PRESSURES OF NEWLY CONVERTED CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN INDIA: ANALYSIS OF CAUSES AND SUGGESTIONS

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Introduction

In the light of the increase in Christian growth, 50.6% are women revealing a substantial increase in female converts in India. It is a fact that many newly converted Indian Christian women face various kinds of pressures. Women are the most persecuted victims of communal violence wherever it occurs. While the men are killed, the women are raped (Akkara 2009, 69). This reality then raises concerns towards the actual causes of these pressures. Are these pressures solely related to their “faith” in Christ?

Conversion from one religion to another has been a serious issue in India (Joseph, 2015). Though this fact is undeniable, there is a desire to know whether or not all conversions were due to “faith in Christ.” This will then shed light on the pressures upon Indian Christian women post their conversion.

Contexts of Conversion Events

My concern grows as I consider various contexts that are found relating to conversions from non-Christian faith to Christian faith as follows.

Various family contexts of women converts

Women converts are from various contexts such as, (a) converted when few other converts are already part of their wider family, (b) converted with the consent of the head of the family, (c) converted secretly without the knowledge of the family, (d) converted when the whole family decided for conversion and (e) converted in spite of oppositions from the family.
Various social atmospheres of women converts

These converts are (a) converted through mass conversion, (b) converted in a city, (c) converted in a village, (d) converted in a province where religious secularism is followed, and (e) converted in a province where religious fanaticism is stronger.

Various conversion processes led by the human instruments

Converters and their styles play a significant role in the post-conversion experiences of women. There are (a) aggressive intolerant extractors and (b) non-aggressive tolerant disciple makers. “Aggressive intolerant extractors” are the human instruments who stand outside the society and call for individuals to profess Christ and come out to join the Christians. They extract new believers from their homes and society (Richard 1996), which ultimately triggers brutal reactions from the respective families and fanatical groups as the reality of pluralism is not considered by them (Bauman 2015, 79). “Non-aggressive tolerant disciples-making” human instruments do not practice extraction. They are considerate of every situation of the convert and would help him / her to undertake a safe spiritual journey from one faith to the other. Religious conversions, thus, are based on various driving factors (Lonergan 1966, 223).

Exploring the Pressures on Indian Christian Women

Religious conversions and pressures on women converts are inseparable (Kalliath 2002, 201). One can observe this reality in almost all the countries where Christians are a minority, as in India. However, the following facts demand a well-researched identification of the causes for pressures on newly converted Indian Christian women.
Religious conversions with no pressures


In 2015 there was a well-planned conversion, stated, that at least five lakh people including women from the other backward classes (OBC) decided to convert to Buddhism from Hinduism in Nagpur. The response of the spokesperson Venkatesh Apdeo of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, was surprising, “We have no issue with the OBC people embracing Buddhism. The philosophy of both the religions is one” (Suryawanshi).

Mohini, an actress, was the pseudonym of Mahalakshmi, a Brahmin born in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, who became a Christian was renamed Christeena. Her conversion was without experience of pressure.

Pandita Ramabai, a prominent Christian convert, had hardships but it was not on account of her faith as history portrays. The pressure was more caste-related. As a high caste Brahmin, her marriage to Bipin Bihari Medhavi, an untouchable – was unacceptable in the society she lived in. She accepted Christ while she was in England in 1889 (Frykenberg 2017, 314). On her return to India she had started the Ramabai Association, to provide homes for upper-class Hindu widows Sharada Sadan for “capacity building” among women, promoting indigeneity; and she built ‘Mukti’ complex and called it the ‘Kripa Sadan,’ a rehabilitation home for the destitute (Frykenberg 2016, 67). A committed ‘Indian Christian woman convert’ of strong character, so

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1 A Hindu fanatic outfit
daring with compassion and dazzling capacity to organize and with such selfless service and dedication, did not experience pressure for her faith.

Sister Nirmala Joshi, who had succeeded Nobel laureate Mother Teresa as the head of the ‘Missionaries of Charity,’ was born in a Nepali Brahmin family. Eventually she was converted to Catholicism and then joined the Missionaries of Charity. The Government of India bestowed the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award, on her on the 26th January 2009 for her services to the nation. Sister Nirmala did not have any pressure in her conversion (Bagchi, 2015).

An actress Pushpalatha in film industry, then a traditional Catholic, who later became wife of A.V.M. Rajan who was also an actor and a born Hindu, did not have any pressures due to their conversion.

