Interrogating state policy, religion and politics in India: a critique of proseltization as social exclusion

Abstract

Religious conversion as a contested phenomenon involves mental trauma both individually and collectively. There are those who plead for a ban on conversion, because it disturbs the social peace in plural India. However, converts, both individuals and groups, make the boundaries porous and implicitly interrogate both the tradition they leave and the one they join. This can precipitate a challenge to both, as conversions in a hierarchical caste society have done. Complete conversion thus requires the convert to enter a new way of life, but the aspect of this process is the change that leads her to accept a new view of how she should live. There also need to be policies that enable religious converted people to seek new opportunities and take advantage of available opportunities.

Keywords: religious, conversion, social, exclusion, state, policies

Introduction

Socially and ritually, Indian society has always symbolized hierarchy and inequality leading to differential exclusion of lower castes, tribes and minorities. Interrogating the interface of caste and religion vis-à-vis exclusion in Indian society one finds it as a subject of passionate debate in contemporary India. No doubt, religious conversion as a contested phenomenon involves mental trauma both individually and collectively. On the one hand, there are those who plead for a ban on conversion, because it disturbs the social peace in plural India, especially the majorities group consisting of Hindus. The degree of aversion towards the proselytising drive of Christianity and Islam is widespread among various Hindu groups – from the radical spokesmen of the Sangh parivar to the moderate Gandhians. On the other hand, there are those who argue that conversion is a fundamental human right, which should be protected in any democracy. Generally, the proponents of the right to conversion are Christians and secularists.

We have been considering evidence for rituals, personal outlook and individual name-change as a clue to religious conversion. In a radical sense, conversions were reactions to a socio-economic situation. As the religious ideology, government and the political parties failed to bring about social justice and economic changes in favour of the depressed classes and kept them at the receiving end of social inequality. So the deprived member’s decision to use religion as an instrument for changing the power balance was, for their part, a politicization of religion. There was another dimension in this politicization. ‘Threatening’ to convert to other religion became a politicization of religion. There was another dimension in this ‘conversion’. Coercive form of conversion motif has been alleged by some to be rampant among the new religions of the Western world. Our reference is to what has been labeled, variously, “brainwashing,” “programming,” or even “mind control.” Others highlight the individual convert’s side of conversion. Coercive form of conversion motif has been alleged by some to be rampant among the new religions of the Western world. Our reference is to what has been labeled, variously, “brainwashing,” “programming,” “mind control,” “coercive persuasion,” “thought reform,” and “menticide,” among other names. In simpler terms, ‘conversion’ means renouncing one religion and adopting another. Complete conversion thus leaves and the one they join. This can precipitate a challenge to both, as conversions in a hierarchical caste society have done. Religious conversion can intensify religious differences and antagonisms or it can effect introspection and interrogation that disarms us of our “non-negotiable” values and entrenched interests. We need a “rethink” on religious conversion for a new satyagraha, jihad, crusade, for a “religious disarmament” for intra-/inter communal justice and reconciliation, for intra-/inter-religious harmony and peace. Religious disarmament and cultural dialogue are the alternatives to religious war and political terror.

Owing to these complexities of the issue, the study of religious conversion has undergone a research renaissance in recent years. Focusing on how organized group activities can induce conversion, some employ such concepts as “affective bonds,” “programming,” or even “mind control.” Others highlight the individual convert’s subjective life and what is seen as the “self-guiding” and “self-induced” side of conversion. Coercive form of conversion motif has been alleged by some to be rampant among the new religions of the Western world. Our reference is to what has been labeled, variously, “brainwashing,” “programming,” “mind control,” “coercive persuasion,” “thought reform,” and “menticide,” among other names. In simpler terms, ‘conversion’ means renouncing one religion and adopting another. Thus, protection against proselytisation is today rightly seen as a response to a community’s right to its own religious tradition, much in the same way as the right to its own language and culture. All of the current anti-conversion legislations prohibit acts of conversion in the same way as the right to its own language and culture. All of the current anti-conversion legislations prohibit acts of conversion in the following terms: “No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion to another by use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means, nor shall any person abet any such conversion”. Forced conversions, stating that: “‘Force’ shall include show of force or threat of injury or threat of divine displeasure or social ex-communication”. Thus, speaking about the issue of religious conversion the fundamental queries that arise in our mind are: What is conversion? Is it a human choice? Is it

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a dramatic emotional event in a person’s life that fades as suddenly as it occurs? Or is conversion a sham, a psychological trick to dupe you of your money, possessions, or one’s autonomy? Is conversion simply another word for changing one’s institutional religious affiliation? Here, the stage of individual or groups prior to religious conversion can be located in the first category i.e. exclusion as deprivation and the stage after religious conversion can be exclusion which is not in itself negative.

