

## *Review*

# **Dynamics of religious conversion in Himachal Pradesh (HP) paradox of manufactured uncertainties**

**Prem R. Bhardwaj**

Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, Paonta Sahib, HPU, India.  
E-mail:prbnahan@hotmail.com

Accepted 31 May, 2011

The meaning of the term conversion cannot be derived in static framework rather is based mainly on the contextualisation of social realities determined in terms of religious beliefs or affiliations. The complexities in defining the process are in fact inflicted by the various 'Methodist missionaries' who kept on experimenting with the popular belief system in one way or the other. The fundamental meaning of conversion originates from religious change or change in faith. Besides providing the succinct theoretical explanation of the process, this paper deals with the dynamics of religious conversion in state of Himachal Pradesh. The roles of various forces that are operating in political and social arena and are pivotal in determining the course of religious composition of the society in the region are put under evaluation. The paper argues that it is not simply the humane instinct to reach at the higher horizons of spirituality responsible for conversion of people from one belief system to other rather it has been accused that the well designed missionary activities pointedly organised against the other religions make religious conversion a strategic derive. It appears that unless the free upward mobility of the lower castes groups is permitted the society cannot be modernised and democratised and it would be difficult to manage conversion conflicts in the society in times to come.

**Key words:** Conversion, religious conversion, reconversion, manufactured uncertainties, religious orientation, religious hierarchies, religious authoritarianism, deities, Shuddhi system, Ghar Wapsi.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The humanity at this stage of the modernisation feels pride in enlisting the achievements in the field of knowledge, science and technology, development, democracy and what not, but the complexities of the social relationships have multiplied tremendously not because of inadequacy of knowledge and resources but surely because of growing disrespect, distrust and intolerance towards the fellow beings. In most of the cases these complexities are artificially created or 'manufactured uncertainties' and are the result of interference of one set of thoughts or beliefs over the other. If the religions are identified with the civilisations then very surely 'end of history' or 'clash of civilisations', appears age old theses simply because the people at any stage of human development tried to master their fellow beings on the basis of superiority of their faith. The basic contradiction of modern civilisation is deeply embedded in the politics of religions being played by the different communities among themselves leading to origin of assertion, persuasions, and conversions of the people of

the other religion or sect into their own. In fact, even at this stage the proponents of religions are deeply involved in the foul play of number game paving the way for forceful conversion or retention of the people in the particular religious belief.

Although, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the evidential details of the religious conversions at the different stages of human history in different societies yet, it can clearly be emphasised that this process is necessarily having the political component as one of the important motivational factors. Historically, it can be established that religious conversions were the result of the organised crusade of a particular religious nationality, defined in terms of religion, against the other, mainly by establishing the political dominance. At the contemporary stage the whole debate of religious conversion is polarised in the binary of granting freedom to individuals living within particular communal settings to adopt an alternative religious path to achieve the goals of spiritual being on the one hand, and vicious designing of

the course of religious conversion through political and socio-religious instrumentations obviously by seizing the political authority, on the other. The element of political power remained more or less in centre stage in the process of religious conversion. The use or abuse of state authority in establishing the dominance of one religious community over the other is the historical fact. So, over a period of time state acquired intricate relationships with the political power of the time. Clearly, the processes of religious conversions of the people in any form try to de-link the historical continuity of a particular religious culture and create grounds for claims and counter-claims over the exploits of the conversions. That is why the issues of religious conversion and political loyalties had always remained in the centre stage of social realities.

Besides analysing the democratic spirit in the ongoing process of conversions or re-conversions i.e., secular perceptions behind these conversions, the thrust area of this paper is to investigate the causes for recent religious conversions in Himachal Pradesh (HP), putting a question mark over the claims for modernised and egalitarian social order. For sake of clarity HP is one of hilly states situated in North-West part of India which is known for social peace and harmony probably because of its religious homogeneity and sustainable degree of isolation of the people from the influences of socio-economic turmoil of North and Central India. Despite religious homogeneity a sizeable part of population living in far flung areas is still somehow on the margin of mainstream religion i.e., Hinduism. Thus, certain local phenomena play crucial role in religious orientation of the people of the state. Keeping this background in mind this paper has been divided into two parts – the first part is about the conceptualisation and theoretical understanding of religion and religious conversion in general. The arguments derived on the basis of data collected under a research study on Religious Conversion in District Shimla of Himachal Pradesh which is still in process, constitutes the second part of the paper.

So far as the methodology of the research is concerned the paper is based primarily on the field survey technique. The first part of paper is developed on the bases of theoretical commentaries given by different scholars and secondary interpretation of various trends that have been influencing the religious orientation of the common masses especially those who have been finding themselves in the outer folds of the religion. The generalisations derived in the second part of the paper are based on empirical techniques i.e., data collected through well structured questionnaire-cum-schedule from the sampled respondents. Since, the issue of religious conversion is too sensitive, it is always challenging to approach the converted people simply because they feel highly insecure and threatened from both – within the communities and out-side the communities.