Anju Panta, of Nepali Hindu origin, is a very prominent ghazal and playback singer. After her conversion to Christianity, she refused to perform at a Hindu festival, saying that her faith in the true God did not allow her to worship other gods through song, which earned her an avalanche of criticism from media and civil society. Her conversion provoked the Hindu radical world to smear hate campaigns against her (Rana, 12-18 September, 2014). According to her, it is an ignorable retaliation. Many continue to admire her contributions to the music world in Nepal.

Another well-known actress, Jayasudha born to Hindu parents, got converted to Christianity in 2001. She said she discovered Jesus after facing a water accident. She has not faced any pressures due to her conversion. Similarly, another actress, Nagma, did not have pressures.

Anand Mahadevan, editor of a well-known Indian business magazine, was born a Brahmin and the grandson of a priest. He chose to become a follower of Jesus Christ. He claims
that his relationship with God is through Jesus Christ rather than a change of religion. He is fiercely proud of his national identity as an Indian and completely at peace with his cultural identity as a Hindu. He retains his name that his parents had given to him. His wife, who also shares his faith, continues to go by her Hindu name. They have two children and are given both distinctly Hindu names. He further says that the Christianity he acquired is an intensely intimate relationship with Jesus than a change of a religion. He testifies that for the past fifteen years, he has been coming to know Jesus even more closely as the pure and sinless Son of a Holy God, amazing friend, guide, leader, Saviour and God (October 27 2008). He and his wife have not shared any pressures in their new walk with Jesus.

There are many more women who have converted from Hinduism to other religions that did not pass through a time of serious pressures.

**Religious conversions with significant pressures**

There are true stories of rapes, imprisonment, ostracisms, killings, discrimination, and various other hurts inflicted on newly converted Christian women.

There are many women whose spouses were slaughtered before their eyes and who became eventually homeless and defenseless for the sake of their faith in Christ. (Akkara 2009, 69).

Roshni, a daughter of newly converted parents was just 13 when she was raped as a punishment for sharing her faith in Jesus with her neighbors. This was orchestrated by unbelieving women in the neighborhood (OpenDoors).

World Watch Monitor published that a thirty-year old Christian woman convert was raped and killed on 29th August 2013 in Bakoudi village in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. She was found dead the next morning by her mother-in-law. Witnesses said that she had
suffered multiple stab wounds to her torso and had been strangled with her own sari (World Watch Monitor).

An independent Catholic news agency, UCA NEWS, published that a 14-year-old girl was found murdered in Jattarbeda village in Kondagaon district of Chattisgarh state on July 22, 2016. Her family and church leaders say it was rape and murder, orchestrated by Hindu extremists because her family refused to abandon their Christian faith. (UCA news)

Citing 85 major incidents of alleged persecution of Christians across 20 states last year, a report by a minority and human rights NGO says that 2015 had seen an unprecedented spike in "intolerance" against the community. …The Catholic Secular Forum (CSF) in its report claims that at least seven pastors were killed and 8,000 Christians (including 6,000 women and children) targeted in 2015 (Gohain, 2016).

Exploring the Causes for Pressures on Women Converts

In the light of the above two divergent types of experiences of religious converts, I would prefer not to conclude that “Faith in Jesus Christ” is the sole cause for the pressures that Christian women converts undergo in India. “Faith in Jesus” cannot be an issue as Hinduism is sampradayas, which allows “Hinduism to accommodate all other religious communities, with their own gods, beliefs, and practices …” (Hiebert 2004, 325). The ethos of Hinduism is expressed in the shloka “Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudda Vadanti,” which means, “There is an eternal Truth, but there are many ways to achieve it.” For this reason many converts do not have pressures as others have. Here are some of the hidden and fundamental causes for pressures of the women converts derived from the publications and first hand sources.

Gain and loss game cause pressures
The encounter between different religions gives rise to competition over the gain and loss of adherents. This arises when some adherents reject teachings of one religion and accept those of another. This gain and loss predicament in the context of democratic country generates tensions, conflicts and violence between religious groups. Globally, conversion in general is considered provocative and thus precautionary measures have been taken by various non-Christian religions.

**Retaliation toward extraction causes pressures**

In the process of religious conversion, cultural, customary, and family clashes are caused by some evangelical groups. Extraction of women from long years of identity and customary beliefs and practices for new and alien Christian identity makes the Hindu and Hindutva communities angry and bitter toward Christian converts.

