

Godroads

The book aims at studying processes of religious change in India. The focus lies neither on any particular religious tradition, nor is it the aim to provide an encyclopaedic overview of conversion in different religious traditions. Instead, the studies presented here investigate the different modalities of religious change across and within religious traditions. In order to understand the different patterns involved, diverse cases are scrutinised. The cases are diverse in different ways. First, they discuss different religious traditions (Hindu traditions and sects, Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions). Second, they cover most regions of India. Third, the chapters discuss historical as well as contemporary examples. Finally, the different cases involve micro, meso and macro dynamics of religious change in different ways, dealing with large-scale political processes of colonialism and nationalism, dimensions of social structure in relation to conversion and subjective meanings of and motives for conversion. In this way, the book seeks to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon under study, a complexity that is also reflected in the multivalence and multidirectionality of the trope of Godroads, which is introduced here as a heuristic metaphor. Studying modalities of conversion means for the authors of this volume to identify patterns of the processes studied. To this aim, the comprehensive introduction provides, next to an overview of the relevant literature, a thorough discussion of theoretical approaches that attend in particular to structures in these (sudden or continuous) dynamics of religious change. The afterword by the Brazilian anthropologist Aparecida Vilaça, a specialist on conversion in the Amazon region, extends the comparative scope beyond India.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-49050-4 — Godroads
Edited by Peter Berger , Sarbeswar Sahoo
Frontmatter
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Modalities of Conversion in India

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, vic 3207, Australia
314 to 321, 3rd Floor, Plot No.3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108490504

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First published 2020

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-108-49050-4 Hardback

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Foreword

Piers Vitebsky

This is an important and original collection. Scholarly approaches to conversion generally focus on Christianity, seeing conversion as a distinctive feature of that religion in accordance with its own rhetoric. Christianity then appears as something one converts *to* from something else, often tracing a trajectory from polytheism to monotheism with an apparent teleological inevitability.

Numerous historical and anthropological studies, from early Europe (Brown 1995; Burke 1978) to modern Africa (Meyer 1999) and Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004), confirm that this kind of shift does indeed happen. But the chapters in this collection show that it is not the only possible journey. Western Europe is the point of origin of much colonialism and many missionaries, yet today people there are turning away from Christianity, which is in serious decline across the region. For India, this volume shows clearly how conversion is not only a story about Christianity – or even about conversion as such. Religious change takes place across Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as in India's numerous tribal religions. One of this book's important contributions, both theoretical and ethnographic, is to show how the same kinds of shifts can also occur right inside what is considered to be one and the same religion, where they manifest themselves as reformist movements. And Chapter 7 explores a deeply spiritual figure who moves between Muslim, Hindu and Christian devotional forms. Such situations are not so much examples of conversion, as of something that could perhaps be called religious adjustment.

Many religious discourses talk of a road or path. In religious terms, these seek a destination so other-worldly that it can perhaps never be reached. The roads in the title of this book refer to journeys with no end point, but for a different reason. They are also a historical and sociological metaphor. For a while, sometimes for generations, a community may feel static, with little change. Then, the pressure for change will build up, and the metaphor of a journey will again seem appropriate.

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The chapters in this collection survey a wide range of historical and contemporary situations across the country. The picture that emerges is highly interactive, as local situations are impinged upon by a range of influences, triggering reactions and counter-reactions: missionaries, communists, Dalit liberationists and prophets emerge from or are met by the agency, agendas and cultural depth of diverse populations. Contributors see these changes as process, as movements rather than moments, which in some situations can even lead to deconversion or 'retroversion', as different religious styles fail to face up to moral and existential questions of their time. In Chapter 4, some members of a community move to a more individualised Protestant Christian self, while others in the same community hold on to communal values for the sake of village unity and collective rights. Chapters 3 and 8 give us a move towards purification associated with a rising middle class. In Chapter 3, this move is towards reformist Islam as a protest against Western, rather than Hindu, dominance, and aims at the development of a modern ethical self which is both religious and secular. This contrasts with the process in Chapter 8, where Western dominance is resisted by performers through the development of a new *habitus* while their audience develops a new taste, both sides together intensifying an already existing Hindu tone. This Chapter 8 shows a Hindu elite resistance to colonialism, in contrast to Chapters 1 and 2, where low-caste resistance takes advantage of new possibilities opened up *by* colonialism. Several chapters also show protest against the conversion of others away from Hinduism (especially Chapter 9), as well as a move towards forms of Hinduism among tribes who may perhaps be regarded as not yet Hindu (Chapter 10). The enlightening juxtaposition of Chapters 5 and 6 explores the long history of Christian conversion among Naga groups from the quite different perspectives of identity formation and healing.

