

## **Political Transformation in Nepal: *Loktantra* (Democracy) and proselyte of Religion**

### Abstract

The core Nepali political ideology has been in constant flux in the recent past. It has been going through continued religious transformation, especially after the 1990s and particularly since 2007 with the adoption of a secular republic in its interim constitution replacing the Hindu Kingdom - which was introduced in the 1960s. It has, thus, contributed in translating political values that was earlier drawn from religious texts to a modern, democratic, secular and liberal state. This has contributed in people being adhered to modern values and a noticeable size of people converting themselves into Christianity. Intercensal data suggest that after the 1990s, there has been a substantial increase in numbers where people have abandoned their traditional religion and adopted Christianity - it has grown up from 458 Christians counted in 1961 to 375699 in 2011 (CBS 2011). This has pushed a group of people in transition, especially those who have changed their religion to Christianity. The study, thus, explores the way in which this transition has taken place in the society. And at first place what is the reason of increase in religious proselyte in the context of political transformation? Further this paper attempts to show the driving forces of such religious proselyting and how finally being translated into cultural and social wellbeing. The study was carried out in Nagarjuna municipality of Kathmandu in 2015. 30 interviews on convention sampling and 5 case studies on grounded theory were conducted while using qualitative method of data collection. Analysis suggests that with the political transformation and democratic practices, a space to exercise religious freedom has emerged. Liberal ideology, democratization of society and state structure has contributed substantially. Moreover, extensive emergence of international development intervention has consolidated the effort. However, at societal level there remain stigma and isolation attached to any kind of deviation from traditional religious practices. This has put people in contradiction and confusion and has led to struggle when it comes to religious practices.

Key word; Democracy, religion, Christianity, transition, transformation

## **Introduction**

Nepali state's core ideology - *dharma* (religion), forms of political structure- has been changing across political transformations - particularly since 1960, 1990 and 2007. Pre-1990s Nepal was politically declared as a Hindu Kingdom, "Sanatan Dharma" was practiced and rest was principally punished. At that period namely Christians were jailed in the name of religion conversion.

*After 1990:* With the advent of democracy Nepal was declared as a multi religious state. The then constitution mentioned that "The State shall not be discriminated among citizens on grounds of religion. No discrimination shall be made against any citizen in the application of general laws on grounds of religion (dharma) under the fundamental right of equality. Similarly under the Right to Religion it mentioned that "Every person shall have the freedom to profess and practice his own religion as handed down to him from ancient times having due regard to traditional practices; provided that no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another. Every religious denomination shall have the right to maintain its independent existence and for this purpose to manage and protect its religious places and trusts". As a result jailed Christians were set free. Eventually Christianity multiplied in Nepal. 458 Christians counted in 1961 had become 31280, 101976 (0.45% of total population) and 375699 (1.42% of total population) in 1991, 2001 and 2011 respectively.

The interim Constitution 2007 declared Nepal as a secular state, which, provides freedom for religion and permits the religious practices of all groups, however, proselytizing is explicitly prohibited, i.e. proselytizing is illegal. . It has, thus, contributed in translating political values that was earlier drawn from religious texts to a modern, democratic, secular and liberal state. According to law here is no any official missionary, however, unofficial missionary intervention practice proselytize in the name of development.

It is relevant to highlight Article 18 in United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that – everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Nepal, being a part of this declaration, it has accepted the freedom to religion in Nepal.

Seppo (1984), in “In Search of Meaning and Identity” states that religious conversion is a phenomenon that raises many questions about the conversion situation and the conversion process of the converted people. Given the context, some questions should be noted – first, what is the reason behind the increment in religious proselyte in the context of political transformation? Second, what are the driving forces of such religious proselyting; and third, how this practice is being translated into cultural and social wellbeing?

