

## Introduction

*Peter Berger and Sarbeswar Sahoo*

A road is only a simple thing at first sight, as has been previously noted (Miller 2001: 183). On second look, however, it reveals its dazzling complexity, as well as a profound and deep connection with human endeavours that it entails, for instance, with the human desire to escape from one place or to reach another. Movement, change and transformation are intrinsic to roads, to the experiencing subjects who travel along them and the environment they traverse, which they connect as much as divide. As the epitome of modernity, the road is a symbol of violence, colonialism, conquest, oppression and exploitation, as well as an icon of hope, protest and freedom.

Roads are connected to religion in manifold ways, not only in the sense that religions offer certain 'paths' to salvation (Sting 1997). Some of our readers and most of our authors will know what it feels like to be squeezed between narrow rows of a crowded bus in India, the vehicle coming to a sudden stop, the bus driver (or one of his team) jumping off to quickly offer a coconut at a small shrine on the side of the road, before diving back into the bus, hoping that the gods will hear him and give their blessing. Obviously, not only in India, but definitely there, roads are places of worship and of pilgrimage. They may represent 'mythographies' (Masquelier 2002), imaginations of an indigenised modernity which also involve ideas about the anger of those spirits whose dwellings have suffered destruction in the very construction of the road. They are also sites of reflection, a moral geography in relation to which loss of traditions and moral anomie can be contemplated (Luning 2009). They are liminal spaces and, as such, dying on the road – or rather on the path – may be considered a particularly 'bad death' (P. Berger 2015: 276f.). Being on the road may be associated with potential transgressions of embodied local moral orders and codes, and, as such, they may be a powerful tool restricting movement and reproducing asymmetrical relationships in terms of caste, class and gender (Miller 2001).

As with roads, conversion might also initially be perceived as a simple movement from one religion to another; however, as in the previous case, this

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assessment will not hold up on closer examination. We have chosen a connection with the road and coined the term ‘Godroads’ because the metaphor of the road helps us to capture the complexity of the phenomenon of conversion. When concerned with the different modalities of conversion, as is the case in this volume, the properties of the road facilitate their visualisation and reflection on them. Godroads, then, is not understood here as a one-dimensional movement towards or away from a god or religion, but stands for the complex, conflict-ridden and at times contradictory processes of engaging with religious traditions.

In this introduction, we intend to outline and elaborate on a few of the themes that run throughout the volume. However, we hope to not merely point out cross-connections between the different contributions but to stimulate reflection on modalities of conversion that go beyond the present volume and also beyond India (see Vilaça, this volume). The introduction begins by situating this volume in relation to some of the main contributions to the study of conversion in India, without aiming to provide an exhaustive overview.<sup>1</sup> We then discuss Godroads in relation to protest, the changing of religious affiliation as the expression of protest and as an attempt to break free from oppression and exploitation, as well as the protest against conversion, especially voiced by Hindu nationalists. It is in this political arena that the metaphor of Godroads coagulates into a concrete materiality, when roads, shrines, mosques, churches and temples become part of a topography of conversion which often entails violence. We briefly touch on this aspect once more later in the introduction when discussing conversion and urban spaces. Subsequently, we take up the widely debated issue of conversion and its relation to modernity, in its material as well as ideological dimensions, and its relatedness to colonial discourses and institutions.

A longer section follows, subdivided into four parts that, attempts to explore some of the dimensions and implications of the terms ‘process’, ‘event’, ‘continuity’ and ‘change’. Like travelling on a road, the process of conversion can be fast or slow, there may be obstacles on the way, a street may turn out to be a dead end, and even if this is not the case, one may decide to turn around and return to where one started (but perhaps revisiting later). While we thus emphasise the multifaceted, potentially irregular *processes* of Godroads, the significance of *events* is not underestimated, accidents can occur that significantly alter the mode of the journey or even its aims, or may motivate a return. However, even if a decision to return is taken, one usually brings home some of the things one had collected on the journey – if not material objects, then memories. Even if one decides to return, one is no longer the same as when one started, as common travel wisdom suggests; yet one is not completely different either, still recognisably a certain person.