Contemporary India too represents the contestation over the religious conversion as observed in different districts of Uttar Pradesh in 2014. Earlier too, it was expressed in the promulgation of the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversions Ordinance and its subsequent passing in October 2002 by the Tamil Nadu assembly, which was by no means new in India. Similar legislations have been in force in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and even Arunachal Pradesh. It is emphasized in the deliberation that the convert is excluded from his/her parents, family, kin members, society, customs and culture. The process of conversion can be seen as a process of alienation and exclusion from one’s own society involving psychological traumas. Finally, it is emphasized such conflicting proselytizing efforts demoralize society, create suspicions and bitterness, and retard the all-round progress of society. Apart from these aspects of conversions, one needs to establish its linkage with exclusion. On the issue of exclusion, Amartya Sen believes that the concept of social exclusion is useful because of its emphasis on the role of relational issues in deprivation. He then goes further, arguing that it is important to distinguish between exclusion which is in itself a deprivation (that is, the exclusion has constitutive relevance) and exclusion which is not in itself negative, but which can lead to other deprivations which do have constitutive relevance. Here religious conversion can be seen in both the senses.

**Dynamics of religion, caste and politics in India**

Religion and politics have coexisted in the whole world since ancient times. However, the recent manifestations of religions being exploited to further political and economic demands have become much more overt. An intensification of communal violence over the last two decades has made this clear to us in India. It may not be wrong to quote Kothari that-if ‘modernization’ is the central tendency of our times, it is ‘politicization’ that provides its driving force. In a global framework, India has always been projected as a country of social differentiation and cultural plurality. The varieties of social collectivities such as castes, religion, class, clan, communities and interest groups have tended to be shaped in the name of ethnic and social identities. In everyday life of individuals and their lifecycle, these categories played a significant role both in terms of interpersonal relationship within and between the categories as well as those, which are external to in-group. We may thus say that, one of the most challenging aspects of Indian culture is its variety and complexity. The multiplicity of groups and traditions in India and the manifold character of their interrelations provide much of the richness of the Indian culture. Primal religions seemed to have been concerned mainly with the security of society and were, on the whole, conservative in their outlook. The rise of modernity creates new crises for the maintenance of religious boundaries. While on the one hand these become hardened through the geopolitical and economic demands of empire, they are at the same time blurred through the massive migration of peoples, the emergence of hybrid types of religions, the contact between peoples due to modern transportation and information technology, and the new understanding of the unity of the human species in its spiritual experience, which is one of the gifts of the study of religion to human reconciliation. It may not be wrong to say that religion has been, and continues to be, a matter of absorbing interest for many in India still today.

In former centuries no aspect of life was set apart from religion. All social relations were inevitably and legitimately suffused with religious ideas and acts. The possibility of religion in a modern world can be felt through altered functioning of religion. The marketization of religion by religious gurus performing miracles and fascinating public, the involvement of religious organizations in the building up of hospitals and schools, working for the victims of natural disasters etc. and politicization of religion by the outburst of fundamentalists reflect the altered character of it. Modern forces have certainly influenced folk culture and traditions in developing countries like India, but they have not as yet lost their vigor. References to modern objects, events and experiences find their way into folklore through the usual process of reworking traditional items, the composition of new pieces, and even the merger of new types. Thus in contemporary India, the impact of modernization has led to the emergence of new religions, revivals, and reforms within the great traditions. In modern societies, with their complex fabric of social differentiations, not only among religion, but other groups and social activities, there appears a proliferation of rites.

Since many rites are attached to the practices of specific groups and do not take on a societal-wide role, this proliferation does not necessarily impede societal integration. Even those rites that are societalized are combined with others in a larger number, with a reduced emotionality for each. The sum of societal rites themselves become routinized and more fully integrated into the workaday fabric of social order, reaching a variety of accommodations with other institutional spheres such as the state, the workplace, the market, the ethnic group and the family. Religion thus continues to be an important identity marker for its worshippers in Indian society. Religious beliefs and practices have a large impact on the personal lives of most Indians and influence public life on a daily basis. Majority of people engage in ritual actions that are motivated by religious systems that owe much to the past but are continuously evolving. Religion is one of the most important facets of Indian history and contemporary life. The emergence of new religions and their revivals lead to diversity which appears through the integration or acculturation of entire social groups each with its own vision of the divine that base their culture on literary and ritual traditions preserved in regional languages. The local interaction between great traditions and local forms of worship and belief, based on village, caste, tribal, and linguistic differences, creates a range of ritual forms and mythology that varies widely throughout the country. The continuity of practices like worshipping village deity, family deity, performing ‘shraddh rituals’, ‘mundane ceremony’, existence of spirits etc. justify the relevance of religion especially in rural context.