So observatory tools of research were aptly applied during the process of data collection. The core questions that are addressed in the first part of the paper pertain to the conceptualisation of conversion in any form, mainly the religious. What is conversion? How the fading away of religious beliefs from one religious setup and rebuilding of faith and loyalties towards the alternate religion can be understood within the framework of person's humane consciousness? Is conversion simply another word for changing one's pursuit for search of emancipation through alternative ways? Is conversion a Christian phenomenon or is it also found within other religious traditions? Is conversion a psychological trick to dupe the religiously less literate people of their money, possession or even autonomy? What are the responses of various social groups and state institutions to counter the challenges posed by the process of conversion? Can we see conversion as group / caste experience or as a matter of individual choices? These are some questions, of course besides many other which are associated with the process of conversion in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century and have been posing serious challenges before the intellectuals and scholars of the religion.

### **Religious experiences and growing social complexities**

The area of religious experience is in fact the most important factor responsible for unceasing investigations and never ending reflections that are essential for understanding of complexities of human relationships in the societies. Diversity in religious practices gives rise to plurality of philosophical issues associated with the religious code of conduct. The religious complexities with which the human civilisations have been confronting are result of – cultural contacts of different groups of people; the propensity of philosophical thoughts about religions; and growing awareness among people about religious issues particularly with reference to similarities and differences in religious traditions which raise issues for philosopher to ponder upon and positioning of individuals within the religious settings within which they have been searching the answers of core questions of life.

The philosophical interpretations of religion display both continuities and discontinuities in religious practices within theistic formulations that are dynamic in nature. The philosophy of religion has remained subject to unpredictable changes and will remain so forever, Muller (1956, 23) has rightly stated that 'the real history of man is the history of religion: the wonderful ways by which the different families of human race advanced towards a truer knowledge and a deeper love of god'. The new directions in the course of growth of religious philosophy can clearly be witnessed in the form of feminist theology, religious pluralism and comparative philosophy of religion that offer strong prospects for new philosophical insights into religion. The religious experiences are manifested in the

imagination of person and are acquired through rigorous testing and trial while getting acquainted with the various facets of realities. Precisely, religious experiences mean – the act of living through events guided and motivated by the religious code of conduct, anything observed or lived through religious mode of life, everything undergone by a person in the form of group activity such as prayer or worship while being the part of particular religious group, effect on a person of anything or everything that has happened to him while observing the particular religious code and activities done in the form of training, observation of practice and personal participation in the individual or community based rituals. In fact, it is only through experiences that the realities of the world are disclosed to the people.

*..... from experiences we know; through experiences we learn; by experiences we find out whether we have been right or wrong; with the help of experimental arrangements we prove a case; to experience we return if we intend to begin new (Dupre: 2005, 19).*

### Religious experiences and hierarchies within religion

So, clearly the religious experiences are determined by the cultural nuances and are unconditionally part of human existence within particular belief system. In fact, the journey of religious experiences which an individual undertakes, inculcates the sense of distinction between self and other, between manufactured uncertainties and concrete realities and make people aware about the dichotomy of distinction and many-fold unity that is manifested in the religious code of conduct. It is on the basis of this experimental understanding about the religion that one arrives at the judgement if he constitutes an equal component within the religion or is dejected as consequence of structured religious discrimination. The individual judgements are clearly determined by the humanistic perceptions of facts or social realities that persist in religions consistently for long time. The human existence in a particular religious set up is primarily determined by the experiences of cognitive relationships of self with the other. So, as stated by Kant 'all our understanding begins with experience cannot be doubted..... In terms of time no understanding in us precedes experience' (cited by Dupre: 22). The religion is about knowing the truth, rather eternal truth, which can only be interpreted from concrete human situations (i.e., existence) rather than from 'pretentious speculations' (i.e., essence). The individual positioning within the religious set up is determined by the concrete realities and as pointed by Kierkegaard 'we encounter truth not by observing or speculating about what is abstract as passive speculations but through first hand engagement and participation as active human subjects or agents' (cited by Thiselton: 2006, 92). There is a wide range of

variation in the domain of religious experiences on the basis of which great theological texts have been expounded. For instance, visions of Lord Krishna, Buddha, the Virgin Mary, the Prophet Mohammed and their interpretation of concrete realities of human existence come mainly from experience based orientation. It has been rightly argued by Kessler (1999, 151) that 'some theological scholars and philosophers, however, have tried to use religious experience as evidence from which we can infer the existence of some type of ultimate reality'. The nature and kind of experiences one gets being the part of particular religion differs from one religion to other and at the same time there is wide range of differentiation in terms of religious experiences within the same religion mainly because of cultural distinctions. In societies like India where universality of religiosity is seriously fractured because of manufactured hierarchies within the religious set up, the level of contentment or discontentment within the religion is determined by the positioning of individual within these religious hierarchies.