Travelling along the road thus highlights the ambivalence and complexity in remaining the same yet becoming different, of continuity and change. This is a multilayered and complicated dynamic that concerns the old and the new, which we wish to discuss here. We focus on this intricate relationship between rupture and resilience in distinguishing and understanding different modalities of conversion. In a first step, this section thus outlines different patterns of continuity and change. In a second step, it introduces several analytical frameworks – needless to say that there are others – that help to theorise such patterns in a structural manner, thereby not merely considering the process as entailing increase or loss, of *more* of this religion or *less* of this worldview. The third step consists in identifying locations in the processes of conversion that are particularly relevant for either continuity or change. In no case are all aspects of a culture equally relevant in producing resilience or facilitating change, and we want to point towards some particularly significant locations. As a consequence of thinking about locations of conversion, in the final part of this section, we ask whether conversion, and the relationships of continuity and change that it entails, actually *means* something different and *works* differently in different kinds of society. No doubt, we cannot come to any kind of definitive conclusion in this regard, but we think it is important to ask the question. The introduction finishes with a consideration of the value of the term ‘conversion’ on the basis of the contributions to this volume.

## STUDYING CONVERSION IN INDIA

A major part of the scholarly work on conversion in India has been historical. These writings have primarily focused on the nature of missionary organisations and their relationship with the colonial state. According to Frykenberg (2005), the relationship between Christian missionaries and the colonial state in India was ambiguous in nature. While the colonial authorities initially opposed conversion and did not permit missionaries to operate freely, fearing that their activities might disturb the religious sensibilities of the majority Hindus, later, based on the conditionalities of the Charter Act of 1813, they actively encouraged Christian missionary activities. Broadly speaking, historians were interested in analysing the mutually enabling relationship between missions and the Empire, especially how the Empire facilitated missionisation and how missionaries helped consolidate the colonial Empire through their civilising missions (Fischer-Tine and Mann 2004; Porter 2004; Watt and Mann 2011).

In contrast to these historical texts, sociologists and anthropologists working on Christianity and conversion in India have mainly focused on caste and identity issues. For them, the central question has been: what implications does

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conversion have for caste and systems of hierarchy, and how does it transform identity-formation processes? In this regard, the work of Chris Fuller (1976) and David Mosse (2012) has been very significant. While Christian missionaries presented Christianity as 'casteless' and argued that conversion would result in the end of the caste hierarchy (Mallampalli 2004: 159), based on his study of Kerala Christians, Fuller shows how caste hierarchies and practices continue to govern the everyday social life and relationship of converts in Kerala. Even long after conversion, low caste converts continue to experience economic and social marginalisation and are very often discriminated against by high caste Christians. As Fuller (1976: 61) argued, 'the various Protestant churches in Kerala are regarded as low in status because almost all of their members are converted Harijans'. He also noted that inter-caste marriages were strictly prohibited between high caste and low caste Christians: 'there are no marital unions between the Syrians and Latin Christians or New Christians, nor are there unions between the latter two groupings. Such a marriage would be as unthinkable for a Syrian as would a marriage to a Harijan be for a Nayar' (Fuller 1976: 56–57).

Following on from Fuller and drawing on historical and anthropological research, in his book, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree*, Mosse (2012) shows how Christianity has accommodated caste over centuries. According to Mosse, Christian missionaries disliked caste and criticised caste practices as 'pagan' and 'superstitious'. However, in order for caste to be 'tolerated among converts', Jesuit missionaries attempted to reform and secularise caste (Mosse 2012: 8). With this, caste was denied its religious significance and practised only as a civil institution. Even when caste was socially or politically permitted, it was denied its rank. The secularisation of caste allowed converts to retain their caste practices, and as Catholicism became indigenised, caste continued to influence the structure of relationships within it. In addition to Fuller and Mosse, Bauman (2008) and Robinson and Kujur (2010) have also recently discussed the relationship between caste and Christianity by analysing the ways in which conversion has transformed the subaltern identity and marginality of Dalits and tribals in India.

Although most anthropological contributions have dealt with the caste question, they have rarely examined conversion theoretically or conceptually. With the exception of work by Robinson (2003) and Robinson and Clarke (2003), very little has been written about continuity and rupture; meanings, motivations and modalities or issues of modernity in conversion. Combining theoretical and empirical insights, contributors to this volume attempt to conceptualise conversion in multiple ways (as protest, as process, as modernity, as ethical transformation) and examine its implications, not only for the everyday

lives of the individuals involved but also for the community and greater societal structures and processes. Bringing together both experienced and young scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds and drawing on empirical insights from different parts of India, this book intends to combine theoretical and empirical insights, paying attention to the micro, meso and macro levels of the social context and processes, investigating questions of caste and identity on the one hand and issues of continuity/rupture and modernity on the other. The following sections of the introduction discuss these aspects and highlight the multiple ways in which conversion can be encountered and conceptualised in India.