Based on this study, the main reason for the people to change their religion is the faith or the trust upon the God, which has been observed to be raised by introduction and encounter with the god in the time of crisis. By the means of activities performed in the religious practice, they came into commitment. In addition, situation also made conversion a necessity. Wherein the mean time, the political transformation gave spaces for the change in the religion. More clearly, people believed the change as a part of life, i.e., if someone leaves the way of negativity and the wrong way and chooses to go through the right way they can meet the real meaning of their life. Although people faced a lot of social and religious obstacles in this conversion process as well as stressful social life because of stigma, they have been found to feel satisfied for what they had done in their personal life.

### **Research Methodology and Methods**

According to the agendas (Letters: Agenda of Hinduism Published: September 14, 2015 by *Raman Adhikari, Jorpati, in the Himalayan times*) of the RastriyaPrajatatra Party-Nepal to restore the Hindu state in the new constitution, it has been supposed to help control conversion of religion under false promises and other forms of temptations in rural areas where conversion to Christianity is on the rise. It further mentioned that nobody should be allowed to engage in conversion. This statement particularly interested me to sought the reason behind the change or attempt to change the religion, that raised some questions, such as - Are there any false promises and temptations being given by Christian agenda or not? Then why religion conversation is in geometric ratio? What was the relation between political change and proselyte of religion? In order to explore these questions, this study was carried out in Nagarjuna Municipality, Kathmandu, where there are numbers of churches being constructed and a good number of people conversing religion.

“Three most common objectives to study religion using qualitative data are 1) that religion is too complex to be classified and measured at all, 2) that quantitative methods are too simplifying and empiricist to be used within a non-positivist epistemological framework, and 3) that religiosity is too context-dependent and sensitive to measurement error to be reliably quantified.” (Researching religion using quantitative methods Ingrid Storm Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester) based on this; interpretive research method on qualitative data was carried. I developed structured open-ended questions. Those questions were developed on the basis of literature review then its issues were discussed with the political affiliated person and the pastor of church. Subsequently, I revised questions through pilot study and interview with two respondents. Then those questions were finalized with certain changes.

“Don’t simply choose to interview the first people you meet; instead, take time to observe and see what your options are before choosing informants.” (Whom should I interview? Nalika Gajaweera and Andrew Johnson POSTED October 21, 2015). While taking interview, firstly I build rapport with the respondent then I tried to understand their belief regarding the religion. Then I cleared the objective and purpose of the interview. I choose a comfortable setting and made an agreement of confidentiality. Instead of direct questions I structured around several focal questions like name, age etc. when I realized that the respondent is open up, I went through the structured questions. I took consent for the recording. Different probes were used to get depth and detail information in certain issues. When the relevant answers did not come I went through follow up questions.

Out of 30 respondents, I carried the in-depth study (case study) with the pastor of church, the widow who was the first person to convert the religion, a person who recently changed the religion, a paralyzed woman and a house wife. The purpose of choosing such variety of people is to understand their purpose of conversion of religion from different perspective.

In the case study firstly I choose respondents and collected data using participatory observations and interviews. The process for conducting case study research follows the general process as in other researches; plan, collect data, analyze data, and disseminate findings. For a case study I spend 3 days with each individual and I observed their behavior, how change in religion has affected them in their personal and social life. I interviewed them on the process of religion conversion. At the same time Triangulation was made across data sets so as to establish the validity.

The grounded theory analysis was the heart of the basic social process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was chosen because of its specific strength in the production of a theoretical explanatory framework of phenomena. Based on this approach continuous comparative, conceptualizing and categorizing data for analysis was done with Rambo's seven stage integrative models for conversion; context, crisis, Quest, Encounter, interaction, commitment, Consequence then data are put back together to make a connection between categories. After that I selected the core category systematically to generate a theory regarding how and why change or attempt to change religion takes place.

### **Life Cases**

Following cases reflect the way in which this proselyte the religion has taken place in the society. These case studies explore the reason of increase in conversion of religion in the context of political transformation. Further this paper attempts to show the driving forces of such religious proselyte and how finally being translated into cultural and social wellbeing.

#### ***Case 1***

Here is a case study of the pastor of church. He performs various tasks in the church like administrator, baptizer, community builder, encourager, emotional baggage handler, funeral companion, interpreter, justice seeker, mediator, missionary and so on. In short he gives advice and counsels to people from the community which rest pastor also do. Regarding the reason for his attempt for the conversion was his quest get matched with the interaction with the Christianity. Thus he committed to follow and flourish this religion.