### Religious authoritarianism

Keeping in view the various dimensions of religious conversion experience of human being in socio-religious setting, it is clear that epistemological meaning of evaluation of human society is deeply influenced by the fact that the religions have played crucial role in giving corporeal shape of civil societies all over the globe. Historically, the role of religion has been crucial in determining the level of 'cultural and civilizational progress, on the basis of which state systems have evolved, developed or perished' (Ilaiah, 2004, xiii). There have been close connection between religious interpretation of civil society on the one hand and institutionalisation of the state on the other. So, religious interests got agglomerated into political interests and almost all the religions acquired authoritarian tendencies with an open bias in favour of beneficiaries of social-political order which very often reflected in the form of discrimination against the fellow beings. The fundamental idea within the religious interpretation of civil society is that the human equality is determined on the principle of universal equality, i.e., God has created all human beings equal which can be described as democratic spirituality. All major religions of the world seem to have evolved out of this universal principle. Since, characterisation of any social order is determined by the dynamic process of interest articulation by different groups who compete for power and resources, all the religions got polluted because of incorporation of power interests, which vitiated the democratic virtue of equality in terms of spirituality. Thus, clearly it appears construction of social order on the basis of particular religious code of conduct had acquired authoritarian features and divided the

societies into the classes of winners and losers which consequently led the 'inclusion of minority of religious community' and 'exclusion' of rest from the domains of both religious spirituality and political decision making. It is because of this authoritarianism that the religions 'used violence against individuals and groups who opposed them' (Ilaiah; 2004, xiii). The first known reformer of ethic code of religious conduct was Buddha who was seriously perturbed with the kind of social order that was constructed on non-spiritual and non-democratic norms or against the principle of democratic spirituality. It was only thereafter that the organic unity of human beings based on spirituality was promulgated as fundamental idea by the religions that evolved afterward.

### Religious experience within Hinduism

It is clear that the role of religion in fulfilling the spiritual desire of people and creation of social order had always been in state of contradictions and which is more prevalent in Hinduism than in any other religion of the world. This contradiction in Hinduism can fairly be attributed to imposition of social order on Brahmanic philosophy which seems contrary to spiritual democracy based on organic unity of all human beings. This all led to 'artificially constructed hierarchies' which resulted into organisation of one group against the other within the same religion. For instance, Blacks against Whites (racial discrimination) in Europe and America and Dalits (though feebly) against upper castes (caste discrimination) in India.

Ironically, there had been wide range of disparity in terms of religious experiences under Hinduism simply because of the fact that the placement of individuals within the religious settings vary from group to group or segment to segment. Even the religious discourses that have been initiated by the intellectuals and theologians appear sometime indifferent towards such realities. The biggest question with which one encounters is that were ever the weaker sections of society, mainly untouchables, brought under the fold of religion? In fact, these discrete groups have no spiritual experience what-so-ever through religion rather gained so called mystical experiences within the group of specific cultural domain.

Now the question arises, how these left-out groups should move to realise their spiritual being? Answer must be either by locating and asserting the appropriate space within Hinduism or by switching over to an alternative religious set up. Clearly, in both these cases it would mean 'conversion' for them.

### Conversion: Etymological meanings

One of the major problems with the conversion phenomenon is the question of definition. The meaning of

the term conversion cannot be derived in static framework rather is based mainly on the contextualisation of social realities determined in terms of religious beliefs or affiliations. The complexities in defining the process are in fact inflicted by the various 'methodist missionaries' who kept on experimenting with the popular belief system in one way or the other, the process which is argued by Rev W. Burgess as 'the mere nominal profession of Christianity' (cited by Oddie, 1997, 12). It is clearly reflected in the change in communal affiliations marked by adoption of new rituals. The characterisation of the process is primarily determined on the basis of methodological formulations contextualised by the theological scholars and different religious activists of all religions. In Christianity it is 'baptism', in Islam and Buddhism it is 'confession' and in Hinduism it is ritual of 'Shuddhi' (Oddie, 2) which clearly indicates that meaning is deeply embedded in proselytising techniques adopted by the missionaries of the religion. However, the 'Shuddhi System' in Hinduism is not strictly a technique to proselytise the followers of other religion, rather it is name for ritual undertaken to bring back the individuals or group(s) of people within Hinduism who had adopted the religious code of alien religion. The appropriate term for this process is 'reconversion' which is strategically called as 'Ghar Wapsi' by Hindu Activists so as to provide little sense of social legitimacy to their interference in the religious code of conduct of the people. So, the meaning can be explored by understanding the methodological dynamics of the whole process which passes through various stages in phased manner i.e., understanding of dynamics social realities followed by gaining their allegiance, especially through building social support system (for instance, opening schools, healthcare centres and organising charities all can be associated to Christian missionary techniques) and then finally religious changes by inducing certain rituals. At initial stage it may appear insignificant or even meaningless in terms of religious transformation, particularly conversion, but over a period of time it is symbolised in the form of high degree of commitments towards the further religious teaching. This is the stage when the faith building process is consolidated which is sometimes in total conflict with local belief system. Emergence of strong catholic communities in West India, particularly in Goa, can simply be explained through this methodological interpretation of 'baptism'. Clearly, this alternative spiritual journey is appropriated in other parts of the country in more or less in same fashion, particularly in the regions where individuals and groups exhibit the signs of dissatisfaction and desire to change the traditional bondages not necessarily by changing traditional identity. The missionaries have been inducing the changes by bringing out the individuals or groups of people from local religious fold and joining them with the religion which they profess. So, it is partially the cultural uprooted-ness of people whose traditional cultural bonds are weak or are