Simultaneously, on the question of caste Kothari rightly points that, everyone recognizes that the social system in India is organized around caste structures and caste identities. In dealing with the relationship between caste and politics, however, the tendency is to start at the wrong end of the question: Is caste disappearing? In reality, however, no social system disappears. A more useful point of departure would be: What form is caste taking under the impact of politics, and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society? A few who are free from a dichotomous view of caste and politics
and are prepared to look into precise empirical relations suffers from another preconception and often a contrary theoretical construct. … Politics, in this view, is an instrument wielded by a particular stratum in society to consolidate or raise its position; its function is to reproduce, or modify, existing states of superior-subordinate relationships. Such an approach blurs understanding of the developmental reality which consists not in any approximation to a preconceived framework but in the changing interactions of the constituent elements in a dynamic situation. But in the particular case of caste and politics, even this is only partly relevant. Where caste itself becomes a political category, it is futile to argue as to whether caste uses politics or politics uses caste. It may not be wrong to say that Hinduism is organized on the basis of a vast number of cults, large and small. By cult I mean here a complex of religious activities directed towards a common object of reverence (be it a deity, saint, animal, spirit, natural feature, or indeed a living human being). That is, the members of the cult are united by the fact that they all worship the same object, rather than by the fact that they all hold the same views or dogma. Most Hindu cults have a fairly clearly discernible geographical dimension or ‘spread’, to use the term coined by Srinivas. They generally have a cult centre or centers where the cult object has its or her chief shrine and to which pilgrims come from a larger or smaller ‘hinterland’.

Throughout the area of its spread there will be numerous small shrines erected and maintained by local people and dedicated to the cult object. Many devotees will also practice the cult privately in their own homes independently of such shrines and without reference to any ritual specialist which the cult may have. Indeed these specialists – priests, custodians etc., usually have no authority in the cult, only an interest in its survival and a certain expertise (special knowledge of songs, stories and rites associated with the cult object) which they may place at the devotees disposal. This also reminds us of the three dimensional issue of caste vis-à-vis political dimension’ namely; secular, integration and dimension of consciousness. As pointed by Kothari, in their concern with stratification, sociologists have generally neglected the ideational underpinning that is inevitably associated with any social system. Thus the contest for positions between various jatis often follows some variation of varna either by approximating to the reality as in the case of the various layers of Brahmins status, or by invoking label as in the case of the claim of certain castes to be Kshatriya (a caste of warriors and rulers). By shifting from one referent to another, it demonstrates the basic continuity between the various referents-doctrinal, rituals, economic and occupational, and associational-political. At the same time by being different things at different points in social interactions, it provides for immense flexibility, and produces tension management and assimilative capabilities.

This also brings out the importance of the manner in which traditional status urges such as ‘sanskriritization’ get interwined with more modern urges like Westernization and secularization…. By itself the sanskriritization urge produces some very basic psychological strains in the group that is trying to acquire a new identity in its search for status, as in the process its status becomes subjectively ambivalent and thus insecure; as with Jews, Negroes and other minority groups elsewhere, it is a ‘negative assertion’, a mood of ‘submitting yet opposing’ the emulated group.

**Notion of social exclusion: its multidimensionality**

From French Republicanism, the concept takes an understanding of the role of the state as the architect of social solidarity. The rupture of the social bond can take many forms: abandonment, segregation, assistance, marginalization, and discrimination. As the European usage of social exclusion has intensified, it has become a guiding concept in a wide range of research on deprivation and inequalities. Its emphasis on social relationships, participation, and customary way of life distances the concept from the tradition of work on poverty which focuses more on financial well-being, consumption, and income inadequacy. In the French policy milieu, for at least a decade prior to the European Union Poverty Programmes, “exclusion sociale” had been a term used to refer to a very select set of categories of people who were excluded from the provision of social insurance in France. According to Hilary Silver an American commentator on European Union exclusion policies, a French social policy analyst, Paul Lenoir, in 1974, identified ten categories or groups who came under the “uninsured” umbrella. These were the physically and mentally handicapped, those who were ‘suicidal’, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents (notably sole mothers), multi-problem households (where more than one of the factors existed at any one time), “marginals”, “socials” and “social misfits”.

Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. Deep exclusion refers to exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances. This matrix, the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix, or B-SEM, contains 10 dimensions or domains of potential importance in social exclusion: Resources; Material/economic resources; Access to public and private services; Social resources Participation; Economic participation; Social participation; Culture, education and skills; Political and civic participation. Quality of life Health and well-being; Living environment; Crime, harm and criminalization. The dynamic process of being shut out from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society. Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some characterizations alienation and distance from mainstream society.

Social exclusion can be seen as a process that fully or partially excludes individuals or groups from social, economic and cultural networks and has been linked to the idea of citizenship. In fact, social exclusion can be defined as disempowerment at the individual level and as structural obstacles at the social level, which deny some groups access to resources associated with citizenship. Social exclusion is a relative concept, in the sense that an individual can be socially excluded only in comparison with other members of a society: there is no ‘absolute’ social exclusion, and an individual can be declared socially excluded only with respect to the society of which he is considered to be a member. An additional relative feature is that social exclusion depends on the extent to which an individual is able to associate and identify with others.

