economic prosperity, new status, social mobility has also been effective in such marketing. In India, nationally, the marginal groups are the primary base of recruitment for these religions.

With the arrival of Muslims and Europeans, the presence of aggressive secularization and missionary activities easily marketed religions on Indian soil which is obvious in nature. The teachings of Islam and Christianity always encouraged the recruitment of new members. With lack of central administration or coordinating body, Hinduism is less readily prepared than Christianity and Islam for marketing. Hence, Muslims and Christians are competitively engaged in the promotion of their own programs and memberships. Hindus are relatively unconcerned with membership listing (Rebe 1988). There were minimal responses from the Hindu religious reformers to counter the missionary onslaught by Christians during the colonial role. Many Hindu religious reform movements emerged to stem the threat from such Christian missionaries. Arya Samaj was one such movement which strongly advocated and launched Shuddhi (purification) or re-conversion movement. It engaged aggressively in converting the Hindus from Islam and Christianity (Seunarine: 1977, Forrester: 200).}

In recent years, Hindu rightists have aggressively engaged in attacking minorities, particularly Christians to prevent their missionary activities. Many Hindu organizations are also actively engaged in Shuddhi (purification), reconversion, or paravartan
among Christian Dalits and Adivasis (Sarkar: 1999, Patti: 2001, Mustafa et al.: 2003). These Hindu rightist groups aggressively market Hinduism and its principles like Yoga, meditation etc. in India and abroad. They organize Bhajans, Hindu festival festivals, melas etc. to popularize Hinduism. The main purpose of their activities is to make Hindus remain in their faith for political purposes. This is nothing but a formulation of religious identity or rationalization of religion. Hefner argues that significant reformulation of religious identity has occurred not through the adoption of a new faith, but through the reconfiguration or “rationalization of the religion with which individuals have long been affiliated. Clifford Geertz, the eminent social anthropologist, refers to this reformulation of identity within the already-professed religion as ‘Internal conversion’. In the modern era “Internal conversion” has often been prompted by Muslim or Christian challenges to other faiths. In early twentieth century India, for example, Christian and Muslim success in converting Dalits led Hindu leaders to develop their own programs of religious proselytization. In so doing, the Hindu leadership standardized and simplified their religion’s organization and doctrine in a manner that owed strong protest influences (Hefner: 1998).

9 Constitutional Perspectives on Religious Conversion

Every individual has a natural entitlement of religious faith and freedom of conscience, a right to adopt or abandon any faith of his own choice. In this sense freedom of religion and freedom of conscience is a fundamental right both constitutionally and conventionally. A society cannot have political and economic liberty without socio-
ious liberty. The freedom of religion and freedom of conscience have been recognized under international law. Apart from this, the Constitution of India also guarantees the freedom of religion and freedom of conscience as fundamental rights under Article 25, 26, 27, 28, and 30. Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees to all citizens the freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion subject to public order. Hence, legitimate space has been allowed by the Indian Constitution to the individual to individual belief (Engineer: 1999, Kim: 2003, Mustafa et al.: 2003). Freedom of conscience surely includes the right to change one’s view about religion and curbing of this right can lead to restrictions on freedom of choice in general, with dominant groups dictating what one can think or do in politics, artistic tastes, dress and ways of life. Conversion by force or fraud is equally reprehensible (Sarkar: 1999). Induced or forced conversion is certainly against the spirit of the Constitution of India and law of the land. Many states like Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh in India have legislations against forced religious conversions. Many Acts which prevent conversion through improper means such as coercion or financial inducements actually violate the freedom to make a choice based on personal conviction (Heredia: 2007).