loosely tied that is closely associated with the process of conversion. This is a gradual process in which the large numbers of traditional traits continue with the new. This also appears the part of strategy of missionaries simply because abrupt change may invite the fierce opposition within the society. But, it is clear that indigenous moral order appears in state of conflict with the social order imposed by missionaries.

So, here it is pertinent to dwell with various meanings of term 'conversion' and 'religious conversion' the terms that have generated wide scale controversies both in history as well as contemporary times. For quite a number of scholars it is a form of 'pathology' and for many others it is result of human manipulations and coercion of socio-political power. The fundamental meaning of conversion originates from religious change or change in faith. In democratic understanding of social realities it appears simple at least superficially but leads to serious questions of what changes, who changes and how does one change? All these questions make 'conversion' debatable. 'the term 'conversion' was employed initially within Judeo-Christian circles to describe a believer's self identification with religious tradition either through faith in God and/or through commitment to new belief, rituals and religious community' (*Encyclopaedia of Religion*: 2005, 1969). James, the American Philosopher and Psychologist, described 'conversion' as – to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance..... denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided ..... becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities', for which he uses the term 'twice born souls' (cited by Lomb and Bryant, 2). The original definitions of conversion seem to be originated from the Greek terms 'epistrophe' which can mean 'conversion' or 'turning around' and 'metanoia' which can mean 'repentance' or 'to turn around' (*Encyclopaedia of Religion*: 2005, 1969). According to school of interpretation the word 'conversion' is derived from the Latin *convertere* which means 'to revolve, turn around' or head in different direction'. The word also holds for biblical Hebrew word *shub* Greek terms '*stripho*' and '*epistrepho*' (noted by Flinn; 1999, 51-2). So, origin of the process is clearly associated to Christianity. The instances of conversion can be found in many forms such as converting from one religious tradition to other, other adopting new values within same traditions or intensifying the religious belief or practices. So, the dynamic complexities that are emerging in society with or without external influences in many cultures, historical periods and socio-economic conditions are both causes and repercussions of religious formulations. So, the metaphysical interpretations can be given to the term 'conversion'. For sake of clarity, here the term is appropriated to signify the religious change so as to make it less illusive. By origin the term

'conversion' is used prominently with the Christian tradition and its study and scope has expanded dramatically. There are number of theories growing out of different sets of assumptions and methods of research to elucidate different dimensions and processes involved in the phenomenon of 'conversion'. For example, *personalistic theories* that include – Psychoanalytic theory, Archetypical theory developed by Carl G. Jung (based on universal patterns within human psyche), Attachment theory (based on emotions), Attribution theory (based on universal human needs to create and/or find meaning in life), *Socio-Cultural theories* which include – Multicultural theory (based on cultural dimension), Post-colonial theory (based on trends in Afro-Asian and Latin American countries), Identity theory (based on ethnic and religious plurality), Intellectualist theory (based on concrete realities of the world), Narrative theory (based on inter-connected) and *Religious / Spiritual theories* which include Theological theories. The categories of theories enlisted above indicate that the process of conversion is so complex that the word cannot be defined precisely simply because each case of conversion is unique and original guided by individual judgements of converts. In most simplistic form the term means definite and somewhat sudden change in the dominant religious beliefs, or attitudes, or sympathies, or allegiances or aspirations of an individual reflected through altogether dramatic experiences. 'The term conversion often signifies the definite acceptance unto salvation of creed or doctrine of fellowship .... with Copernican revolution of values from egocentricism to a response to a universe of spiritual and cosmic Reals' (Fern: 1945, 202).

### Formulations of contemporary conversion debate

The present debate of conversion or re-conversion in any form clearly indicates the fact that a quite distinct boundary wall appears between one world of religion and another. But there are parts of society where people are out of the fold of major religions therefore do not figure in the current discourse of religion. At present stage dynamics of religious conversion and pursuit for better human life in any part of the world at any point of time can fairly be generalised on the basis of emerging trends and patterns of claims and counter-claims in the perceptions of religious transformations that are taking place in different parts of human societies especially at margins of different civilizations. Precisely the conversion debate at current stage is motivated by the following presumptions:

Firstly, ironically, the strength of almost every religion at the present stage of human civilisation has been misrepresented and hypothetically projected by the clergymen, particularly the strength defined in the terms

of number of followers of the religion, which is absolutely contrary to the fact that the real strength of any religion is in its capabilities to provide a social order free of discrimination and exploitation. That means the necessary component of any religion is the better quality of life which is only possible in the social order free from discrimination and deprivation of weaker people.

