

## **Chapter I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

India is a land of multicultural society where diverse communities have been evolving in relation to each other for centuries. There are communities that originated from its own ground while numerous others made it their home even though their original land was somewhere else.

The term 'community' is derived from the old French word '*communaute*' that means a group of people living together in one place. Quite often it is also interchangeably used as 'society'. Different communities grow together and experience the changes which could be similar or different in degrees. The belongingness, identification and cultural values are not taken away even when different communities share the physical and political space with each other while maintaining some distinct features of their own. The development of any community depends on some essential factors: social, economic, health and hygiene, education, ethical and moral. My research explores Methodist Christian community's social, economical, health, educational and spiritual development at a local level where the Centenary Methodist Church of Baroda played an important role in shaping a new community.

The study assumes special importance because its subjects experienced significant changes in their lives. After conversion the major aspects of their life including religious, cultural, social, economical witnessed

an overall transformation. The introductory chapter tries to explore the concept of 'conversion' and its implications.

It is alleged that the Christian missionaries proselytized with the power of money that allured the ignorant and weaker sections of the Hindus and thereby displaced Indian culture with a foreign one and endangered social tranquillity and national solidarity. The attacks on missionaries have come largely from the dominant sections rather than dominated sections of the Hindu society. The missionaries have refuted each of the allegations and have countered back to defend their positions. It is possible that material considerations during calamities like famines and droughts could have led people to convert. In many cases, those involved in the mass conversion had been famine-orphaned. Yet, it would be rather simplistic to link conversions only with missionary relief during such times. The conversion presumes that they are effective during a subsistence crisis and come to a standstill after such a stage has passed.

During the imperialistic period and in times of social and economic dislocation, a group of people would express their aspirations through conversion. As I understand, the conversion movements were not only the work of outside agencies, like the imperialists and the missionaries, or due to famine conditions, but were the desire of the people who had their reasons for accepting and adopting another religion in the wider socio-religious context which was exploitative and unfair to a section of society. We had Dr. Ambedkar and his Buddhist conversion movement. There was not only the imposition of a religion by outside agencies, but also the free adoption of it

by the indigenes and we need to look into the reasons why, for instance, did some segments of society opt out of the Hindu socio-religious system. Did conversions occur as a result of the inadequacy of social conditions in the fulfilment of the individuals or the group's social, psychological, economic and spiritual needs on the one hand, and the conflicts in social situations on the other? In that sense, conversions were symptoms of the structural conditions of the Hindu social order. Conversions were a search for equality.

There have been many attempts to define conversions as opposed to proselytizing missions, at individual and group level. The former is what happens within a person while the latter is what one person does to another, applying pressure to change one's view or way of life. Conversion is "a process by which people move out of one's religious community into another".<sup>1</sup> To Frykenberg, it is a specific process of mobilization and transformation triggered by some deeper, more profound and radical shift of personal and communal including hard to measure psychological and ideological perceptions about customs and institutionalized life.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars view conversion as a consequence of persuasion, as a cognitive act, which may or may not be rational, calling for the total transformation of one's worldview, value system and behaviour. For others it is an altogether in voluntary consequence of cumulative and pre determined influences, arising perhaps from environmental factors, leading

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<sup>1</sup> G. A. Oddie, (ed.), *Religion in south Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 4

<sup>2</sup> R. E. Frykenberg, "On the study of conversion movements: A Review Article and a Theoretical Note", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.17, No.1, 1980, p. 122

to a different set of worldviews, values and behaviour. For others still, it is a miraculous supernatural event which a creative or redemptive Supreme Being performs. Hence, while some definitions stresses the spiritual transformation, others the social transformation at the individual or group level.