### **CONVERSION AS PROTEST AND PROTEST AGAINST CONVERSION**

B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution, once famously declared, 'Though, I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu.' The oppressive social hierarchy of Hinduism, organised according to the principle of purity and pollution and institutionalised through the caste system, treated a large section of India's population as 'slaves'. As Rupa Viswanath (2013: 125) notes, in south India, the names of some of the 'untouchable' castes, such as Pariah and Palla, were used interchangeably by Tamils with the terms 'al' and 'atimai', which literally meant slave. The low caste untouchables were dehumanised and denied basic human dignity and respect. Ambedkar argued that under the caste system, the untouchable Dalits had 'their very persona confiscated' (cited in Rao 2009: 118). For him, since caste constituted an integral part of Hinduism, escaping caste discrimination necessarily involved a change of religion or conversion from Hinduism. In 1935, Ambedkar announced before a large crowd that 'because we have the misfortune to call ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another faith, none dare treat us so.... We shall repair our mistakes now' (cited in Rao 2009: 118).

While it was thus clear to Ambedkar that he would convert from Hinduism, the question was which religion to choose. Ambedkar deliberated on the cosmologies of various religious traditions and found that there were many similarities between the cosmologies of Hinduism on the one hand and Christianity and Islam on the other (Barlingay 1974: 145). All of these religions believed in various 'customs' and 'superstitions'. For Ambedkar, it was only Buddhism which would entail a 'massive revolt' (ibid.)<sup>2</sup> against the 'superstitious' beliefs and practices of Hindus. As Heredia (2011: 95) notes, Ambedkar's Buddhism was 'cleansed of the Brahmanic interpolations of the doctrines of Karma and rebirth'. Gail Omvedt (2003) also notes that it is Buddhism which has, over a period of 2,500 years, been engaged in a struggle against Brahmanical Hinduism and caste hierarchy. Considering this, Ambedkar converted to

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Buddhism in Nagpur on 14 October 1956 as a mark of ‘social revolt’ or protest against the existing Hindu religious and social order.

Conversion was thus articulated by members of the low castes and marginalised communities not only as a form of protest against the caste system and the Hindu social hierarchy, but also as a quest for equality, human dignity and social justice. In a sense, it was considered a ‘personal and collective accomplishment’ (Strauss 1979: 158). Along with Ambedkar, almost 500,000 Dalits converted to Buddhism on the same day. Anupama Rao (2009: 118) argued that Ambedkar’s public conversion from Hinduism became ‘the symbolic core of a liberated Dalit identity’ and ‘emphatically affirmed a defining characteristic of Dalit emancipation’. Ambedkar’s conversion moment not only marked a rejection of Hindu religious ideology but also a moment of liberation. After his conversion, he declared: ‘I feel as if I have been liberated from Hell’ (cited in Rao 2009: 119). Ambedkar’s conversion constituted a pivotal moment in India’s postcolonial history and the significance of this can be imagined based on the scale of today’s neo-Buddhist movement which, according to Heredia (2011: 94), is ‘the largest mass conversion of the twentieth century’.

Conversion from Hinduism was considered the basis for restructuring society and achieving Dalit dignity. Although Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, Christianity and its association with a modern Western egalitarian value system has also been attractive to the Dalits for a long time. As Louis Dumont (1980) has pointed out, while Indian social structure and ideology was marked by the principle of ‘homo hierarchicus’, the Christian West was represented through the principle of ‘homo equalis’. The Christian missionaries played a significant role in highlighting this contrast between India and the West, and worked actively with the low castes to convert them to Christianity. For example, having been exploited and oppressed by Hindus and Muslims, the whole of the Paravar, or the Fisherman caste on the Fishery Coast, approached Portuguese missionaries and converted to Roman Catholicism. According to Forrester (2017 [1980]: 15), between 1535 and 1537, about 20,000 people were baptised. Similarly, the Pariah (Dalits) of Tamil Nadu also converted to Christianity to escape caste-based and economic exploitation. Discussing the case of Pariah conversion in colonial south India, Rupa Viswanath (2013: 121) argued that conversion of the Pariahs to Christianity not only significantly transformed their relationship with their masters, but also changed ‘the balance of power and distribution of authority’. Furthermore, Sanal Mohan (2015), in his recently published *Modernity of Slavery*, shows how the low caste Dalits in Kerala, who comprised one-sixth of the population, were ‘owned’ by upper castes and Europeans, and how Christian missionary work transformed their collective self-identity and deeply impacted the emergence of Dalit consciousness and modernity in Kerala.