*Professionally I am pastor of Church (studied B.Th). I become Christian from Hindu in 2055 B.S. I knew about the Christian through my elder sister. My elder brother and younger brother used to drink alcohol. Because of alcohol they had hearing problem and my family offer cock to god. I knew that Christianity is against of alcoholism, scapegoat, abortion, drug abuse, conflict, sex before marriage and polygamy marriage are sin. I avoid all these activities therefore I haven't any physical and mental problem. I and my family happily adopted the Christianity because, it fulfills what people wish. I didn't get any support from any religious institution. After adopting the Christianity I feel free, polite, and close with family and adopt girl as daughter. Other people think that there is some error and people get money after adopting but there isn't any materialistic support*

*and super institution in Christianity. I did not feel any social problem and religion based discrimination anywhere. Christianity makes my daily life easy. We should not follow this religion but we could be a disciple of Jesus because Bible doesn't talk about the Religion.*

When I analyzed this case I came to know that stereotyped rituals of Hinduism, social evils like drugs abuse, premarital sex, polygamy, and alcoholism caused him the problems and anxiety in his cognition and personal life. To get off from this kind problem and anxiety he choose to convert the religion. It shows that he was happy by religious conversion, where, from his point of view, every individual were treated equally whatever their caste, social status, religion, occupation and so on.

### **Case 2**

It is a case of poor women whose leg was paralyzed and she was separated from his husband for the same reason. Here the context of Hindu religion and her illness made her life situation a crisis. At the very moment she encounters the member of the church and she commits to this religion and becomes happy.

*Me a Hindu married woman turned into Christian because of my health condition especially my paralyzed leg was able to move as I regularly visited church and prayed for Jesus. Not only that I witnessed a miracle that, my mother survived because of prayers to god Jesus even doctor has given her death date. My son and daughter are also Christian and I am very happy to be Christian. I have a faith that by prayers to god only we can get lots of happiness as there is no extra burden of offering animals and other stuffs to god as in Hindu religion. Here in this religion I don't have to do unnecessary expenses, extra stuffs and any kinds of offerings to god. Moreover I am getting help for children for their study too. I am sure that god can produce a miracle by truthful prayers to god without any extra expenses. Now I have an enlightened on myself and have got strong self belief and self esteem by involvement in this region. Now I become more social and feel good about every visitor in church. I believe that each words of bible are very truthful and accurate despite of many criticisms.*

In this case, the main reason behind religion conversion is feeling of being protected and supported. First of all she felt that religion us prayers helped improve her health condition, and she is also receiving help for her children to progress a lot. The procedures of Christianity are simple and its economical then Hindu religion made people to choose this religion. Thus welfare

features and the teachings of church to poor Nepalese people were the factors for religious conversion.

### **Case 3**

It is a case of house wife who is occupied managing her home and caring the family members, for whom the happiness of her family is everything. She committed to change the religion because of the happiness she believed to receive in the situation of crisis caused because of conflict with her husband and illness of her mother.

*I knew about Christianity even before the time I was 10 years old. Intimacy of the Christianity touches me while reading the Bible; I find every aspect about the human life. Firstly, my mother changed her religion who had been seeking treatments at different hospital but all of the medicines totally failed to deliver. With no hope, she was living in a dire situation at her final stage when the god gave her the new life. After seeing the drastic change and healthy colorful life in my mother, I got more attracted towards the Christianity and began to follow this religion. No doubt, I will motivate further my generation to this religion. The nature of my husband is change after changing the religion. He used to drink alcohol, tobacco and was addicted to smoking but it's no more the case in him now. The enhancement of confidence and positive vibes in my body lead my life toward humanitarian deeds. The violence and inhuman feeling no more come to me. I often feel if I were in same religion then I surely would have involved in violence. My Family environment reflects peace, prosperity and happiness. Lending Helpful hands in the hour of need has developed in us. The major factor that affects the religion is the law of nation. In the law, there must not be restriction to change the religion. The beauty of this religion is the love for all and no discrimination based on caste.*

While analyzing this case I came to know that the verse of the bible, changing habit of her husband and healing of her mother's illness made her intimate with Christianity. She also felt positive vibes and increased self-confidence after the conversion. In addition, she also favored a caste free society and claimed that political environment define the law related with the practice of religion.