The relativity element of social exclusion makes the latter closely related to the concept of deprivation. Runciman formulates the idea that a person’s feeling of deprivation in society arises out of comparing...
his situation with those who are better off: 'The magnitude of a relative deprivation is the extent of the difference between the desired situation and that of the person desiring it.' Recently, Amartya Sen has argued that being excluded from social relations limits our life opportunities, thus producing not only capability deprivation, but also diverse capability failures. One important aspect of such exclusion is that it seems to unite the perpetrators at the same time that it isolates the victims. While the "excluders" produce exclusion by collectively expropriating public space and refusing to share social opportunities, the excluded experience exclusion as an individual and personal failure-as-the inability to participate freely and fully in the social life of the community.

Social exclusion can also been seen as a part of the Sen’s capability approach, and it can be defined as a process leading to a state of functioning deprivations. Therefore, the “process” of social exclusion produces a “state” of exclusion that can be interpreted as a combination of some relevant deprivations. In particular, Sen argues that the well-being of an individual is best seen as an index of the individual’s functioning’s. Functioning’s represent parts of the state of an individual; in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functioning’s the individual can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. Thus, living is viewed as a combination of various “doings and beings”, with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve relevant functioning’s.

**Debating the issue of proseltization in India**

**Processes/discourse on conversion**

According to Rudolf Heredia conversion is a complex and emotionally charged issue. Where the dalits are trapped: upward mobility in the caste hierarchy is socially negated, while escape through religious change is legally obstructed. ‘No entry, no exit!’ Conversion implies some change in one’s religious commitment, the more radical the conversion the more drastic the change. The change may be within the same tradition from the lesser to a greater degree of commitment. Religious revivalists often see themselves in this light. But the change of commitment may be across religious faiths. Here conversion is used to mean not an ‘atmaparivartan’, a metanoia, or a change of heart, within the same religious tradition, but a ‘dharmantar’, a change of one’s religious allegiance across such traditions.

**The Psycho-social Discourse**

Sometimes identity is taken to be primordial, as given, ascribed. However, when an identity is to be constructed, it is imagined, invented. This can be a matter of internal fabrication or external imposition; in most cases it is a mix of both in varying proportions. A conversion at this level involves a rejection, a change or an adaptation of one’s identity. This can happen through a reconstruction internally or an imposition externally. Here is where force or fraud comes in. But with regard to conversions there is a complex set of motivations involved. Individuals looking for personal space, whether this is psychological or social, intellectual or emotional, often opt for a changed religious identity that allows for such space. The change then is justified in terms of a personal quest, which may be more than just a religious one. The rejection of the old identity and the adaptation to the new one implies a critique or an interrogation of both. This can be threatening to, and resented by those who feel rejected by such a change. At times this can be a very emotional issue and even precipitate violence.

At this level of discourse the crucial issues to be faced is whether we construct our identities positively or negatively. A negative identity is delineated against others by what it is not. Such identities easily become closed and exclusive. They create in-groups and out-groups, stereotypes and scapegoats. The danger is to have a single, consolidated identity, inflexible and rigid. This can lead to all kinds of personal crises with the inevitable changes in life. This is precisely what ‘life passages’, the necessary discontinuities in one’s life, are all about. For no life can be evenly continuous, especially in times of rapid social change. Old and stable identities are eroded creating insecurities and anxieties that become aggressive and even violent.

Religious conversion cannot but involve a new rearrangement of such evolving multiple identities. Coming now to the converters, at this psycho-social level in one scenario the converters could be projecting, extending and imposing their own identity, and of course if this is by force or fraud then it is a violation of the person, an illegitimate dominance over another. This can happen with all kinds of identities, political, cultural, linguistic or others, not just religious ones. The greater the violation involved the greater the need to oppose it. Certainly this has happened with regard to religious conversions, and subjugated or colonized peoples (’a colonization of consciousness) have had bitter experience of this.

**The socio-cultural discourse**

A second level of discourse is the socio-cultural. This is the area of identity politics, sometimes called the politics of passion, as opposed to interest politics, or the politics of class. The question here is the social disadvantage or advantage, of discrimination or affirmation, of a sense of deprivation or privilege that a group or the community experiences with regard to its cultural identity. Conversion in this discourse involves a change or even a rejection of allegiance to the old socio-cultural tradition and consequently to the group or community identified with it, and a transfer of this allegiance to a new socio-cultural tradition or even the creation of a new one. Ambedkar did this for the neo-Buddhists, recreating a tradition that was well nigh extinct in this country, with his own reinterpretation from a dalit standpoint.

