

Conversions to Christianity and Islam in India: A Historiographical Survey of the Recent Literature

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Abstract

The issue of conversion is a controversial and current topic of debate in academic circles. Conversion meant several things to many people and given different definitions by scholars of various disciplines. Conversion ultimately is what the converted individuals said it is. This paper is an attempt to look at how and why conversions to Christianity and Islam take place in India by examining the various literatures written on the topic. In the process, it is seen that conversion takes various forms and in case of Christianity and Islam where tradition transition takes place, it has inevitable socio-cultural consequences. The question of whether forced conversion took place is also dealt with. By and large, though there were instances of forced conversion, the bulk of the conversions to Christianity and Islam were due to various other factors.

Keywords: *conversion, convert, Christianity, Islam, force, culture*

The conventional wisdom in the historiography of the ancient world is that the emergence of what we call civilisation was marked by the rise of state, government, bureaucracy, writing and a complex division of labour. Less widely noted, but of equal importance was the conversion of tribal and non-tribal state

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peoples to more expansive and doctrinally formalized religions. For many people, incorporation into a broader social order brought not just technological and political transformation of traditional life ways but far reaching adjustments into the canons of divinity, identity and social ethics as well. Though conversion to world religion seems to occur in the civilizing process, understanding it has challenged students of religion and social theory for well over a century and theoretical accounts of conversion have long been entangled in debates concerning the nature of cultural evolution and the rationality of different types of religion. Conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics and morality (Hefner 1993, p 4). The topic of religious conversions have therefore been at the centre of discussion in several academic disciplines. Most historical writings on conversion and convert communities have been concerned with very different issues. Here, an attempt is made to present the issues raised by different authors regarding conversions to Christianity and Islam in India. But, first, a look at the meaning of the term 'conversion' would be pertinent.

Defining conversion is not an easy task. Several scientific disciplines like psychology and sociology have been struggling with this problem because how do you define a very abstract and personal religious experience or process of change? Throughout the 20th century, several academics in the field of psychology came up with a wide range of definitions, approaches, typology of conversion and they all try to include the wide variety in religious traditions as well as individual variability and historical conditions. It all comes down to the fact that conversion is always a complex process "that takes place in a dynamic force of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations" (Rambo 1993, p.5). The term conversion itself is also used rather loosely and different scholars attributed its meaning in different ways. A widespread consensus is that it involves some kind of

religious or socio-religious transformation or change. So change is the keyword. Conversion always has something with religious change. Yet, conversion is above all “malleable” (Rambo 1993, p.170). There certainly are some general patterns, but no single convert goes through the same process. Therefore, conversion is what the converted individual says it is. This does not mean that all the knowledge about conversion gained so far is lost. In an experimental or inner psychological view of religious conversion of early Christianity, conversion for A.D Nock meant the re-orientation of the soul of the individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new was right (Oddie 1991, p.4). W.H.Clark defines religious conversion in a somewhat similar fashion as, that type of spiritual growth or development which involves an appreciable change of direction concerning religious ideas and behaviour. His notion of conversion also denotes “an emotional episode of illuminating suddenness, though it may also come about by the most gradual process”(Oddie 1991, p.4). Both these ideas of a sudden and complete transformation is a reflection of a particular type of western Christian experience.

There are historians who termed conversion in a simple, primary and non-technical sense, to mean the process whereby people opt out of one religious community and join another. Hardy used this term to explain that in Indian life conversion means more a change of fellowship than of conduct or inner life although the latter may in time occur (Oddie 1991, p.5). Here, a change of fellowship also suggests a certain level of dissatisfaction and a seeking for something better. A change of fellowship, such as entry into the Christian church or becoming a Muslim, involved rituals of admission and also placed the individual in a position of receiving new ideas which could be the beginning of

a process of acculturation into a new tradition. The term 'conversion', thus, has been understood and used in historical literature in different ways which is why conversion also assumes a variety of forms.