### **Case 4**

It is a case of a person who recently interested to follow Christianity.

*I year ago while I am searching for a job, I reached to the door of an INGO where they asked for my religion. I introduce myself as a Christian because one of my friends already told until and unless you are not Christian you will not get job anymore. From the same time I became the Christian. Before this while I am studying, once I read bible to understand about Adam and Eve. At that time too I realized that every religion is same. Every religion teaches us the way of living, helping own self and helping the needy. Now every Saturday I am being go to church where I am witness of the various miracles; by praying people illness were healed. My family members are rigid Hindu. Time and again they threaten me for going church. Even they scold me for my job too. Regarding Hindu religion, ritual and ceremony I have no problem. Even I have no problem to worship on idol of the Hindu God. Thus I even go to temple. The only problem which I suffering is while I go church, my family member scold me and when I go to temple my Christian friend scold me for worshiping the idol.*

While analyzing this case we came to know that education practice, international intervention influence him to choose and practice Christianity. He doesn't have any problem with any religion and ritual but when it comes to the strong follower, religion became the problematic issue.

#### **Case 5**

It is a case of widow who converted her religion at that time when it was principally punishable, about which she was even aware of being arrested. For her personal crisis lead her interest for conversion of religion.

*My husband had co wife and used to beat me daily. One day after I was beaten by him, I went to sleep and saw Jesus in my dream and became so close to Jesus. After my husband died I spent my money for his death ceremonial work. We Newar community have to expense a lot for this work. Thinking that mine children would use such money for themselves instead of spending in my death ceremony I followed Christianity and also did Baptist with my daughter. I was introduced about Christian from my father's little sister around 43 years ago. I felt lonely even with family, so I decided to follow Christianity. After changing religion society neglected me which hampered family relationship too. Even mine own brother who is Catholic, don't treat me well. After I left Hindu religion I didn't participate in any Hindu ceremonies and festivals. I had uric acid, diabetes,*



*pressure before, but after praying Jesus I am healthy and able to do all house works myself. If I hadn't change religion I would be waiting for any of my son for my care, so I think my decision was good. My elder and younger son is not Christian, they don't like it. At the time of conversion by Law is not allowed the people to change religion that time also I am not afraid to change because Jesus is with me. But I did not used to practice ritual, do not go church and introduce myself as a Christian. I haven't got any help from religious institutions and I don't expect too. But being a daughter of Jesus I can wish for others to get help for themselves. People think that we followed Christianity for getting money but it's wrong. We spend our own money to go church and for gatherings. I wish for betterment of those who have negative thoughts as Bible doesn't want others sorrow. I got freedom through Christianity. My daily works are being simple and easy. I don't need to spend lots of money in ceremonial and festivals. Instead I am helping poor and needy.*

From this case we can analyze that due to her isolation and loneliness in family, perception regarding the expensive ritual cost in Hindu religion are the major factor behind conversion. She converted religion for her self-satisfaction and for the good of her children; however, it made her away from her relatives and the society. That is why, she did not participate in any ceremonies. Before 1990, she could not present herself as a Christian and did not practice its ritual too because of the fear of punishment. More importantly, she did not receive and wish to get any help from religious group, rather she has faith that God will help her and she is enjoying the simple living without any expectation in this old age too.

### **Analysis**

Based on grounded theory approach; continuous comparative, conceptualizing and categorizing data were done, based on Rambo's seven stage integrative models for conversion; context, crisis, Quest, Encounter, interaction, commitment, Consequence. Through case study and interview I argue that, beside this step political environment and necessity play a signification role in the conversion of religion. Based on the analysis of interview following were highlighted which further support this argument.

