# RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN INDIA AND ITS DIFFERENT MODES

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## ABSTRACT

*Conversion is a western idea and the word comes from Latin term. The concept of religious conversion is very much fluid in character and it is a process of changing affiliation of religious beliefs and traditions with a range of possibilities. In simple language, it can be defined as a process where an individual or a group adopts new religious faith by discarding the practice and values as well as the overall worldview of the earlier one. But such definition often abandons those changes that have taken place as the process of assimilation of older and newer ones and resulted into a synthesized form. However, religious conversion among different social groups in India occurred on different circumstances and it involves social, economic, spiritual as well as political dimension. The phenomena of "Religious Conversion" generate more questions on the part of converts' socio-economic and political life at individual as well as at communal level. So, a unilateral definition of the process of religious conversion could restrict the social researchers into a closed cell since it largely depends on the context or manifold circumstances revolved through time and space. The main objective of this paper is to analyze different modes of religious conversion among the people in India across different time and space.*

**Keywords:** Conversion, Proselytization, Sanskritization Hinduization, Tribe

# I.    INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is a complex topic that elicits controversy, confusion, fascination, skepticism and enthusiasm. The idea and phenomena associated with conversion have attracted many scholars from different disciplines and it was since the end of the nineteenth century, they have proposed theories and methods to describe, understand and interpret the nature of conversion processes. This particular area has gained impetus in the field of academics mainly by the efforts of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists. Although social scientists provide many models and theories of religious conversion from time to time, feasibility of applying such model in all the circumstances could raise eyebrow among the critics. Such theories often bounded to be applied on particular situations within time and space. The phenomena of "Religious Conversion" generate more questions on the part of converts' socio-economic and political life at individual as well as at communal level. In the context of India, the issues pertaining to 'religious conversion' often been dubbed as a controversial one, since it has been more or less politicized by political parties for fulfilling their mere interests for gaining political power .Thus, it often creates tension in the society which sometimes could hamper the social fabric at high cost. If we look back at the history of religious conversion in India, it can be noticed that religious conversion has occurred under different circumstances over time and space. It is also discernable that the process of conversion to another religious faith often attracts those people who feel themselves as incomplete in their previous worldview or life. So, it can be seen that most often those section of people who are socially depressed, politically ignorant and economically weaker in the society resorted to such drive for their self-gratification and amelioration.

# II.    OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper are-

a)   To look at the different modes associated with the process of religious conversion in India within its historical account.

b)   To analyze the orientation of tribes in India towards the process of religious conversion.

## III. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach has been used to understand the various dynamics of the social phenomena on this study. Data are mainly collected by using secondary sources of information from scholarly articles, books, newspaper cutting, reports etc.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The process of religious conversion was not a new phenomenon in India. The history of India was a colonial construct, written on the basis of three religious faiths in chronological order. The ancient represent rulers of Hindu, medieval era called as the Muslim rule and the modern era ruled by the British people which stand for the Christianity. But nationalist writers radicalized such notions of historiography on the basis of evidences where the rise of such religious faith crisscross within those categorized eras of these three religions in India (Thapar, 2012). Due to relative advent of these religions at different phases of time and their intermingling with the existing culture of the Indian subcontinent presents an explicit picture of demographic change among the people on the basis of religion. As a result of such social contact with other worldly cultural entities, some totally changed their earlier accepted ways of life by ejecting older religious beliefs for manifold reasons and absorbed into a novel worldview, while some intermixed some cultural traits of the emerging religion to find out a synthesized form of religion. Whenever the term conversion has been discussed in Indian context, it is often defined in terms of Islam and Christianity. However, it is also very important to understand the term 'conversion' beyond generally accepted notion where the contours of religious conversion are not restricted only in terms of proselytizing religions like Christianity and Islam (Pati, 2003).