At the outset, Christianity and Islam are religions that have initiated and benefitted from massive tradition transition which refers to the "movement of an individual or a group from one major religious tradition to another" (Rambo 1993, P.14). Moving from one worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe and lifestyle to another is a complex process that often takes place in a context of cross-cultural contact and conflict and thus socio-cultural consequences are inevitable.

Most of the earlier researches on conversion to Christianity are historical accounts of conversion to Christianity and much of the research is about conversion to Christianity in non-western countries. The opposite is true for conversion to Islam. Since 9/11, there has been a lot of attention for conversion to Islam in the western world recently, especially for western women converting to Islam. Our focus, of course, will be in the context of India only.

On conversion to Christianity, most historical writings dwell on various issues like mode of conversion, whether force or voluntary, the motives of conversions, the convert's view of the new religion in relation to their existing culture and tradition and most of all their socio-cultural consequences. Factors of continuity from an earlier tradition also feature prominently in their writings. My paper, being a survey of the recent literature on theoretical issues of conversion, will be along these lines.

Anthony D'Costa, for instance, talks about the Christianisation of Goa in terms of its voluntary character. Writing from the perspectives of the converting missionaries, he claims that in the Christianisation of Goa the conversions were

genuine in that they arose out of the true commitment to the faith and not out of force or out of a desire to gain material benefits. He holds that the missionaries were humanist in their approach attempting to come to terms with the belief system of the people and converting only when there was a genuine desire on the part of the person to be converted to Christ. He interprets this to mean that the conversions were completely voluntary in character. In doing so, Costa closes his mind to the social and political circumstances within which the conversions took place. He largely ignored the fact that the rapid rise of converts in Goa was mostly the result of Portuguese economic and political control over the Hindus, who were vassals of the Portuguese Crown (Mendonca 2002, p.397). He therefore gives too bias a picture of Christian conversion.

Moving away from the voluntary character of conversion, another issue of conversion is the focus on the factors of continuity from a convert's earlier belief system and tradition. Some converts to Christianity did not totally repudiate their earlier moral order. This is evident from Susan Bayly who stresses on the factors of continuity linking Christians with Hindu society. Talking of the early conversion to Syrian Christianity and Catholicism in South India, she argues that with conversion, Indian Christians did not opt out of the indigenous moral order. She says, "the behaviour and social organisation of these converts continued to reflect the perceptions of caste, rank, honour and ritual precedence which were shared throughout the wider society of the two regions" (Bayly 1989, p.260). The Syrian Christians, a Malayalam speaking population, whose Christian identity dates back from before the sixth century A.D. were accepted as a community of high caste rank within the elaborate schemes of social and ceremonial precedence for many centuries before the rise of colonial powers. Bayly argues that the Malabar Jesuits could not remake the Syrian's world view or their conception of

sacred power and authority since their contact with the latter as early as 1500 AD. The attempt of the *Padroado Real* or Royal Patronage to induce the Syrian priesthood to disown their allegiance to the West Asian Catholicos, to renounce all uncatholic doctrines and observances and swear allegiance to the Roman See failed as the Syrian Christians continued their veneration of the cult saints and West Asian bishops continued to make their way to Kerela. Alternatively, there were instances of the Portuguese actually re-enforcing the existing Syrian traditions (Bayly 1989, p.269).

Yet another issue of conversion on the theme of continuity and change is taken up by Rowena Robinson. She attempts to analyse the patterns of persistence and transformation in the socio-religious practices of contemporary Catholics in Goa in relation to the wider Hindu society in which they are located and from which they emerged through conversion four centuries ago. She quotes, “The Portuguese missionaries did not seek conversion only in terms of a change in religious belief or dogmas but also demand from the converts outward manifestations of this change in terms of a transformation in cultural practices, yet the converts responded to the changes brought about by conversion selectively and discerningly rather than indiscriminately” (Robinson 1998, p. 78). So she infers that processes of both continuity and discontinuity are constructed out of the convergence of several different elements. According to her, the occupations of certain castes underwent change, modes of inheritance were influenced and new sartorial codes and food habits were introduced, yet she maintains that converts did not give up their socio-cultural practices. They were maintained and adjusted with the new faith. Rather, the new is perceived through and integrated with the old.