### **Context (Sanatan Dharma)**

Almost all Nepalese used to follow Sanatan dharma. In sanatan dharma; Hinduism is in great extent. Nepalese are known by **castes** amongst themselves essentially for their identity. Basically, caste determines their way of life. On the whole, caste system has an important role in

social stratification in Nepal. Internally, Hindu Dharma had been a stratified society based on the caste system which is divided into four folds – Brahman (priests and scholars), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaisya (merchants and traders), and Sudra (laborers). In this caste system, the membership is both hereditary and permanent. There are six system of hindu philosophy i.e. Nayaya (belive in rationality), vaishesika (belive that every person have single meaning), Samkhya (scientific theory believe in evolutionary development), yoga (related with scientific physical fitness), Mimamsa (believe in supreme sprite of god) and Vedanta (believe in philosophy of vedh and upashinid). Thus, Sanatan Dharma has its own faith on different gods and goddesses with their particular characteristic. Traditionally, two form of caring illness were found – medical herbs and faith healer. While in a suffering people visit their faith healer and only then doctor.

### **Crisis and conflict**

*“While I am rigid Hindu, at that time no peace, joy and satisfaction in my life.”*

*“I believe in one god not in multiple gods.”*

*“Our relatives always attempt to harm us, changing religion that has been solution to get rid of them.”*

*“I also used to believe, Christian change religion for money and hide the caste but it is not true”*

*“It cost high to function a ritual in the Hindu culture”*

Practices of rigid Hindu system arouse a crisis in personal level and conflict in the societal level for the certain class of people. Stratified society based on caste system caused social exclusion, identity crisis and conflict for certain castes which resulted on stresses and tensions. In addition, the expensive cost of different Hindu ritual practices is another reason for the people to seek a way toward solution by religious conversion.

### **Quest**

*“Give your soul, mind and heart to Jesus and love your neighbour as yourself; forgive everybody then Jesus save people from sin.”*

*“Salvation is free from god”*

*“Yes I am free and there is no rigid boundary in my religion” and this is the reason why I converted my religion because “ if I had not converted my religion than I would have been in darkness”*

*“Love your enemy too. Do well to those who do badly to you, bless them.”*

*“To become a part of casteless society I choose this religion”*

*“Love your god; love your neighbour as you love yourself.”*

*“Family member’s happiness is my happiness, when my parents follow Christianity they become happy thus I also follow him.”*

*“Here in this religion I don’t have to do unnecessary expenses, extra stuffs and any kinds of offerings to god. Moreover I am getting help for children for their study too”*

*“I am poor so church and religious group support in our work and study.”*

Teaching and preaching of the Christianity became good tools for everyone to live happy life. Better carrier option, financial support and material assistance also interested people for conversion of religion.

### **Political transformation**

*“God is above the law”*

*“I would be Hindu if law doesn’t allow me to change the religion.”*

In Nepal caste system earlier incorporated in the National law which stratified the society where religion conversion was principally punished. But with the advent of democracy state shall not discriminate among citizens on grounds of religion. In other words, people are free to choose their religion. Although Nepali law forbids proselytizing (the act of attempting to convert people to another religion or opinion) but this law is not currently enforced.

### **Interaction and encounter**

*“I got Moral support and encouragement from religious group.”*

*“I introduce this religion through family member.”*

*“Surely faith is the substance; however this substance has to come from god himself. After my introduction to the church, God make me know sin and way for my salvation.”*

*“I listened and witnessed some of the miracle of good and the word from bible touched my heart and soul. I realized the way to eternal of life and salvation then I become part of this religion”.*

*“Seven years ago I used to smoke hisses, drink alcohol, one day I felt unconscious, I pray for all Hindu god and goddess but I don’t get light of hope. At the same time I realized the good news of Jesus which I heard from someone else then I beg for life where I got new life in form of invisible ray.”*

*“I introduce this religion before 5 years ago when I was sick where priest pray for me and become fine.”*

In searching way to dissolve the crisis people interacted with different people and they were encounter with a miracle; if they were sick they got healed, if they were addict they were able to leave it.