## V. HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN INDIA

It is pertinent to understand the Indian tradition and its evolution to develop an idea of change in religious faith among the people in India. Indian tradition has been changed through two ways–one is through progressive change within the Hindu system of cultural and religious beliefs through cultural renaissance and other is the changes through the contact of other worldly religion. Orthogenetic changes in Hindu cultural structure constantly took place from the Vedic times through two process – one is through accretion and reformulations within the Vedic traditions and another one is the through differentiation and establishment of

new tradition. Various reform movements within the Hindu cultural and philosophical systems can be categorized within the former one and the emergence of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as a result of independent differentiation can be placed as a later process of orthogenetic changes (Singh, 2007). Orthogenetic changes of traditions in Indian subcontinent provides many examples where mainstream Hindu religious practices infused into traditions of the small communities which were out of Hindu social order that eventually leads to absorption of these communities into the Hindu faith after a few generation has passed (Bose,1941). These processes have shifted the rigid character of Hindu order into a more flexible and approachable one for those who were not located within Hindu tradition earlier. M.N. Srinivas has conceptualized the term "*Sanskritization*" for denoting the process where lower caste Hindu and tribes and untouchables imitates the customs, rituals and norms of the Hindu dominant castes to enter into the fold of Hinduism for their social mobility. However, as result of fission in the Hindu tradition, new independent religions breakaway like Buddhism and Jainism emerged. During sixth century B.C., many Hindus adopted Buddhism and Jainism as their accepted faith which had its deep root in Hindu tradition. These two religions overemphasized some of the values that are inherent in Hinduism as well, like the theory of predestination, transmigration of soul and rebirth. But these two religious traditions undermine the principle of hierarchy on the basis of Caste and Varna, which attracts many communities to embrace these two religion for their escape from the jolts of being remain undermine. It can be seen in the later Vedic era that many kings adopted Buddhism as their state religion by ejecting their earlier religious faith i.e. Hinduism due to its apparent complexity and orthodoxy in terms of observing various rituals. Thus, royal acceptance of Buddhism and Jainism provides the source to the religious seekers to adopt the ideas and values associated with these two religious faiths specially to escape from the shackles of orthodoxy and complicated worldview of Hinduism, which was marked by strict differentiation among the social groups on the basis of prescribed social interaction. To counter the wake of breakaway traditions like Buddhism and Jainism in post Gupta period, many Hindu religious reform movements broke out especially in Southern part of India to keep the basic ideas of Vedas intact among the Indian people by maintaining the network of communication. Some of the influential figures who propagated the orthogenetic changes in tradition through reformulations and reinterpretation of the basic tenets of cultural and ritual structure of Hinduism and make it approachable to the life of the people were- Shankaracharya, Ramanuja and Madhava. Another significant development that had taken

place under the auspices of Ramanuja and Madhava for emancipation of Shudra or lower castes was the temple entry movement and the removal of their many disabilities (Singh, 2007).However, mass conversion of lower and untouchable castes to Buddhism in the 20th century India reveals that it still continues to be a dynamic cultural movement in India. In this context, Gary Tartakov argues that conversion to Buddhism of Dalit community or untouchable under Ambedkar was more socio-political in nature rather than the prototype of ancient Buddhist conversion where metaphysical and theological aspects had given primacy (Robinson et al, 2003). Again in the case Jainism, it can be observed that the mercantile class of people adopted Jainism because of their belief in extreme non-violence character where even killing of insects is considered as sin for them (Singh,2007).

The contact of India with Islam started from the beginning of eighth century as a result of Arab conquest of the Sind. Inscriptional evidences in Kerala, however, indicated the presence of Muslim by 9th century. But significantly from 13th century onwards, the conquest of Islamic rulers had made a profound impact on the socio-economic and political aspects of Indian people. Conversion to Islam in India by the use of force is considered by many social scientists as an exceptional case rather than a rule or a widespread assumption. Likewise, the presence of little and great tradition of Hinduism; as concept put forward by Mackim and Marriot, similar type of categorization also prevails in the context of Islamic tradition in India. However, one of the significant aspects of the little tradition in Islam is that it consists mainly of the converts from Hinduism. While high caste Hindus converted to Islam for the obtaining political benefits, lower Hindu caste accept Islam as their religion for being escaped from the degraded status they had in Hindu social order.   However, there was a process that ran parallel to "Sanskritization" called "Islamization" which denotes the revivalist movement in the little tradition of Islam resulting from risk of being exterminated by the Hindus and developed political consciousness during British and post-British era. In the process of Islamization, efforts were made by the groups of people belonging to the lower strata of Islamic tradition to inherit the ritual symbols, life style, name, custom and manners of High caste Muslims i.e. Ashraf's for status enhancement (Singh,2007).   The theories regarding conversion of the Hindus into Islam varied from time and space on various circumstances in all the sphere of life. Richard Eaton refuted all the three different theories regarding conversion to Islam i.e.  "Religion of the Sword", "Political Patronage" and "Religion of political Liberation" in Indian context and moved forward to a new theory called "Accretion