Escaping caste oppression has also been a key motivating factor in low caste conversion to Islam in India. According to Sikand and Katju (1994: 2214), the vast majority of India's Muslims 'are descendants of low caste Hindus who converted to Islam to escape the oppression of the higher castes and in search of equality and dignity'. Some scholars, however, have pointed out that conversion to Islam in the Indian subcontinent was in many cases achieved only by force (see Mathew 1982: 1029), with Hindus converting to Islam to 'save their lives' (Patvardhan, 1994: 2566). Although this is true, what is important is that in many cases conversion to Islam did indeed involve the rejection of the caste system. In one of the most recent and talked about cases, we witnessed the Dalits of Meenakshipuram village in Tamil Nadu converting to Islam on a mass scale, renaming their village Rahmatnagar (Wright Jr, 2007: 239). In this case, the Dalits of Meenakshipuram had striven for equality with the higher ranked Thevar castes of the village, but the Thevars had mistreated them. In 1981, when two Thevars from the nearby village of Mekkarai were found dead, the Dalits were suspected of being involved and the police came down heavily on the community. Enraged by the attitude of the police, the Dalits of Meenakshipuram converted to Islam as a symbol of protest, as well as a means of achieving equality and dignity.

Conversion as protest has thus been imagined by people of low caste and marginalised communities as an important 'event' symbolising a break with their past identities and experience of exploitation. Through conversion, low caste communities attempt to consciously construct a non-Hindu identity, which is perceived to be empowering and emancipating. As Heredia (2011: 90) argued, 'conversion becomes a passage to a new identity that empowers and frees the group. The converts do not attempt to reform the old; they have lost hope in this regard. Their choice is a social protest directed not to reform the old, but to reject it, inspired by hope for a better future elsewhere'.

Many of the chapters in this book reflect on how caste and tribal communities have used conversion as a sign of protest or revolt against the existing dominant religious and social order. For example, Geoffrey Oddie's and Ashok Kumar's chapters highlight the feudal oppression of the Shudra and the untouchable Mala and Madiga in the Telugu-speaking region of south India, respectively. Oddie argues that the Shudra considered conversion to Christianity as an opportunity to escape the exploitation and oppression of the feudal landlords. The successful work of the British Methodists among the outcaste Mala and Madiga in the region also facilitated the conversion process. The Shudra's conversion to Christianity severely undermined the authority of the local landlords, who unleashed a period of 'savage persecution' in an attempt to stop the conversion and missionary activities. This, however, could not deter the Shudra from

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converting. Oddie argues that in addition to their ambition to achieve material progress, what mainly inspired the Shudra's conversion to Christianity was their desire for 'freedom' from forced labour and protection from oppression by the upper caste feudal landlords.

Similarly, discussing the relationship between caste, communism and Christianity in coastal Andhra, Kumar considers how communist activism played a major role in creating caste consciousness among the outcaste Mala and Madiga and helped them to not only resist caste inequality and dominance but also prepare the ground for their conversion to Lutheran Christianity. For Kumar, Christianity was at the forefront of advancing an alternative Dalit liberation agenda, which enabled them to not only attain political power, but also economic independence. Kumar concludes that the village church and religious celebrations are used today by Dalit Christians as platforms to reassert their power and strength in the local political context.

While the Shudra and outcastes used conversion as a form of protest against caste hierarchy and oppression, the upper castes and feudal lords protested against conversion because it posed a threat to their power and dominance. Frank Heidemann's contribution to this volume clearly brings out this aspect in his discussion of how the conversion of the Badaga met with fervent resistance from co-villagers and relatives. Heidemann argues that what drove Badaga resistance to conversion was not opposition to a religious orientation but identity politics. Some villagers and relatives believed that conversion violated ethnic boundaries and threatened the 'unity' of the village. It also posed a threat to endogamy and landed property of the village, as well as violated principles of purity and commensality. Although the Badagas who converted were motivated by the idea of 'forgiveness of sins', according to Hindu Badaga villagers, by converting to Christianity their fellow villagers committed even greater sins. As a consequence, the Christian Badaga were excommunicated and excluded from the village social structure in the Nilgiri regions of Tamil Nadu.

Similarly, in his contribution, Sahoo discusses how the upper caste Hindu nationalists perceived conversion as a threat to their idea of a 'Hindu nation'. They believed that conversion from Hinduism, especially to Christianity and Islam, would increase their enemies, make Hindus a minority in their own nation, and endanger their agenda of making India a Hindu nation. Resisting tribal conversion to Christianity, the Hindu nationalists argued that the missionaries were using material incentives to lure the 'poor tribals' to Christianity, which was a violation of the constitutional right to freedom of religion. Furthermore, they argued that tribal Christians were taking undue advantage of the affirmative action (reservation) policies of the government and depriving the 'Hindu tribals', for whom the policies were originally formulated, of their rights.