The case of the Paravas examined by Baily provides an example of caste formation around a central body of Christian

symbols which transformed the group's ideology but maintained them within the broader system of ranking within Tamil society. The Paravas were once part of the low-ranking fishing and boat handling communities of the South Indian coastline who became professing Roman Catholics as clients and protégés of the Portuguese in the early 16th Century. By converting to Christianity, the Paravas find themselves a ritual arena which allowed them to raise their status by adopting a Christian 'caste' lifestyle and improve their position within the region's wider scheme of caste, rank and honour. Though Christian, the Paravas' relations to Hindu rulers and to lower caste servants and agricultural groups were similar to those of many formally Hindu and Muslim commercial and artisan populations (Bayly 1989, p.328).

There are also instances where historians think Christianity was accepted to liberate the converts from their social status. Forrester(1991) talks about how untouchables were becoming increasingly interested in Christianity. He discusses the reasons for their increasing restiveness, the options available to them in their desire to improve their position and the factors which attracted them to Christianity. His analysis, which includes an examination of specific untouchable conversion movements, stresses among others, the impact of the protestant emphasis on equality, the untouchables' desire for dignity and a new sense of identity and the attractiveness of some kind of connection with the missionaries who had already shown their willingness to stand by the poor and oppressed.

The instances of Christian conversions presented in these essays are evidence of an intellectually and social complex process in which contemporary people in non-western societies are struggling with new religious possibilities. Their cultural identities and traditions affect that struggle but not the whole of it.

In the islamization process, while Islam in the Arab world and South Asia came about largely "by the sword and military

conquest, Southeast Asia's experience was totally different- largely one of gradual, peaceful assimilation through trade and intermarriage" (Gross 2007, p ix). This process seems to be true also, to some extent, as far as South India is concerned going by the literature available. However, scholars also attribute several other theories regarding conversion to Islam. Four theories have been prominently highlighted.

- 1) Immigration Theory which postulates that the bulk of the India's Muslims are descended from other Muslims who had either migrated overland from Iranian plateau or sailed across the Arabian Sea
- 2) Religion of the Sword Thesis which stresses the role of military force in the diffusion of Islam and elsewhere
- 3) Religion of Patronage Theory which views Indians of the pre-modern period converting to Islam in order to receive some non-religious favour from the ruling class like relief from taxes and promotion in the bureaucracy
- 4) Religion of Social Liberation Thesis which postulates that the Hindus converted to Islam to improve their status in the social hierarchy (Eaton 1997, pp.54-57).

It is largely true that military conquest preceded the conversion to Islam (with the exception of the early Muslims in the south). But how far conversion took place due to this military conquest can be highly debated. Scholars differ widely as to how Indians converted to Islam. Was force the dominant factor in the conversion process? Was Islam spread in India as the religion of the Sword? M.A.Khan seems to believe it so. He derived how Prophet Mohammad applied the doctrine of jihad as he founded the Islamic creed during the last twenty-three years of his life (610–632 CE) which he progressively received revelation from the Islamic God (Allah) as contained in the Muslim holy book, the Quran. He quotes, "...in putting Allah's doctrine of Jihad

into practice at the birth of Islam, Prophet Muhammad had established three major models of Jihadi actions:

1. Use of violence for the propagation of Islam,
2. Islamic imperialism,
3. Islamic slavery”(Khan 2009, p.4)

He demonstrates how this jihadi doctrine had been used right from the Islamic rule in India in 712. Accordingly, conversion, according to him, took place by the following ways.