Secondly, it is not simply the humane instinct to reach at the higher horizons of spirituality responsible for conversion of people from one belief system to other rather it has been accused that well designed missionary activities pointedly organised against the other religions make religious conversion a strategic derive. It is in fact the number game that is responsible for an organised drives of religious conversions or re-conversions of the people not only in one section of society but also in almost every part of the world. Therefore, it is not simply the matter of the individual choice rather is a strategic design of religious expansion. It is clear that the very idea of religious conversion is negative in nature simply because in this process one religion try's to destroy the other by undermining the faith of the people in the religion they follow, which ultimately creates the identity crises simply because it de-nationalises the people and obviously, disrupt the social order. Thus, religious conversions under all circumstances are result of manufactured uncertainties that have been destabilising the modern human society.

Thirdly, evidently, the process of religious conversion can either be 'forceful' or 'wilful'. It is 'forceful' when the dominant religious groups enjoying decisive political authority apply the force ruthlessly to manipulate the demographic balance in their favour, and it is 'wilful' when the people from below opt to change their religion because of the prevailing discrimination and exploitation in the existing social order. In country like India, where the caste discrimination is a historical reality and secular democracy has strengthened the aspirations of common people to be free from discrimination and exploitation, it appears at the first sight that the most of religious conversions are 'wilful' and thus, can be seen as result of search for liberation.

Fourthly, there had been intricate relationship between the political power on the one hand and religious power controlled by clergymen on the other, especially prior to advent of modern secular democracy. As has been claimed by Nietzsche 'will to power' is the most fundamental drive in human person' and 'God and Religion are to be unmasked as manipulative devices which emerged only to serve the power-interest or those who could work the system' (cited by Thiselton: 93). So, historically, the religion has played as crucial role in total amalgamation with state authority in building the civil society. Though, this is an existential argument yet when social realities are interpreted in concrete term, especially in India, the religion consolidated merely as an instrumental device to serve the power-interests of

individuals. Thus The argument can be verified from the fact that despite the secular approach of East India Company in India the missionary activities got a fillip as consequence of expansion of 'railways', 'improvement of post and telegraph communication' and introduction of English as 'common language', (Bonk, 2007), because of political dynamics the incorporation of power-interests into the domain of religion induced the phenomenon 'inclusion and exclusion' or 'insiders and outsiders' or central or peripheral groups' into the religious discourse. In this process the emergence of empire as consequence of war paved the way for imposition or enforcement particular religious code of conduct over the losers who became subject to empire which subsequently tempered the whole texture of social fabric permanently and present day claims and counter-claims over the sections of human societies can be attributed to this fact.

### **Dynamics of religious conversion in HP**

Right at the outset, it should be made clear that no state system operates in emptiness. The prevailing social conditions provide both opportunities and challenges for political agencies of the state to interfere in the religious life of the citizens. In the struggle for political power among the different elite groups the core social issues of justice, equality, freedom and security of human rights, remain unaddressed. In present circumstances, how the contribution of religious beliefs could be understood in the best possible egalitarian perceptions especially in the remote areas of Himachal Pradesh? What are the motivational factors responsible for religious conversions of the people in Himachal Pradesh? How far is the prevailing caste discrimination in Hindu society responsible for religious conversions in Himachal Pradesh? Has Hindutava failed in creating the equitable and cohesive society in post independent India in general and in Himachal in particular, especially in establishing the socio-economic justice? Besides the above raised issues, this part of the paper is an attempt to visualise the grass root complexities compelling the people in Himachal, especially those who feel exploited and discriminated and whose issues remain un-addressed in literally unreligious social order of society, to search for the alternative where they could get comfortable space to realise the spiritual goals with respectable social existence.