With these complexities in mind, one must attempt a working definition of conversion. According to Frykenberg it is "a change (event or process) from one set of beliefs of opinions to another, from one party, religion as 'spiritual' state to another."<sup>3</sup> Conversion movements occur when a single group of persons or groups of persons convert. These have occurred within and across all religions, within Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The best example of the emergence of a new religion out of the 'Hindu' beliefs and practices is found in the organised religion of Sikhism.<sup>4</sup>

The conversion process may bring about many changes in the convert: (a) socio-economic change (b) there is cultural change in its material (technology, dress, food habits) and non-material (values, norms, ethos, attitudes, beliefs, world-views) aspects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Frykenberg, op. cit. p. 129

<sup>4</sup> There is a huge body of literature available on this young religion. Amongst others J. S. Grewal and W. H. McLeod has significantly contributed to the understanding of the Sikh religion and tradition. For general argument see J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (New Cambridge History of India, II. 3), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990 and his *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. W. H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975; his *Exploring Sikhism: Aspects of Sikh Identity, Culture, and Thought*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Lancy Lobo, *Religious Conversion and Social-mobility (A case study of the Vankars in Central Gujarat)*, Surat: Centre for Social Studies, 1991 (Mimeo), pp 5-9

The question of why individuals or group of people change their religion has been a subject of numerous studies, particularly from sociological and anthropological perspective. The main concern of the latter has been identification of principal motivations in conversion movements and a critical assessment of the role of Christianity or social, economic and political aspirations in the process of conversion. This represents a reaction to an interpretation of conversion that emphasizes the role of the missionary and sees people as passive recipients of evangelization. Such studies focus attention on the initiative and active participation of the people themselves in the process of conversion. Conclusions about what exactly causes people to convert, the mode of conversion and the effects on their society differ among scholars.<sup>6</sup>

The question of conversion in India becomes highly problematic. Historians have examined the problem of conversion in relation to several socio-cultural dynamics and this has resulted in four main explanations. First, the problematic nature of conversion is due to communalism. It is argued that communal tensions in India were exacerbated by 'colonial modernity', particularly by the politics of encouraging different legal systems for different communities and by the late-colonial 'politics of numbers' through the introduction of separate electoral systems for different communities. In this explanation, tensions around conversions are related to community borders becoming simultaneously harder and more vulnerable. Second, the problem is due to conversion challenging the socio-economic establishment.

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<sup>6</sup> C. H. Sebastian, *In search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 2

The reasoning is that conversion undermines the hierarchical system of caste and at the same time disturbs the rural economic system of India in which high-caste landowners exercise tight control over lower-caste labourers. In this scenario, the conversion is seen as a threat not only to the caste system but also to the economic interests of the landowners and therefore opposed by Hindu leaders. Third, the conflict was provoked by the Hindu counter-conversion movement. In this view, the political rise of the movement for Hindutva—making India a Hindu nation—and the aggressive campaign of Hindu ‘fundamentalists’ resulted in the ‘manufacture’ of the issue of conversion as an excuse to bring about the political agenda of Hindu fundamentalist groups. Christian theologians and missionaries, on the other hand, have been concerned mainly with the methodological problems of Christian conversion, yet they share a common assumption with the historians who relate the problem of conversion to a particular aspect of Indian society—communalism, economics, politics or cultural diversity.

The Christian studies also tend to assume that the problem of conversion is socio-cultural rather than theological. In other words, people of other faiths reject Christianity not because of its content but because of the way it is presented.<sup>7</sup>

Rowena Robinson links Catholicism in Goa with Syrian Christianity in Kerala. Both the regions witnessed ‘significant conversions among the highest caste’. In both the cases conversion to Christianity did not entail a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 5

dismantling of the social system rooted in caste. Thus, the privileges of the Brahmanic caste communities that marked their existence within Hinduism continued to be operative even after their conversion to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Sathianathan Clarke's study focuses on conversion to Christianity in Tamil Nadu. On the one hand, conversion had to do with the deliberate movement of dalit communities away from their traditional religions which were in an intricate and ambivalent manner connected with local variants of popular Hinduism. This system of social and economic stratification left dalit communities cumulatively and comprehensively marginalized and exploited, living on the borders of dominant society. On the other hand, conversion involved a conscious embrace by dalit communities of a missionary-proclaimed Christianity. In the minds of the convert missionaries had the ability and the will to make economic and social capital available to such oppressed communities and could exploit their positive relationship with the colonial power that ruled India to aid the liberative activities of the dalit communities.<sup>9</sup>