1. Conversion by the sword
2. Conversion through enslavement
3. Enslaved women as reproduction tools
4. Humiliation & economic burdens contributing to conversion
5. Conversion under brutal Aurangzeb
6. Brutal Conversion in Kashmir(Khan 2009, pp.73-75)

A question which arises is if Islam was spread by the sword, why are there still 80 percent of the people Hindus in India after about fourteen and ten centuries of Islamic rule? The answer also lies with him. He explains that the Hindus were hostile towards Islam even at the extent of- being pauperized by extreme exploitation namely imposition of *Jizyah*, *kharaj* and other kinds of onerous taxes, having their children sold, escaping from being converted to the thick jungles, re-conversion of the converted under liberal Muslim rulers- and also the Muslims' inability to secure a complete hold over the entire country (Khan 2009, pp.69-72). Though M.A.Khan's observations seem too harsh a process of conversion, yet one cannot but deny the forced conversions to Islam in Kashmir and elsewhere not to forget Aurangzeb's notion of *dar-ul-Islam* and his fanatic religious policies towards the non-Muslims.

In complete contrast to M.A.Khan's view, some historians believed that conversion to Islam was not solely by the sword or

political force but through peaceful means too. One of the greatest exponent of this idea is Richard M. Eaton who's book, "*The rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*" analyses the various political, economic and cultural forces which combined in the Islamization of Bengal's frontier areas explaining in the process why among India's interior provinces, only in Bengal, a majority of the indigenous population adopted Islam. Eaton asserts that Islam's ability to adapt to socio-cultural environment was responsible to a large extent for the large Muslim ethnic population in Bengal. Here, Islam became locally understood as a civilization building ideology, a religion of the plough and where an expanding agrarian frontier was seen co-terminus with the cultural percolation and its religious acceptance. As such, the frontier folk of the eastern delta do not perceive Islam as alien and as a closed exclusive system to be accepted or rejected as a whole. Eaton's argument here is the in-appropriation of speaking of conversion of Hindus to Islam because none can identify a specific moment when people saw themselves as having made a dramatic break with the past. Eaton's concluding statement bear testimony to these effects. He states, "What made Islam in Bengal not only historically successful but a continuing vital social reality has been its capacity to adapt to the land and the culture of its people, even while transforming both (Eaton 1997, p.315).

Like Richard Eaton, Stephen F Dale's article '*Conversion to Islam in Kerela*' also focuses on the propagation of Islam largely through peaceful means. His argument is that Islam spread in Kerela not only through trade and intermarriages with Muslim merchants [where Duarte Barbosa writing during the first two decades of the Sixteenth Century, in speaking of the Mappilas but describing a phenomenon which must have originally involved Arab sailors and merchants], says that Mappila men had many wives and low caste concubines and that children of the born alliances became Muslims as often did the low

concubines (Dale 1991, p.41)] but also because of other factors such as its religious and social doctrines and the opportunities it presented to discontented lower caste Hindus from an extremely rigid and hierarchical social structure.

While the above mentioned scholars talked about conversions to Islam citing a particular region or community, S.A.A Rizvi in his paper *'Islamic Proselytization: Seventh to Sixteenth Centuries'* gives a general overview of conversion to Islam in pre-modern period. One of his main themes is the way in which Muslim rulers converted local elites in the hope of securing their political allegiance. He does not deny that some Hindus and Buddhists were influenced by the life and example of rishis and others by the setting up of khanqahs (hospices). However, he also argues that the influence of the Sufis in particular has been exaggerated and places less stress on the part played by preaching and peaceful penetration in the spread of Islam.

By way of a conclusion, various issues raised by different authors regarding conversions to Christianity and Islam have been presented and in highlighting these issues, one can infer that in the study of conversions, the need is to move away from question like force or non-force. Just as force is not the dominant mode of conversion, an exclusive emphasis on question of force or non-force gives an incomplete picture of the conversions. The issues which need to be looked into in the study of conversions are issues involving the process of conversion, how a convert community come to adopt the new religion, the framework of adoption and how they internalise the new faith. One has to also see the parallels between the old and the new religion. As shown, conversions never constituted a complete break with the past from the convert's cultural and religious moorings. The past was never completely dissociated. Rituals etc. continued while change rather comes about gradually and selectively. Conversion is more of a long term assimilation and acceptance and dissociative

power of the new religion would be differentially visible among social groups.

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