and Reform". The accretion aspect of conversion provides the ground for the people to add new deities to their existing cosmological stock or identifying new deities to their existing entity of the cosmology. But the reform dimension of conversion process advocates the rejection of all Islamic supernatural agencies and opt for all-encompassing power of a single Islamic agency i.e. *Allah*. Such absorption of all lesser beings into one single universal supreme God is conceptualized by Max Weber as the process of religious rationalization (Eaton, 1984). According to Richard Eaton, Sunnis who represented the mainstream Islamic tradition in India were not in favor of the conversion policy; on the contrary, Mughal officers in Bengal restricted the promotion of conversion of Bengalis into Islam. But spread of Islam in eastern delta took place as a result of State Expansion Policy where the regime was interested in promoting the emergence of local communities as economically viable and politically loyal to the Mughal state. However, another source of conversion was minority sectarian traditions or Sufi saints. In this context, Dominique Sila Khan wrote about the Nizari Ismaili model of conversion which is also known as Sat Panth that focused on the strategy of slow enculturation into a new faith without restricting its neophytes from practicing earlier socio-cultural rituals and customs. However, Stephen F Dale provided a contradictory argument regarding the conversion to Islam in the context of Kerala. He argued that in the coastal part of Kerala, indigenous people were converted to Islam neither through pressure nor the activity of the Sufis. He advocated the presence of trade association and intermarriages as one of the reason for the spread of Islam to the Hindu hinterlands (Robinson et al, 2003). Aziz Ahmed also wrote that proselytization in the Indian coasts by the Muslim traders and settlers were not regarded as a serious challenge by the Hindu rajas because they did not impose any restrictions on conversion to Islam. Due to such developments in the coastal part of India, a syncretic culture among Hindu and Muslim had developed over time. However, such is not the case in other parts of India. Religious bigotry was very common aspect in India in later part of the medieval history in India. Though efforts were made by the saints like Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak etc. for establishment of a syncretic order by criticizing the orthodoxy of both Islam and Hinduism, but such objectives were not being fulfilled as they want (Singh, 2007).

The relationship between Hindu and Muslim had reached to the point of extreme hatred and anger towards with each other from 1920 onwards. Both blocs tried to exaggerate their respective numbers through two movements i.e. *Shuddhi* movement of *Arya Samaj* and

*Tabligh* movement of Muslim missionaries to counter the former one. *Arya Samajis* launched missionary drives to bring back those converted people who had some traits with Hindu culture. Though in common dictate conversion is not possible in Hinduism, scholars signify such reconversion drive as conversion on the ground that those who were brought back to Hinduism from religions like Islam and Christianity were themselves out of Hindu hierarchical order (Pati, 2003). However, Muslim organizations and leaders made strong effort to quash such drives of the Arya Samaj and launched their missionary drive with the objective to convert Hindus to Islam, particularly those lower caste Hindus who were outside of Hindu order and to protect those neo-Muslim from the depredation of *Arya Samajis* (Robinson et al, 2003). *Tabligh* movement operated with the sole objective of ridding of the syncretic cultural elements drawn from Hinduism in the little tradition of Islam in India. Islamization, in this context, altered its motive in search for a new identity based on orthodox Islamic principles. However, such tendency among the Muslims fueled after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 (Singh, 2007).