### **Conversion process in HP: Generalisation vs. Particularisation**

The prevailing social and economic injustice in the hands of dominant groups through local social and political institutions, mainly in remote areas, is quite prominent in Himachal Pradesh. In fact, by conversion from one belief

system to other, these marginalized groups search their liberation and obviously, pursue the security of their better human values. Thus, the issue needs to be addressed from within instead of the investigation of the forces coming from outside. Clearly, the main dimension of religious conversion in Himachal Pradesh incorporates the question of emancipation of deprived people from the clutches of caste discrimination and social dogmas. The various dimensions associated with this process in more or less homogenous religious society can be understood properly and precisely after meticulous analysis of the following formulations derived on the basis of concrete realities with which the people of the region are living –

*First, the present trends in religious conversion in Himachal Pradesh indicate that those sections of the society who are beneficiaries of the existing social order (i.e., Upper Castes) feel contented and satisfied with the religion they follow and the people who are discriminated and sometimes humiliated by the existing social hierarchies (i.e., Dalits), particularly in terms of socio-economic injustice, feel strongly dissatisfied of the prevailing religious order, rather treat religion as an agency of discrimination and exploitation and thus, have been opting for conversion. In fact, the historicity of castes vis-a-vis power structure has remained detrimental in the process of religious experiences of low caste Hindus which is reflected in the institutionalisation of 'higher level of obedience' shown by low caste groups in highly discriminatory social order besides the 'mutilation of self-respect of Dalitbahujan' (Ilaiah: 1996, 37).*

*Second, the dynamics of religious conversion or re-conversion in Himachal Pradesh, as elsewhere in the country, is also deeply embedded in the indigenous caste system. The existing caste structure is responsible for prevailing socio-economic discrimination within society and because of increasing control of upper castes on the benefits of science and technology, the marginalisation of weaker caste groups has accentuated further which has resulted into sense of insecurity among them. Since, the social and economic structures have not changed in accordance with the pace of modernisation and development, the instances of violation of Human Rights and instances of discrimination against these marginalized groups are increasing with unprecedented pace. Gradually, they have been feeling perpetually dejected from the religion and eliminated from the process of economic development.*

*Third, besides socio-economic factors, the prominent existence of discriminatory local belief system in the form of local deities and superstitions has made the lives of socially deprived people of backward regions (Tribal or semi-Tribal areas, for instance, District Kinnaur and rural areas of District Shimla) deplorable. To get rid of these*

*conditions the poor people of these regions are all prepared to overthrow the age-old dogmas and thus, opt for the alternative religion for their liberation which could satisfy their spiritual being.*

*Fourth, the history of religious conversion in other parts of the country reveals that the conversion of the people, mainly Dalits, from Hinduism to Islam during medieval period did not change their socio-economic status as majority of converted people remained in the same economic stratum even after five or six centuries. There are clear indications that similar would be the case with converted Christians in Himachal Pradesh simply because allurements (if any), support and motivation for conversion coming from outside, are short-lived and temporary and real state of affairs is hardly to change without the substantial change in the existing socio-economic and political structures of the society. Thus, the pursuit of liberation through religious conversion is certainly going to be incomplete and unaccomplished.*

*Fifth, most recently, the process of conversions and re-conversions in India became allegedly more prominent in 1990s especially after emergence of BJP in power. This is probably because BJP government could not check the activities of its non-political wings i.e., RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal, nor could these organisations devise a mechanism to change the conditions of historically deprived sections of the society. Rather, in general, it is perceived by the deprived caste groups that the BJP strive for maintenance of caste hierarchy in the society. There is more or less similar kind of observation with regard to instances of conversion or re-conversion in Himachal Pradesh which is otherwise a peaceful society. However, it remained less reported in the national dailies or electronic mass media.*

*Sixth, the religious conversion in any part of the country goes against the spirit of the secular democracy and thus, in Himachal it has not only created the pressing conditions for the maintenance of social harmony but has also put the question mark on the secular polity. Clearly, if the parameters of secularism are analysed in historical perceptions then the stories of discrimination and exploitation of Dalits in the Indian social order in general are sufficient to conclude that we are far away from being a reasonably secular society. These conditions have been capitalised by the missionaries of the religion who get the licence (in tacit form) from the Indian Constitution Art. 25 that confers on all persons 'the right to profess, practise and propagate religion'.*

*Lastly, despite the fact that the Dalit assertion mainly in Hindi speaking areas of the country is at rise, claims and counter-claims over the identity of the Dalits and their use by the dominant political forces for realisation of petty political goals are going to intensify the problem of*

*religious conversion in these areas including Himachal Pradesh, which obviously would challenge the necessary conditions for social harmony. It appears that unless the free upward mobility of the lower castes is permitted the society cannot be modernised and democratised and it would be difficult to manage conversion conflicts in the society. This process of religious conversion can be tackled effectively by two ways firstly, by reinterpreting the religion in accordance with the principle of spiritual democracy, i.e., by recognising the humanity of weaker sections, secondly, by guaranteeing them, at least, the minimum standards of Human Rights.*