**The Economic-Political Discourse**

Because religion is not isolated from other areas of collective living, it will necessarily impact the economic political one and vice versa. For conversion at this level involves the realigning of vested interest and centres of power. For in changing one’s religious allegiance one changes many other circumstances as well, precisely because human interactions are so interdependent in any area of social life, and not all these changes may be positive for all the parties involved. Thus conversion could mean a passage from subaltern to dominant groups, or even vice versa; or again it could involve an empowering coalition of otherwise disparate individuals and groups, that come together under the umbrella of a larger religious brotherhood, for what could well be non-religious purposes. The real issue at this level of discourse is how the religious will impact other levels of societal interaction.
Will the status quo prevail, or will there be increased dominance and oppression, or is there openness to positional and structural change, group and community mobility in various horizontal strata and vertical segments of society? Further, what if the conversion itself is undergone to improve one’s life circumstances? Those opposed to religious conversions need to ask themselves: why is it that the oppressed only attract attention when they convert? Often they convert because their basic human dignity and freedom has been denied and abused. But it is not their oppression or wretchedness that merits attention: only the event of their changing religious allegiance. Indeed, for such people conversion may not be a religious act but rather a political protest. Yet it is certainly within the legitimate limits of political freedom in a secular society such as ours claims to be. To the proselytizer who can be another brand of religious zealot, we have this to ask: why is it that changing the religious allegiance of the convert motivates them more than the need to alleviate the terrible misery of their human situation? What kind of religious community would want to count converts even before it can help to restore their violated dignity and freedom?

Social reformers on conversion

As eminent a person as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833) in the early 19th century itself expressed his opposition to the activities of Christian missionaries, even as he struggled to reform Hindu society simultaneously. Of course, his focus was on putting his own Hindu house in order rather than on opposing conversions. Sir Syed Ahmed was even more forthright in showing his concern over conversions to Christianity and expressed his apprehension that the government itself was encouraging proselytisation. He pointed out how the general famine was taken advantage of for converting many people including orphans.

Mahatma Gandhi who persistently and doggedly expressed his criticism of conversions of Hindus both to Christianity and Islam, even as he passionately advocated eradication of social including untouchability all his life. He had a profound regard for both the religions and gave his life in the protection of minorities. His views on conversions cannot therefore be considered as narrow. They are found scattered over many volumes of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Collected Works in brief). As one goes through his many statements on the theme, one is struck by the fact that even as he vehemently and explicitly opposed conversions made through force, fraudulent means and inducements, he was also opposed to the very idea of religious conversion itself as the motto or hallmark of any religious preaching. He made a distinction between freedom of practice of a religion and freedom to canvass a religion for the ultimate purpose of converting the adherents of another religion.

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Christian proselytizing is an arrogant idea, a denial both of god and of one’s neighbour; it denies god, denies his working in others, denies the many ways in which he fulfils himself. It helps neither the missionaries nor the converts.” Gandhiji condemned pitting one religion against another particularly for the purpose of conversion. He said, I believe that it is impossible to estimate the merits of the various religions of the world, and moreover I believe that it is unnecessary and harmful even to attempt it. Gandhiji was opposed to proselytisation was that it undermined and even demeaned humanitarian work and social service if its ultimate goal is ‘harvesting souls’. A conversion is that humanitarian work done with the motive of conversion is demeaning to the dignity of the receiver. It explicitly involves contempt for him/her and his/her society, and superiority and arrogance on the part of those who give such a service. It is that the convert is tom apart from his/her parents, family, society, customs and culture. The process of conversion is also a process of alienation. It is not only at family level, but also at the social level. Gandhiji clearly observed that ‘in Hindu households, the advent of a missionary has meant the disruption of the family’.  "  

He was only worried over the fact that new converts can be unreasonably fanatic and hostile, and even old converts felt proud in being contemptuous of Hinduism and Hindu society. In other words, the alienation also soured relations between communities in an already charged atmosphere of communal tensions. The most important reason for Gandhiji’s opposition to proselytisation is that it involves violence. He said, ‘it is the cause of much avoidable conflict’. The bulk of con-versions in the history of the world, also including India, have been through violence of some kind or the other, with honourable exceptions like Buddhism.

Ambedkar: conversion as dharma

Conversion of Babasaheb Ambedkar from Hinduism to Buddhism, which cuts to the heart of the controversy in this country. Buddhism is still Hinduism so Ambedkar did not really convert his conversion is an atmaparivartan not a dharmantar! His conversion to Buddhism was the conclusion of a long process, discerned carefully, thought through critically, planned diligently and timed deliberately. He was acutely aware that however personal his religious convictions might be, his conversion could not be just a private affair. It would inevitably be a public event that would necessarily and crucially affect thousands of his people. Today, Ambedkar is crucially important, for he sets the issue of religious conversion in a multidimensional context that we must not ignore, and interrogates us in a manner we cannot escape. The neo-Buddhists movement is the largest mass conversion of the twentieth century and no longer restricted to the Mahars of Maharashtra. It has already spread to the Jatvas of Uttar Pradesh and beyond.