The history of conversion to Christianity in India witness two major areas i.e. Goa and Kerala in pre-British era. The Syrian Christians of Kerala regarded themselves as the descendants of Nambudiri Brahmin converts of St Thomas who believed to have arrived on the coast in 52 AD. Privileges of the high caste were maintained through negotiation with the local rulers even after the process of conversion takes place. Rowena Robinson wrote about the history of sixteenth century conversion in Goa with its manifold modes and strategies. In 1510, Goa was captured by the Portuguese from the hands of Muslim rulers. In order to rule the foreign land with the help and support of the local communities and incorporating them into the political body, they utilize the tactics of conversion to Catholicism for the creation of a body of loyal supporters. According to Rowena Robinson, Portuguese used two methods of conversion- one is care of the orphan child by handling them to a Christian family and other is the use of a system of privileges like providing jobs to attract adherents to its faith. However, another strategy that boosts the process of conversion to Catholicism in Goa was the banning of non-Christian practices among the converts as well as among the Hindus. Instead, Christian missionaries encouraged the celebration of various saints by eating pork and beef among the high and low caste Hindu local communities. For mass conversion to Christianity, priests persuaded the leaders and elders of the village to convert followed by other caste groups. The lower caste people converted to Catholicism to acquire ample sources

of occupations like wine-selling, baking etc. that arose with the entry of the Portuguese. Although they discarded purity-pollution ideology, they remained stagnant in terms of social mobility. Sathianathan Clarke stated religious conversion as a conscious mass movement of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu during twentieth century by ejecting the conventional Hindu world order. Due to religious orthodoxy of the Brahminical ideals in Hinduism, Dalit community had to bear social marginalization, economic slavery along with religious exclusion. Protestant missionaries provided a counter-worldview to Hinduism for the Dalits along with social and economic capital which were denied in their earlier social order. Clarke also argued that though Dalits enter into a new world of missionary promised equality, freedom and dignity; they still faced the horror of caste discrimination within the Christian community. Despite being aware of such discrimination, dalits continued to convert to Christianity because they were influenced by the deeds and words professed and promoted by the missionaries which have some utopian consequences on them with the hope an anticipatory future. John C.B. Webster's study on conversion of the *Chuhra,* a Dalit community converted to Christianity in Punjab between 1873 and 1914 portrayed a different outlook of conversion process where the *Chuhra's* themselves initiated the process through the agent of their own community rather than the missionaries despite facing resistance and discrimination or inhuman treatment from the dominant castes of their earlier social order. Punjabi Dalit Christian considered their movement as a liberation movement of the oppressed (Robinson et al, 2003).

## VI.   TRIBES AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

According to Betellie, the term 'Tribe' is a colonial construct which refers to the people different from those of the mainstream civilization. Conversion of tribes into different religions often takes place due to their changing discourse in terms of religion. They were enumerated as 'Animists', 'Aboriginal', 'tribal religion' etc. by colonial tradition prior to the census of 1941. However, with the inception of religious electorate politics in 1909, many Hindu organizations mobilized the tribes to be enumerated as 'Hindu' rather than 'Animists', 'Tribal religion' etc. for meeting the ends of their vote-bank politics. After India got independence, with the eradication of categories like Animism, tribal religion etc. from census, tribes were left with no other option than to be enumerated as 'Hindu' if they do not belong to other religions. Thus it is clear from the fact that state administration played a

crucial role for integrating tribes into the Hindu social order (Xaxa, 1999). While G.S. Ghurye recognized tribes as the 'Backward Hindus'. He also asserted that there is so much similarity between Hindu religion and Tribal religion. Again, it can be said that tribes are absorbed in Hinduism under the patronage of the state which is proved from the declaration of the Niyogi Committee. This committee, which was constituted to look into the activities of conversion to Christianity of the tribes in Madhya Pradesh, reiterates the points made by G. S. Ghurye. As a result of that, in 1954, Madhya Pradesh Government recommended legal restriction on religious conversion. Since then the right wing nationalists and political activists injected such popular belief in their mind that tribes are Hindu (Xaxa, 2005). Sangha Parivar prefers to address Adivasi or tribes as *Vanavasi* because the only difference between Hindu Caste and tribe is their dwelling, while later lives in forests. From then onwards, Sangha Parivar and right wing political organizations had been involved in welfare activities of the tribes for maintaining as base for their vote bank politics (Shah, 1999). Tribal conversion to Christianity often dubbed as force conversion by right wing nationalists and thinkers where missionaries used the various strategies for manipulating those people by the sources of money, education and health care facilities. The chief of RSS, Mohan Bhagwat accused Christian missionaries in India of converting Adivasis to Christianity on 3rd January, 2017 (Bara, 2017). It can be seen from the past that tribes are often targeted by the missionaries of other worldly religions like Islam and Christianity for their conversion due to their non-inclusive identity within the Hindu social order. Due to their distinctive cultural traits, language, geographical territory, tribes are often regarded as distinct entity from the mainstream Hindu culture. However, some features of the Hindu great traditions infused into in the lives of the tribe as a result of cultural contact with the Hindu castes. According to N.K. Bose, the rigid character of Hindu order or the caste system is not as immutable as it appears to be. The Hindu order provides the flexibility where once a tribe who came under the influence of Brahminical culture could become a new *Jati* or caste by assigning particular occupation within a particular region. The entire process has been called by N.K. Bose as '*Hindu method of tribal absorption*'. On the similar lines, M.N. Srinivas conceptualized the process where tribes imitate the values, culture, norms and rituals of the upper caste for their social mobility in the Hindu caste hierarchical ladder. (Munshi, 1979). Since tribes are technically outside of Hindu order, it would be appropriate to use the term 'Hinduisation' in lieu of 'Sanskritization' because climbing up the social ladder is not the overriding concern of the tribes. Even after such process occurred, they could hardly mobilize their social position.