### **Necessity**

*“I believe that the view of two people who get married out of two different religions can hardly match”*

*“Yes, my religion affect plan to marry because I love a boy from Hindu and our religion become problem for us and our parents were also against us. Thus at the time of marriage this religion bother me a lot.”*

*“I wish a caste free society, in Christianity I got it”*

Marital conservation makes necessity of mobility to Christianity. Most of the people think that if both spouses belong to same religion there will not be conflict in their life. Their thinking and ritual will match. For social inclusion and outrank in society religion conservation become practical.

### **Commitment**

*“It has helped to change my life; I know the meaning of life. Preaching and teaching of Jesus changed my life.”*

*“Christianity is not religion it is change of life so to change life so we encourage other to change our life.”*

*“Going to church is one way of having fellowship with god, when you are in church you get to know others problem too. Fellowship is important and it is possible when you are together.”*

*“Everybody have to right to choose religion but conversion by brain wash and some economic purpose is not good.”*

*“I am changed as a person before I use to be very angry and worry but now I get strength and patient from spiritual belief.”*

*“I realized the meaning of life in earth and fell peace, joy on him (Jesus) or in this religion”*

*“I came to know there is only one god who is truth, righteous, holy, perfect and creator of this whole world.”*

*“By visiting religious institution it encourage, motivate teach good thing and help to eradicate our bad habit and thought.”*

When their crisis is solved within a Christian context instead of a Hindu, they convert from Hinduism to Christianity. Most of the people claim that they understood the value of life, meaning of life thus they were committed for Christianity.

### **Consequences**

*“If I am without this religion I would be materialistic rather than spiritual.”*

*“If I have not changed my life I will be drug addict.”*

*“If I don't have faith on Christianity, I would be dead or I will be the criminal.”*

*“My relatives look down upon me; they believe it is foreign religion.”*

*“People have misconception that it is followed by low caste, untouchable and poor.”*

*“Relatives have hated us because of conversion of religion they give parental pressure to our grandparents.”*

*“Some of my friends are not accepting me easily as a friend; some are not showing their thought directly backbite me.”*

*“In my society they gossiping that I might have been going financial help.”*

Many people claim that they will be in darkness if they do not converse the religion. Thus most of the people were happy on what they have done. At the same time it has to understand that family and relatives have a function of religion. Due to change or attempt to change the religion, among the same family there comes two or more religion in the same family which led stigma, stress while it comes with the practice of rituals. At the same time in societal level too such stigma is being seen.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that with the political transformation and democratic practices, a space to exercise religious freedom has emerged in Nepal. Liberal ideology, democratization of society and state structure has contributed substantially. Furthermore, the feeling of isolation caused by modernization and urbanization lead the people to search a way to reduce it. In such a transitional phase better carrier option, modern educational system and content, marital conversion with religion worked together as a powerful instrument that could link internal

problem with external opportunity resulted new religion to flourish. Thus the encounter with the religious group from missionaries, family, friends where sharing, caring, praying, analyze biblical verse made them see an alternative way to live a new life, which have been consolidated by the incidence of extensive emergence of international development intervention. Nevertheless, my observation could hardly see such a trend among the economically well established class of people. This shows that the religion conversion in some way related to economic or any other kind of assistance. The main reasons behind the conversion of religion can be highlighted as:

- Faith regarding the God for eternal life
- Healing from all the disabilities and diseases.
- For the freedom from all the stereotypes rituals of Hinduism
- Emotional care, fundamental support, Financial and material support (basically for poor)

Thus with the advent of democracy and secular democratic republic (2007), people who have crisis in personal life and conflict in social situation tended to build up a necessity for religious conversion of religion among certain people. The belief that Christianity leads to eternal life, which could lead them to - get modern values and practice by interaction and encounter with the missionaries, religious person and religious group of church; get freedom to choose religion as a result they hold, involve, encompass and combined with Christianity; get emotional care, fundamental support, financial support, materials assistance. As a result, people committed to adopt the new religion consequently those who proselytize were found happy in personal life at the same time when it comes to the societal level same attempt lead them to stress, stigma and isolation.

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