However, he critiqued Buddhism with equal rigour and from the same value commitments that made him reject Hinduism. His Navayana Buddhism is a this worldly ethic, which he explained in terms of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’. For Ambedkar’s conversion to the Buddhist dharma challenges us to rethink the Hindu concept of dharma. He understood it in the context of caste hierarchy as binding or rather binding one to the system and he rejects both Hindu dharma and caste. B R Ambedkar has contributed enormously in shaping the dalit perspective over the issue of religion. For a radical social empowerment, religious conversion is envisaged as one of the important solutions by many great leaders of dalits in the past, including Ambedkar in the later years. He insisted on the necessity of religion for a civilized society; however, he asked his followers to judge the viability of any religion in the society on four main parameters. According to him, social ethics, rationality, peaceful and fraternal cohabitation, and opposition to supernaturalism should be the essential elements of religion in a modern society.
The Hindu social identity of the dalit was degraded and his/her public identity was contaminated with orthodox caste prejudices and it was difficult for the dalits in this context to reap the benefits of new democratic order as an equal citizen. To nurture the modern ethos—individual liberty, social dignity and harmony — a cohesive societal set-up was needed, which Ambedkar argued was not possible within the stratified nature of the Hindu caste system. Ambedkar believed that conversion to Buddhism will empower the dalit-self from such an illiberal and appalling social milieu and that it was really difficult for a modern state to establish secularism and a true democratic order in such a caste-based and communally-defined social and political atmosphere. Ambedkar believed that conversion to Buddhism was necessary as it had the required potential values which supported the liberal ethos of the newly imagined modernised nation state.

Therefore, Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism has been regarded as a modernist project to redefine the character of India as a secular nation state. Buddhism’s moral doctrine represented an apparatus that enabled the subaltern masses to bring about radical changes in the socio-cultural relationships of the Indian society. Buddhism provided a comprehensive socio-political and cultural alternative which is conducive to an effective functioning of liberal-democratic polity. Ambedkar assumes that conversion to Buddhism, at the first stage would “de-caste” the dalits from their primordial caste identity and in the progressive run to “establish the kingdom of righteousness for the prosperity of the whole world” which would counter the orthodox religiosity of Hinduism. In the battle between scientific temperament of Buddhism and the irrational doctrine of brahmanism, the destruction of latter was inevitable for him. The issue of religious conversion provides a poised value to the converted subject to escape from the existing dominant social bondages as a free individual. Freedom to convert from one’s religious identity valorizes individual freedom and rational choice as it judges the acceptability of religion on certain ethical credentials.

Ramabai: conversion as interrogation

Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) crossed the Lakshman rekha of Brahmin and Anglican patriarchy and exclusiveness, and straddled religion and culture, Hindu and Christian, East and West. Though she claimed to have remained culturally Hindu and religiously Christian, she was perceived as treacherously subversive by the conservative patriarchy in both traditions. They thought her to be confusing and contradictory. Revivalists were outraged and distanced themselves from her after her conversion, and the missionaries were embarrassed by her ‘self-chosen faith’. Ramabai’s rejection of Hindu reformism and Anglican patriarchy placed her at the margins of both traditions; Nivedita’s involvement in revivalist Hinduism and militant politics left her in the peculiar situation of an outsider on the inside. If anything, this further magnified the dilemmas and paradoxes they confronted.

The post-Ambedkar dalit movements have had a critical approach towards the issue of religious conversion. They have hardly placed the required emphasis on the sociopolitical and cultural notions of religious conversion and movements related to it. They have undermined the democratic credentials of the conversion movement and have located its impact on the narrow parameters of alternative identity formation. On the other hand, dalit politics throughout the country has employed caste as an ideology and an identity to fight against the authoritative brahmanical hegemony by belittling the legacy and compatibility of the conversion movement that was prescribed by Ambedkar. Concrete theoretical engagement with the pertinent issues of right of religious choice, social discrimination, hegemony of social elites and achieving greater social democracy is sidelined under the broad consensus to the largely ineffectual political democracy. The dalit movements have developed strategies which are limited to petty materialistic issues such as representation of the caste elites in the power structure, borrowed dignity for the castes and perpetually controversial caste-based reservations. Apathy of dalit intellectuals and politicians over the communal incidents in Orissa further reflects the prejudice and lack of confidence over the conversion debate.

Religious conversion in India

Proselytisation, be it forced, allured or voluntary, has been a hotly debated issue in the Indian socio-political discourse. Not only has it attracted the attention of Indian mass media, it has also initiated the process of legislation in some Indian states. The centre of attack has been conversion by the Christian missionaries. The method adopted by it was the one by force, coercion, intimidation, allurement etc. The common methods used by them have been developmental and social service like education, health, legal aid etc. However, conversion was often followed by a great loss of much of the rights that the converts had earlier enjoyed in the community. The converts were often denied food, shelter, inheritance, succession as well as participation in rites and rituals of the family and the community. They were at times excommunicated from the community. There was thus both gain and loss in the conversion. But what has been relatively unnoticed is another kind of proselytisation, equally real and concrete, that is the conversion of faiths of tribal masses by Hindu proselytizers. Although Hinduism ideology doesn’t lay emphasis on proselytisation one can easily observe the efforts of large scale transformation of religious practices, particularly at the level of ritual and emotional association, of tribal masses. This ideology has concretized in the form of processes like ‘Ghar wapsi’ (home coming) on the one hand and the growing religious bigotry in the form of attack on minority in tribal society, on the other. It is interesting to note that the converts continued with their languages, food-habits, customs, and traditions etc. that were integral part of the social organization of tribal society. The conversion did not lead to a total breaking away from their traditional community. Neither did it lead to an absorption or assimilation into an alien society (not a case with Hinduism). Conversion invariably led to the formation of new social groups. Even though converts retained much of the attributes in common with those of non-converts and maintained some continuity with the traditional structure, the changes following conversion brought about a rupture in the relations of the converts and non-converts. The missionary discouraged and even prohibited the converts from socializing and mixing with the non-converts. Through such exclusive living the converts completely isolated themselves from the rest and form an exclusive group. It generated asymmetrical relations and economic stratification too.