Since, tribes are not Hindu at the first place such processes are identical with the term conversion at some point. However, it is also important address the question whether tribes after adopting Hindu ways of life considered themselves as tribe or caste (Xaxa, 1999). David Hardiman extends the meaning of religious conversion beyond its normal association with proselytizing religions like Islam and Christianity by conceptualizing it as change of systems and practices within Indian context to attract followers in different circumstances. He argued in the context of Bhil tribe, conversion has not taken place by directly imitating the values and behavior of any particular high caste rather it was viewed as a process where many values and cultures of various dominant groups were adopted in a synthesis form. Again, Saurabh Dube and Ishita Banerjee Dube, in their essay explored the histories and ethnographies of two religious movements i.e. Mahima Dharma of Orissa and Satnampath of Chhattisgarh to traced out the rules of initiation and strategies which incorporated the tribals into a new sectarian movement within the line of Hindu World vision. They analyzed how conversion movement takes place among the lower caste people or tribes by utilizing sectarian ideology to deconstruct the barriers of ritual rigidity of the Hinduized order where hierarchical structure of caste gave utmost importance. They observed that by invoking egalitarian endeavors in a new form of sect, those who resides within the lower strata of the caste order can develop a new religious identity where no place would be given to caste division on the basis of hierarchal pattern. In their essay, the process of conversion was represented as a novel way of practicing rituals, worshiping and reconstructing social identity, mythical meaning, visions and boundaries on the basis of acceptance and rejection of the caste and sect norms in different circumstances (Robinson, 2003).

It can be observed that missionary religions like Christianity, Islam (Sufism) assimilated their respective elements along with the local culture (Zhimo, 2015, Singh, 2007 et al). This particular drive attracted the tribes into Christianity and Islam. Such transformation of tribes often not occurred as a whole for the entire community. Only some sections of the tribe move into a new way of life like Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. In such situations, conflicts within the tribe have been appearing as a matter of concern. Religious institutions and organizations creating an antagonistic situation among the Tribal section of the people, pertaining from different religious affiliation over petty issues like land, jobs, and state provided facilities, social identity, language etc. for establishing a gap among these two for retaining its hegemony of the elite caste over the society (Pati, 2003). In such tug of war between Hinduism and other so-called proselytizing religions like –Islam,

Christianity for converting tribes into one's side, religious and political organizations played crucial roles. In Jharkhand, calculative interventions were made by RSS and VHP to inculcate the spirits of Hindutva among the tribals in the name of "Jagganath cult" and by establishing Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (Wankhede, 2009). In similar way, Ghanshyam Shah analyzed the polarization among the Adivasi as a result of rising number of religious conversion to Christianity which eventually leads to depredation of those converted into the hands of dominated ones. He also looked into the dynamics of spreading pre electoral agenda of right wing parties where it was proclaimed by them to delimit the entitlements of those converted Christian tribes. It was one of the political strategies of the BJP for reconverting the Adivasi people in Gujarat (Shah, 1999). Such type of argument goes against democratic ethos of the Indian constitution. Again, state government sometimes acts as mere spectator whenever violence broke out on the issue of religious conversion within the society. References could be made to the states like Orissa and Gujarat in this context. The politicization of conversion entails complex inter-play within society, people and God. Thus, it can be observed that the phenomena of conversion have integral connection with the socio-political as well as the economic dynamics of society.