Discussing caste–tribe relations and the politics of conversion in the context of Odisha and the freedom of religion and inducement in the context of Rajasthan, Sahoo shows how Hindu nationalists politicised the issue of conversion and mobilised people against it, often resulting in violent clashes between the two communities involved.

Fernande Pool's, Iliyana Angelova's and Vibha Joshi's contributions go beyond the caste factor and examine conversion as a form of protest against political dominance and the socio-religious status quo. In her chapter, Pool conceptualises conversion to reformist Islam as an alternative form of modernity that offers resistance to Western cultural and political dominance. According to Pool, conversion defies the existing power structure, particularly the hegemonic secularity of the Indian nation that has engendered a substantial moral void in people's lives, and offers new modes of cultivating the religious and secular self. Similarly, discussing the case of the Naga ethno-nationalist movement in northeast India, Angelova shows how conversion to Baptist Christianity was used by Sumi Naga as a form of resistance against the Indian nation-state. For Angelova, conversion to Christianity has helped the Naga construct a distinct collective cultural identity and strengthened their nationalist movement (Nagaland for Christ) for autonomy and political independence from the Indian state. Taking Angelova's argument further, Joshi shows how revival churches emerged between the 1950s and 1970s as a mark of protest against the Indian government's attempt to intensify security operations in Nagaland. In fact, their response to increasing persecution by the Indian armed forces was an intense desire to convert. As Joshi writes, 'the more that they persecuted, the more that Naga sought refuge in religion. Within a few decades Nagaland became almost entirely Christian'.

## CONVERSION TO MODERNITIES

Several of the chapters in this volume also discuss conversion in the context of what Peter van der Veer (1996) theorised as 'conversion to modernities'. The relationship between conversion and modernity is widely discussed in the anthropological and sociological literature (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Hefner 1993; 2013; Pelkmans 2009; van der Veer 1996; Washburn and Reinhart 2007). While secularisation theory of the 1960s discussed the incompatibility of religion and modernity and predicted the decline or privatisation of religion with the growing modernisation of society, anthropologists have convincingly demonstrated the co-existence of religion and modernity in contemporary societies (Hefner 1998; Joas 2009). In fact, several major sociological and anthropological works have demonstrated how the conversion of a single

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individual or entire community is often motivated by desires and dreams of modernity (Martin 1995; P. L. Berger 2010).

In his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (2005 [1904/5]) described modernity as a process of rationalisation and individualisation. He distinguished the ‘universality’ of major world religions from the ‘irrationality’ of primitive religions built around magic, and analysed the role of Protestant Christianity, in particular, in the making of European modernity. Peter van der Veer (1996: 3) argued that, in the Indian context, missionaries and the colonial ruling authorities believed Christianity to be superior to Hinduism. For them, what distinguished Christianity and made it attractive for people to convert was its unique emphasis on rationality (reason) and freedom (free will), in contrast to the irrationality and immorality of Hinduism. In particular, van der Veer pointed out that Christian missionaries and colonial authorities supported their argument by citing examples of the ‘authoritarian irrationality’ of India’s priests (van der Veer 1996: 3) and the immorality of Hindu practices such as widow burning (*sati*). Given the prevalence of such ‘backward customs’ in Indian religious and social life, colonial authorities strongly believed that there was a need for the colonised to be converted to modernity.

The conversion to modernities project was thus intimately attached to the civilising mission of Christianity and British colonialism in India. Carey Watt (2011: 1) has argued that in addition to bringing the benefits of free trade and capitalism, as well as law, order and good government, at its core, ‘the civilizing mission was about morally and materially “uplifting”, “improving”, and later “developing” the supposedly “backward” and “rude” people of India to make them more civilized and more modern’. In particular, Christian missionaries advanced scathing attacks on India’s caste system and offered an alternative and egalitarian socio-religious order through conversion to Christianity. As Nicholas Dirks (1996) argued, missionaries fiercely criticised the immorality of the Hindu caste system, especially the Brahman, and presented the low caste Dalits and tribals as ‘non-Hindus’ to facilitate their conversion project. In a sense, Christianity offered a new individualised notion of self, personhood and citizenship, to which Europe’s Others were to be converted (van der Veer, 1996: 9).

Similar accounts of conversions to Christian modernity are also found in the African context. For example, Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) have provided in-depth ethnographic narratives on how the civilising project of the colonial missionaries reshaped and reconfigured the mundane, ordinary and everyday social world of the ethnic subject in South Africa. Specifically, the Comaroffs argued that the colonial modernity project in Africa was not confined to ‘material’ improvements but also concerned the discourse on ‘individual rights’ (ibid.: 366). The creation of ‘stable, discrete persons [individuals] and properties’ (ibid.: 337)