**Misperception provokes pressures**

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, a Christian activist who writes regularly on Christian issues, asked her Hindu husband and other educated Hindu friends for the reason of their anger toward conversion. She writes her findings, “They just don’t see Christians as Indians; they see us as an alien ‘other’, minions of a white Christian world that is synonymous with spiritual and racial chauvinism. Our cathedrals, our culture, and our worship set us apart” (The Examiner 1998). Conversion is a threat for them as it is considered as renunciation by Hindus from their cultural and spiritual heritage for the purpose of adopting a westernized religious identity, in Christianity.

**External responses of converts cause pressures**

Conversion-encounters in India are very distinct from conversions in western countries. They do not merely involve a sinner’s prayer but should be a conscious “response” to the
invitation, love, and work of God in Christ (Cawley 2016, 165). There are internal and external elements involved in the conversion process: belief, repentance, assurance of forgiveness, and devotion are internal, whereas baptism, church affiliation, and mission participation are external. Response is an external act of their internal faith. “Response” usually generates “pressures” to new women converts in the southern part of the northern hemisphere, in particular to women.

**Existing frigid relationship between religions cause pressures**

Misconceptions of Christians about other religions and vice versa, negative propaganda of other religions, and other mutually offensive religious acts, have strained the relationship between Christian and other non-Christian religions. Increasing religious intolerance is another factor for the increasing gap between religions. The key findings of a 2016 report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, places the strongest emphasis on deteriorating religious tolerance and increasing violence in India, according to the daily Indian Express dated 3rd May 2016. As non-Christians witness incremental additions to the Christian faith, the existing bitterness and fury become pressures on the new women converts.

**Spirit of paternalism causes pressures**

Though numerous positive changes have occurred among women, chronic social issues like inequality and bigotry still make women to be secondary in the status scale. Domestic violence, commonly found in India, is one of the manifestations against Christian women converts. Their subjection to male-female discrimination, compounded by pressures arising from the religious affiliation of their respective families and identities, is still bothersome. Ravi, an alcoholic Hindu husband was so brutal toward his wife Rani when she became a Christian and got baptized without his knowledge. Given his low view of women, his wife’s personal decision
to become a Christian was unacceptable to him, even though he himself believes Jesus to be one of the gods. He said that he had no issues against Rani’s faith in Jesus.

**Consequences of the unethical practices of mission agencies cause pressures**

Unethical mission methods and conversion episodes of certain agencies, churches and individuals are undeniable. Post-conversion practices that end up in the extraction of women converts from their families and psychological or material inducements of agencies towards the women of vulnerable sections of the population trigger anger among Hindus and fanatics. This anger results in pressures against converts, in particular for women who are more in numbers than men.

**Other hidden factors cause pressures**

A young lady, the first generation Christian in the whole family, accepted Christ in September 2005, but was compelled to marry a man from her old faith. Her life turned to be miserable as her husband is one of the fanatics in his region. Eventually their marriage was broken. Another 37-year old Christian married woman, a recipient of the best teacher award from the President of India, works in a school owned and managed by Hindus with their beliefs and practices. She is expected to adhere to all of them, some of which she doesn’t owing to her faith in the Lord. Often she has been humiliated as a result. Other envious Hindu teachers influence the students and prompt them to behave rebelliously toward her.

**Conclusion**

Conversion in general leads to anger and hostility among the religious people (Andrew 1999, 232). Thus many conversions are considered as “pressures” against women. “Faith in Jesus” alone cannot be the cause for the hostility and anger toward women. Hostility and anger
are the responses to the threats that non-Christian religions have through conversions. Some consider conversions as a threat to their desire for political power; for others they are a threat to their cultural values and practices; and for others they are detrimental for their family identity in society. Retaliations of these communities are interpreted as “persecution or pressures” by the Church at large as the result of “conversion.” Since causes for Christian women’s pressures cannot be generalized, precise suggestions cannot be made easily. However, following are some suggestions in general which would help the readers. These suggestions are given to the Church that it may prepare the Christian community to find ways through which it may accomplish the Mission of God in pluralistic South Asian countries.

1. Mission agents should shun the “avoidable” in the conversion process in the context of pluralism in order to protect women from pressures.

2. Avoid extraction style of conversion. Make women converts to remain witnessing before their respective family members in order to soften them toward their conversion.

3. Make a thoughtful discipleship process for women converts, which could be done in their respective domestic environments rather in a church context.

4. Incorporate women converts into the churches carefully.

5. Avoid Christianizing individual women from non-Christian families; try to reach a minimum of three converts.

6. Teach women converts to respect cultural values and practices when these are not against the Word.

7. Do not impose any Christian values on women converts unless the situation is favorable.

8. Respect and value the family hierarchical system as conversions are taking place.

9. Prepare and train women converts for adverse situations.

References


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