In case of North-East India, conversion drive has been taken out by the waves of many religious sects and missionaries on different phases of time. North-East is one of the strategically located region where numerous ethnic communities that have migrated as a stock in different phases of time from its neighboring countries. Majority among these communities belongs to the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid racial groupings. Until the late medieval period, people of the different communities practiced their own branch of primal religion. Brahminical Hinduism entered into this region many centuries ago from Northern part of India. Muslim community entered the region during the rule of Mughals, while Buddhism entered into the parts of Arunachal Pradesh from Tibet. Though Christianity was introduced in this region during Mughal rule, their number started to increase at a significant rate by the middle of twentieth century. By the end of the twentieth century, Christian communities developed in Meghalaya and Upper Assam mainly among the tea laborers belong from Chotanagpur. British Raj and missionaries functioned hand to hand for benefiting each other in the context of North East India. Thus their presence in the region leads to the conversion of the tribes mostly into Christianity. During the earlier period, only Meghalaya experienced some sort conversion movement which was much higher in comparison to other states like Assam, Nagaland etc. Down argued that massive conversion

movement took place at times of crisis or disaster like earthquake which had happened among the Khasis. Down characterized the conversion among numerous tribes of the region as a collective effort for seeking a new world view which is crystallized under British administration. According to Down, religious conversion to Christianity exemplifies a phenomenal growth as a result of cultural synthesis in the second half of twentieth century. However, it also galvanized political and cultural synthesis of the tribal world to resist the unified Indian nation-state which is an epitome of Hinduism (Robinson, 2003). However, proselytizing strategy of the Christian missionaries in Nagaland in the context three groups-Ao, Sema and Angami- rely on the translation strategy of the bible into the vernacular language of the Naga and by appropriating their lesser deities of immediate lives into a single entity as Jesus for the expansion of their worldview from microcosm to macrocosm (Eaton, 1984). Arkotong Longkumer, in the doctoral thesis focused his study on the reform movement of the Zeme Nagas to restore their traditional religious identity by adopting one God, simplifying the mode of religious worship and abandoning animal sacrifice for resisting the religious conversion of their group members into Christianity. In this paper, he also stressed his concern on the issue of fluid form of boundary that often created among the religious adherents and their changing affiliation towards religion over the issue of retaining traditional customs (Longkumer, 2008). Thus, it can be seen that a counter culture to conversion is inherent within every society as an entity of resistance.  However, new converts played a very crucial role who would, in later stage become pastors, evangelists were indulge in proselytization activity among the poor by making promises of attaining prosperity and wealth by embracing Christianity. Besides providing humanitarian aids and materials benefit as a tool to convert simple people, evangelists took the advantage of large-scale superstition by imposing fear among them by telling the story of hell-fire after death where only those people can survive from the jolt of hell-fire who are the followers of Christianity (Zhimo,2015). During ancient times, Assam was recognized as a region inhabited by various stock of Mongoloid groups. In terms of religious practice, such groups of people used to practice their own animistic religion prior to the contact of Aryans.  Migration of the Aryans in Assam led to transformation of socio-political as well as religious change through the process of *Sanskritization* among the natives. Society gradually transformed into a settle agricultural system where socio-economic position of the people has been determined by the ideals of Hindu social order. The process of *Hinduisation* of the ruling dynasties in Assam encouraged large scale migration of the Aryan race people. however, it is also important to be