In her Afterword, Vilaça gives a thoughtful response from the perspective of a specialist on Amazonia, contrasting the hierarchical and totalising nature of Indian society (and one could add the essentialism of caste ideology) with Amazonia's egalitarianism, as well as with that region's ready transformations and reversals of identities between human and animal, kin and affine.

It is true that such Amazonian modes of being and becoming are strikingly un-Indian. But for me as an Indianist, these chapters also offer another lesson: that there is an almost infinite variety in what people do with the distinctive elements which the Indian cultural universe does provide. Against a background of these principles of hierarchy and holism, imperfectly realised or cleverly subverted, there is so much more going on than can be encompassed even by this collection. The Sora of southern Odisha are close geographically, linguistically and culturally to Berger's Gadaba (Chapter 10). Yet my own experience of studying them since the 1970s shows them to be travelling in a different set of

directions. All younger Sora are abandoning their parents' unique shamanistic dialogues with the dead (Vitebsky 1993). But while some turn to Baptism and other Christian churches, others turn to indigenised versions of reformist Hindu movements (Vitebsky 2017). These are not the Olek Dormo of the Gadaba but range from nationalist Hindutva-inspired versions to the cult of a unique Sora script revealed to a prophet in a dream, somewhat like the Ol Chiki script of the Santal (Carrin 2014).

All of these may be regarded as new Sora religions. While Hindu forms keep some strands of the old religion but bring them into line with national orthodoxy, Baptists reject everything that came from their ancestors. This reinforces the point that conversion need not be about Christianity as such since in political terms these new Christian and Hindu Sora religions are functionally equivalent. The old tribal religion, for all its subtleties and fulfilments, was rooted in a feudal regime of oppression and humiliation which has become unacceptable. Young Sora are not so much converting *to* something, as *from* an archaic local cosmology which has become too small and humiliating for the aspirational world of literacy and government jobs which they now inhabit. It is not that the structure of society has changed, but rather that they are now able to re-position themselves within the wider structures and values that encompass them. Various aspects of modernity and democracy had long been visible, but had not been available *to them*. What has changed is that they are no longer victims of a one-way extractive economy, but recipients of effective government programmes and participants in the nation-state as voters and political party candidates. Outside authorities – whether kings previously or politicians today – are no longer oppressors, but have become answerable and responsible as patrons (Piliavsky 2014). Where the Naga in Chapters 5 and 6 became Christians in order to resist the Indian state, the Sora do so in order to join it on better terms than before.

My own comparison outside the region would be, not with Amazonia, but with Arctic Siberia, where I have also done fieldwork (Vitebsky 2005). The comparison would reveal another distinctive feature of India which this collection brings out strongly: the intensely religious idiom of even the most political process. It would not be so in Russia. From the 1920s to the 1980s, the Soviet state strove to abolish religion altogether and create a population of atheists. Among the Russian majority it suppressed Christianity; among indigenous Siberian tribes it imprisoned or murdered their shamans (after the end of the Soviet regime in the 1980s, there has been a resurgence everywhere of religiosity in a variety of new or supposedly old forms). The Soviet revolution was a conversion to un-religion or anti-religion, in which religion featured as an inferior form within a spectrum of other, secular ideologies. But in the Andhra Pradesh of Chapter 2, the communists do not diminish religion, but facilitate a change

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that is itself religious. Similarly among the Sora, the escape from feudal oppression has come not through political movements as such but by turning to an array of alternative religions.

There are some great recent edited collections of papers which rethink an important topic comparatively across South Asia, such as Piliavsky's volume on patronage (2014). But there is nothing else like this volume, which will become a landmark reference point on the hugeness and restlessness of religion in India. No specialist on the region can afford to ignore it, while those who study any other region of the world will find fascinating echoes, reflections and contrasts.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of the chapters of this volume were first presented at the European Conference on South Asian Studies held at the University of Warsaw, Poland, in 2016.

Our individual contributions to this volume are based on research conducted in the context of a project titled 'Modalities of Conversion in India' funded by the Gratama Foundation. We thank the Gratama Foundation for its unbureaucratic and flexible support.

We would also like to thank Qudsiya Ahmed and Sohini Ghosh at Cambridge University Press for their cooperation and careful work during the publication process.

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