To substantiate the above raised points one needs to understand the undercurrents of the tumultuous changes the society in Himachal Pradesh is undergoing. What is there to be smug about the democracy and secularism in India where about 250 million people, i.e., Dalit population, are living under the miserable conditions and are very often subject to cruel atrocities in the hands of both - state as well as social institutions? Caste and state in India have become so intermingled that the space for Dalits in society is shrinking drastically. That is why the people, who are deprived of social dignity and economic opportunity, are looking for the ways of liberation by means of conversion to other religion. However, it is quite debatable that whether the religious conversion of Dalits would be able to eradicate their socio-economic discrimination in prevailing social order. By putting the caste bars on Dalits the clergymen of Hinduism have harmed the religion from within. That is why the leaders of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Federation, comprising of the educated and employed segments of Dalits in government, opted to turn en mass to Buddhism in October 2001. For the same reasons 'around 1000 lower caste Hindus in Southern India had converted to Christianity in July 2001' (D'Souza 2001). It is well-established fact that there are well planned drives for numerical proselytisation of Dalits and Tribes carried out by the Christian missionaries in India. For instance, it was revealed by sister Placid, working as missionary in Gujrat Tribal constituency of Dangs that 'the missionaries had certain targets every year. They had to lure and bribe the Tribal people with goodies to join their faith (Christianity)' (cited by Lavakare: 1999, from Net). Under the systematic drive to proselytise the Dalits the missionaries such as Johan Dayal and DeSouza, have been categorically stating that 'they will give reservation to Dalits in the Christian education institutions' (*Indian Christian Partnership*: from Net). Thus, allurements of weaker caste groups with the target to convert them to Christianity in tribal or semi-tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh cannot be overruled. Though, the converts in Himachal Pradesh have been emphatically rejecting such acquisition.

It is pertinent to mention here that, as is the case in other tribal regions of the country, the social linkages in

remote areas of Himachal Pradesh are also based on traditional values and the Hinduism has not transcended the values of religious life down to Tribal or semi-Tribal region of the state. Although, the caste structure is main basis of the social engineering of tribal and semi-tribal regions yet the people were never educated in accordance with the spirit of Hinduism (which is nothing but substitute term for Snathan Dharma). Consequently, the local belief system based on superstition emerged as a guiding force for social order in these areas and the dictates of local deities prevailed all around. Till today these deities govern day-to-day life of the local people. Not only that, even the local deity system in these regions is established in accordance with the caste hierarchy. Thus, the caste discrimination is deep rooted in the ethos of local belief system and quality of life of the people belonging to lower sections of society in these areas is deplorable. Under such circumstances the marginalized people of the region are left with one option i.e., to overthrow the age-old dogma of social relationships and get converted to other religion, which pretends to guarantee them respectable life conditions. However, the evidences show that so far their socio-economic conditions have not changed in any visible manner except their socio-moral elevation mainly by overthrowing the irrational age old social dogmas.

Although, as accused by Hindu nationalist groups it can be observed in the form of undercurrents that allurements and bribes have certainly attracted the lower caste Hindus towards Christianity to some extent, yet it is established that proselytisation of Dalits would not be able to enhance the upward caste mobility in the state. Had it been so, the Churches of all denominations would not have been so supportive of reservations for Christians on caste basis. Without requisite reforms in Hindu religion, particularly with the objective to end caste discrimination, the Christianisation of Dalits would not uplift them. If the upliftment of weaker and poor people would had been the real objective of the conversion drive the vast population of the South America and African continent would not be living in poverty and exploitation after the religious conversion by the rich Christian West during the first and second millennium. Thus, the dream of emancipation and liberation from the caste-biased society through conversion to Christianity is in itself unrealistic and unscientific. The poor and destitute people in any part of the world cannot be served only by compelling them to denounce their beliefs and by alluring them to adopt other faiths. Unfortunately, scientific knowledge and resources are mixed with the mysticism so cleanly that the people from lower section of Hindu society expect overnight change in their socio-economic conditions which is not possible in present circumstances.

As in other parts of the country the successful proselytisation of untouchables and semi-tribal people in Himachal are mainly because of two reasons – firstly, the



Hindu ruling classes and the Hindu organisation did not feel the need to enter deep forests or hills to widen and strengthen their civilisational ambit which ultimately alienated the tribal people from Hindu mainstream. Secondly, the assimilation of semi-Tribal people to Christianity brought them closer to urbanisation, a civilisational change which they acquired only after conversion. Of course, these roots of 'Christian assimilation were supported and approved by some Indian liberals' (Gupt: from Net). Besides that, the local tribal belief system, particularly in the form of local deity structure, has played a crucial role in creating the conditions for religious conversion in this state which is otherwise recognised for its social peace and tranquillity.

### **Conversion and emerging fabrics of civil society in HP**

Whatever may be the causes for religious conversions in Himachal Pradesh and elsewhere in the country, one thing is very clear that until and unless the dominant upper Hindu castes own the responsibility of uplifting the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through systematic religious reforms, the process of conversion would intensify further. It is pertinent to mention here that how Hindu extremist organisations react to the conversions of Dalits to Buddhism is not very clear. Majority of Hindu organisations treat Buddhism as branch of Hinduism. This is clear from the fact that so far the conversion conflicts in India have surfaced either between Hindus and Christians or between Hindus and Muslims. However, in Himachal Pradesh there is no instance of conversion of lower caste people to Buddhism. But the way Hindu extremist organisations have been reacting to the process of religious conversion, the lower caste groups are exploring the possibility of embracing the Buddhism simply because the conversion to Buddhism is less reacted.