Historically speaking, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda emphasized social reform and service for their own sake and not just for the sake of meeting the threat of conversions. Mahatma Gandhi too expressed his criticism of conversions of Hindus. To him, a conversion is that humanitarian work done with the motive of conversion is demeaning to the dignity of the receiver. However, B.R. Ambedkar projected proselytization as a mechanism to overcome exclusion. It was the issue of conversion of tribes in Madhya Pradesh that sparked off the first major controversy in independent India as inquiry in the early 1950s under the name of Niyogi Commission.
Interrogating state policy, religion and politics in India: a critique of proselitization as social exclusion

Following the Meenakshipuram conversions government acted pressure to rectify administrative inattention and class injustice. ‘Threatening’ to convert to Islam became a lever for extracting certain of religion. There was another dimension in this politicization. for changing the power balance was, for their part, a politicization social inequality. So their decision to use religion as an instrument favour of the depressed classes and kept them at the receiving end of parties failed to bring about social justice and economic changes in

Conversion as subversion

As with any change that crosses traditionally ascribed boundaries, conversion tends to disturb the status quo and precipitate unpredictable and uncontrollable consequences, especially when the ethnic community is identified with its religion. when the majority religion is politically dominant, national and religious identities get conflated. In India, conversion to non-Hindu religious traditions still invites the anti-national suspicion from those Hindus who project themselves as a national political majority and not just a religious one.

Conversion as atrocity

In struggling with the consequences of conversion, within or across religious traditions, the rallying response from religious conservatives, from moderates to extremists, has often been varying degrees of denial and resistance: We have lost our identity and dignity because we have been unfaithful; we have failed our religion, our
degrees of denial and resistance: We have lost our identity and dignity conservatives, from moderates to extremists, has often been varying anti-national suspicion from those Hindus who project themselves as a national political majority and not just a religious one.

Aftermaths of conversion

The capability of religion for providing the individual with a sense of both meaning and belonging are especially evident in the process of conversion. Conversion means a transformation of one’s self concurrent with a transformation of one’s basic meaning system. It changes the sense of who is and how one belongs in the social situation. Conversion transforms the way the individual perceives the rest of society and is or her personal place in it, altering one’s view of the world. This meaning of conversion distinguishes simple change in institutional affiliation from more fundamental alterations in the

Citation: Saxena A, Saxena V Interrogating state policy, religion and politics in India: a critique of proselitization as social exclusion. Social Int J. 2019;3(1):78 -86.
DOI: 10.15406/sij.2019.03.00158
individual’s meaning system. Another less extreme type of conversion is essentially a reaffirmation of elements of one’s previous identity. It is difficult to specify how much change such conversions really entail. Often they involve no change in one’s religious affiliation. Yet exhibit real changes in the individual’s personal religious behavior and sense of identity. This type of conversion does not necessarily entail a total rejection of the previous meaning system.

Some identity-consolidating conversion experiences involve little or no change in meaning system and sense of self. Many religious group expect young members to make a personal faith decision and to undergo a conversion experience as they approach adulthood. Such group provides opportunities such as youth revival in which the necessary conversion experience is more likely to occur. These experiences, although very real and meaningful to participants, are better understood, not as conversion, but rather as rituals of reaffirmation of the person’s existing identity and meaning system.17 Sociologists have conventionally approached religious conversion as some- thing that happens to a person who is destabilized by external and internal forces and then brought to commit the self to a conversionist group by social- interactive pressures applied by the “trip” [i.e a sect or cult]. and its agents. This stands in contrast to an alternative paradigm of the individual seeker striving and strategizing to achieve meaningful change in his or her life experience, and which treats the groups and others involved in this process as salesmen, shills, coaches, guides and helpers-themselves typically converts farther along in their own personal quests.18 In the new paradigm, says Straus,19 conversion is seen as an accomplishment on the seeker’s part, rather than as the effect of social, psychological or other forces.