pointing out that Brahimin literati provided the space for incorporation of many deities, customs and rituals into the fold of Hinduism for legitimizing the process of 'Sanskritization' as well as 'Tribalisation' for the formation of a larger social identity. Such social organization led to the emergence of a feudal order where the upper caste Hindu fortified its hegemonic influence over the tribal population, who has lost their autonomy over the process of production due to the formation of orthodox Hinduized state. When Neo-Vaishnavism, as a result of the spread of *Bhakti Movement* appeared in Assam like other reform movements in many Indian parts, people of Assam embraced it with great sigh. Due to its all approachable and counter-culture character of Brahminical Hinduism, a large number of tribal enter into the fold of Neo-Vaishnavism through the simple procedure of religious shelter or *Saran* under a *Guru*. Such tribal neophytes are called *Saranias* who are known as a separate community in Assam. However, it also provides the flexibility to the tribes for their vertical mobility within a few generations by renunciation of some of their earlier customs and adoption of certain Hindu customs. Towards the end of 17th century, with the emergence of *Saghatis*, some brahminical ideals entered into the fold of neo-Vaishnavism . Suddenly, *Satras* with its power legitimized from the ruling class acted like powerful feudal institution with its organizational structure. The religion which emerged on the ideas of egalitarianism, itself becomes an instrument of perpetuating social inequalities. These lead to the resentment among the tribal neophytes in Neo-Vaishnavism because many a time tribes were restricted to do certain things on the basis of purity and pollution issue. It has been said that the role of *Satra* is limited to the collection of money from its tribal neophytes rather than involving in ameliorating the conditions of the tribal people (Nath, 2011). Such negligence of the upper caste Assamese Vaishnavite led to conversion of many Mishing tribe people into Christianity in Majuli. Although Christian Missionaries began their evangelical activities among the tribal groups of Brahmaputra valley from 19th century onwards and they taste success only in post-independence period. The spread of Christianity in Majuli gained momentum between 1996-2000 A.D. Missionaries worked more on the socio-economic upliftment of the tribes and travel even to the remotest tribal villages where Satras cannot even reach. Christian missionaries are also involved in welfare activities of the Mishing people in times of environmental havoc like Flood, soil erosion etc. Though some Mishing convert accounts that they feel peace of mind in Christianity rather than in Neo-Vaishnavism where they were being humiliated. Some other put forward counter-thesis that missionaries took inappropriate measures to convert Mishing into Christianity (Pegu, 2013). Such type of situation can also

be witnessed among the others tribes of Assam like Boro, Rabha, Tiwa, Deori, Karbi, Rengma Naga etc. The Christian missionaries, during British period, provided education and medical facilities and therefore the tribal people were attracted by them. Many a time, missionaries had chosen village headman of the tribal groups to convert the whole community into Christianity. However, many a times such conversion of one group within the community developed a conflicting situation within the community.

# VII.  CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be said that the process of religious conversion has manifold dimension, so, it cannot be sketched out in a single line. The history of India provides many such instances which are dissimilar in terms of its different modes and internal-external consequences. If we look at Hinduism as a way of life, then it can be found that many indigenous groups have adopted the Hindu ways of life so as to become a part of such glorious civilization by initiating different types of method and mode. Indian scholars often termed such drive of conversion process as *Hinduization*. However, pure and impure aspects of the caste system within Hinduism have upset many of its lower rung adherents and when these groups were in search of a new faith for their amelioration and introduced with a new one at that time period often led to the religious conversion of those groups. Such uniform pattern of conversion from Hinduism to Islam, Christianity, Jainism and Buddhism can be ascertained on different phases of time in different geographical location within Indian subcontinent. However, apart from that, in some instances, economic and political dimension also justifies the process of religious conversion mostly among the tribes in India. To counter such conversion process in India, many organizations came up with different strategies like *Shuddhi, Tabligh* etc. and set up movements like *Ghar Vapasi movement* for retaining its strength on numbers and believers for fulfilling their political aspiration. However, such conversion and checking of conversion drive led to boiling up conflict-ridden situation among the members of society. Some state governments also implemented Anti-Conversion law to check the conversion process from time to time, which itself contradict the secular ethos of Indian democracy if we look at this act from one perspective .Violence often took place in the name of religion for retaining the numbers of antagonistic religious groups among the members of the same community in different geographical areas, mostly among tribes.  Tribes in India often located in an ambiguous situation while they were asked about

their religion. Though, it was said that most of the tribe in India practice Animistic religion, but due to non-existence of their written historical records, they were often became the victims of misapprehension of their earlier religious faith and undergo the process of conversion . Due to intermingling with the various religious communities, their earlier religious practices have gone extinct and immersed gradually into another religious faith through the process of conversion. However, the process of reconversion also takes place among the people on spiritual, political, economic and social grounds. Thus, religious conversion stands as one of the very delicate issue which often raises more complicated questions rather than any generalize proposition.

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