The ongoing process of religious conversions in Himachal have made following impacts on civil society of the state –

Firstly, the organised process of re-conversion of converted Hindus has been started by Hindu extremist groups but without any commitment for social and economic security of the people undergoing the process. That means, in case of re-conversion through Shudhi System which is called *Ghar Vapsi* or "Home Coming" by Hindu organisations, the guarantee for their respectable living conditions remains missing and their concerns remain un-addressed.

Secondly, the religious violence emerging in the form of conversion conflicts are rising in the state with alarming pace putting serious threats to social harmony. The inter-community clashes are growing with unprecedented pace in the regions where the process of conversion or

reconversion is going on and in some cases these clashes are inflicted by upper castes deliberately. After conversion the feeling of hatredness towards the marginalized groups, especially those who embrace the other religion mainly in search of liberation, has grown sharply. It is because, after conversion, these communities have been rejecting the dictates of upper castes, which threatens their status and privileges.

Thirdly, the converts have come out from the exploitative social dogmas and the social order based on local deity system which could not fulfil their spiritual desire, rather was responsible for economic miseries.

Fourthly, a debate to reinterpret the religious rights envisaged in Indian constitution, especially after the rise of a Hindu nationalist party (BJP) to political power at centre in late 1990s, (though with the help of the alliance with other smaller parties), has emerged in the state also. However, this debate is limited to the tribal or semi-tribal areas of the state and intellectual groups are more or less unconcerned about the issue in the state.

### **Conclusions**

Since, the conversions lead to animosity among religious groups and also lead to retaliations by re-conversions dragging the society to communal rioting, arson and looting, the spirit of mutual respect for faith, the main prerequisite for the existence of plural societies in modern age, should be upheld. The principle of democratic secularism could only be realised if due respect is granted to each other's traditions rather than to try to destroy them. Simultaneously, the rights of weaker sections of the society should be guaranteed. The perpetuity of atrocities of caste discrimination, mainly in the backward and tribal areas, has not only continued but has also increased sharply in recent past. Democracy and discrimination cannot go side by side and religion can no more be the tool of exploitation. The Hindu extremist organisations have to realise that the strength of religion is vested in its capability to smoothen the social life of the people. The exclusion of weaker caste groups from the domain of religious affairs has not only weakened the Hindu religion but has also complicated the social life of these groups. In given circumstances the emancipation of discriminated caste groups through Hinduism appears an unrealistic preposition. These groups need to be incorporated in the mainstream of the religion with the help of proper education, health services and greater economic opportunities. So far the Hindu organisations have failed miserably in approaching these people so as to grant them social and economic security. Since, the basic cause for religious conversion is the discriminatory social order thus, without providing a respectable space for downtrodden groups in society, the prevailing socio-economic discrimination is unlikely to end. Consequently, in such conditions the people will

have no option other than search for liberation through conversion and society will obviously be overridden of communal violence.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to Prof. Peter Desuja, Director, IAS and Prof. (Retd.) Gopal Singh for their valuable comments.

## REFERENCES

- Bonk JJ (2007). Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries. Rutledge, New York.
- D'Souza J (2001). India: Caste and Conversion. Available at [www.worldevangelical.org/](http://www.worldevangelical.org/). Assessed on May 15, 2005.
- Dupr'e W (2005). Experience and Religion – Configuration and Perspective. P.I.E.-Peter Long, Oxford.
- Encyclopaedia of Religion (2005). 3 Thomson Gale, New York.
- Fern V (1945). An Encyclopedia of Religion. Peter Owen, London.
- Gupt B (2005). Religious Conversion: Sin or Sincerity. available at [www.sulekha.com/](http://www.sulekha.com/). Assessed on April 27, 2005.
- Ilaiah K (1996). Why I Am Not A Hind., Samya, Calcutta.
- Ilaiah K (2004). Buffalo Nationalism – A Critique of Spiritual Fascism. Samya, Kolkata. Indian Christian Partnership. Available at <http://www.webdelic.com/church/delhi411.htm>. Assessed on May 6, 2005
- Kessler GE (1999). Philosophy of Religion – Towards a Global Perspective. Wadsworth Publishing Company, London.
- Kierkegaard S (1941). Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Lavakare A (1999). Mission: Religious Conversion. Available at [www.geocities.com/](http://www.geocities.com/). Assessed on April 24, 2005.
- Muller FM (1956). The Vedas. Susil Gupta (India) Limited, Calcutta.
- Oddie AG (1997). Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia – Continuities and Changes. Curzen, Surrey, pp. 1-14.
- The Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act- 2007.
- Thiselton AC (2006). A Concise Encyclopaedia of Philosophy of Religion. One World, Oxford.