As suggested by the new paradigm, the important arena for investigation in conversion studies is the individual’s striving for self-actualization through identity change. Asserts Straus,18 “we must….. develop a typology for the etiology of seeking” as well as determine “how material communicated to the seeker as concepts comes to be experienced as actuality. Psycho-social effects of conversion may include: psychological problems, relational problems, loss of identity, loss of cultural affiliations, de-integration from work relations, problems of mental depression, internal de-structuring of the person, loss of purpose, de-integration from family ties, processes of subjective implication, the inner dimension of poverty, and de-integration from social relations.19 The dalits who are converted to Christianity have also utilized the benefits of modern education and used the state’s infrastructure to achieve some sort of economic empowerment. The empowerment of the dalits in most of the states in India has seen the calculative strategies by the upper caste conservatives to distract and demoralize their efforts of becoming the part of the mainstream society.

The usage of threats, social boycott, social discrimination and violent attacks against the dalit communities is the accepted norms among the brahminical forces to curb the growing consciousness among the dalits. The moral responsibility of the dalit social movement and other secular and progressive forces is to convert the traditional war amongst the castes and tribes into a conclusive battle between the scientific, modern secular, civilized traditions against the orthodox, communal and discriminatory religious order. Complete conversion thus requires the convert to enter a new way of life, but the aspect of this process in which I am interested is the first: the change that leads her to accept a new view of how she should live. Conversions do not begin with what the convert does, but with what happens to him. It requires a jolt: an event that forces him to re-examine his life and motivates him to change it. Only when we understand the kinds of events that can move him in this way can we construct a meaningful framework in which to discuss the justification of conversions. His reasons for change only make sense to us once we understand the causal forces at work, so we can only judge those reasons once we understand the particular context of his conversion.

Conversion is not just a moment in a person’s life, but involves a complex set of factors that are at once social, psychological and spiritual. Conversion is also seen as movement towards secularity. Donald Taylor20 explores the meaning of conversion in relation to its usage in the context of the relationships between religions. Here he finds that conversion is an evaluative term used positively by those in the religions to which one converts and negatively by that religion which one abandons. ‘turning away’ and ‘turning towards’. It is important to recognize the sociological and institutional dimensions of conversion. Conversion is not just a personal spiritual awakening, it is also an awakening, it is also an entry into a particular religious community. There is a ‘gatekeeper’ dimension to the conversion, the religious officials or institution that recognizes and acknowledges one’s experience or intentions and validates it in relation to a religious community or institution.

Sikhism, despite its egalitarian ideology, failed to create a casteless community. Discrimination and exclusion of lower castes continued. Roots of the exclusion have to be located in the history of the making of the religious community and the way a few castes after benefiting from religious conversion perpetuated the caste-based exclusions. The presence of castes among the Sikhs is an issue which sometimes creates strong reaction among the Sikh establishment only in such situations where attempts are made to make Sikhism coterminous with Hinduism. One of the arguments is that there is existence of caste-based discrimination against the Mazhabis at religious places. Judge & Bal21 noted that the Mazhabis were not permitted to carry the sacred book, Guru Granth Sahib, to their homes arguing that they were dirty and they could violate the maryada (code of conduct) of properly keeping the book. However, this was not the only reason. It was also found by them that each separate gurdwara is located in one locality. Since the Mazhabs have their own separate locality, they also had their own gurdwara. In other words, the Mazhabs have constructed their own gurdwaras due to various reasons and caste based discrimination is one of the major reasons.

Summing up: Conversion as an opportunity towards social inclusion

The PSE Survey was specifically designed to measure poverty and social exclusion. Carried out in 1999, it built on the 1983 and 1990 Breadline Britain Surveys.22,23 A pioneering feature of the PSE approach was its direct measurement of exclusion from social relations, the same can be equated with the person with religious conversion. It employed five themes:

1. Non-participation in common social activities;
2. The extent of people’s social networks and the extent to which they are socially isolated;
3. The support available to individuals on a routine basis and in times of crisis;
4. Disengagement from political and civic activity;

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5. Confinement, resulting from fear of crime, disability or other factors.

Social inclusion as a policy framework is also not without risk—the normative tendencies inherent on social exclusion discourse are still present. However, a desire for social inclusion could be interpreted, in a policy context, as an agenda to facilitate, enrich and enhance individual and group capacity for at least three things: Opportunity, reciprocity and participation. These three concepts occur alongside the concept of exclusion in much of the international policy debate. Investing in the strengths and resources of people requires multifaceted policy approaches. There need to be policies that provide access to basic advantages in health, education, housing and amenities. There need to be policies that seek to protect people from harm, and/or that help prevent people being exposed to difficult circumstances and unnecessary risk. There also need to be policies that enable people to seek new opportunities and take advantage of available opportunities. Ideally, there need to be policy mechanisms for recognizing that investments and opportunities that are valuable and accessible to some people are not relevant or accessible to others.

Thus, the broader forms of inclusion through conversion may involve: improvement of marital relations; improvement of relations between children and parents; change in consumer behaviour; change in family finance management; change in value orientation; increased responsibility for one’s own life; increased self-respect; activation (in seeking a job, engagement in social networks); improved, more cultivated behaviour and communication; change in life strategies (more long-term visions, positive self-projections).

Acknowledgments
None.

Conflicts of interest
The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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