John C. B. Webster deals with the *Chuhra* (sweepers) conversion movement in Punjab. According to his findings and interpretation, the movement of dalit conversion was initiated by the Chuhras themselves rather than the missionaries. Second these movements were local, sporadic and spontaneous. Thus it will be difficult to construct general theories that

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<sup>8</sup> See Rowena Robinson, "Sixteenth Century Conversions to Christianity in Goa" in *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings* edited by Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 291-322

<sup>9</sup> For details see his "Conversion to Christianity in Tamil Nadu: Conscious and Constitutive Community Mobilization towards a Different Symbolic World Vision" in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke edited *Religious Conversion in India*, pp. 323-50

are not context specific. Third, there were many different stages in the conversion movements through the period of study from 1873 to 1914. Notably though, the stage at which the mission began to be systematically and organizationally involved with the converts marks a significant point in the successful growth of the movement. Fourth, this conversion movement among the dalits cannot be understood as a liberation movement among the oppressed. The measurable gains were indeed modest but through the decades of struggle 'new emancipatory identities were forged.'<sup>10</sup>

Fredrick Downs in his analysis of the Christian conversion movement in the North-East India up to the middle of the twentieth century fends off the arguments of 'the political-imperial' and 'the foreign missionary zeal' explanations. Instead he argues for a 'cultural synthesis' explanatory model. Thus, large scale conversions among numerous tribals of the North-East are interpreted as collective choices for new worldviews which made sense and framed community living within a new context that got crystallized because of the traumatic changes that the British administration brought to this region. Here conversion to Christianity helped to galvanize the cultural and political synthesis of the tribal world over and against the Indian nation state, which was associated with a kind of peninsular Hinduism. Thus, Christianity is chosen here as a potent and suitable religious, cultural, social and political worldview to resist the domination of the unified nation-state.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John C. B. Webster, "Christian Conversion in the Punjab: What has Changed?" in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke edited *Religious Conversion in India*, pp. 351-80

<sup>11</sup> Frederick S. Downs, "Christian Conversion Movements in North East India" in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke edited *Religious Conversion in India*, pp. 380-400



Thus, the Indian Debate on religious conversion has been an ongoing one for a few centuries now. However, the mutual understanding between the advocates and the adversaries of conversion has not advanced much. Religious conversion has become the subject of passionate debate in coteremporary India from the political realm, in the media and in the courts. During the last few decades the dispute has attained a new climax in the plethora of newspapers, Journals and books whose pages have been devoted to the question of conversion. Apparently, a large group of Indians considers this to be an issue of crucial import to the future of their country. The positions in the dispute are clear. On the one hand there are those who plead for a ban on conversion, because it disturbs the social peace in plural India. This group consists mainly of Hindus. On the other hand, there are those who argue that conversion is a fundamental human right, which should be protected in any democracy.

Generally, the proponents of the right to conversion are Christians and secularists. In spite of the clarity of these two position, which have remained unchanged throughout the previous century, the debate has not seen significant progress. The discussions are still governed by the feeling of mutual incomprehension, unease and resentment. The gap between the different views on conversion is unbridgeable.

The Indian constitution addressed the issue of conversion more than half a century ago. In article 25, it is stated that "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and their right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion". Soon it would turn out that this piece of legislation was not able to resolve the problems around conversion in Indian society.

In 1954, the Madhya Pradesh state government launched an inquiry to proselytizing activities of foreign missionaries, which resulted in a report that recommended legal restrictions on conversion. In the next decade, the Orissa government endorsed a Freedom of Religion Act that put such recommendation into practice other states should follow. Recently, the Tamil Nadu prohibition of forcible conversion of religion ordinance added more confusion. The ensuing polemics demonstrated that the question of conversion is still as contentious as it was before. The situation is growing worse today. In recent years a similar enmity towards the proselytizing activities of Christians has suffered in Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup>

This study can broadly be seen as a part of local history as it studies the Methodist Church of Baroda and its contribution in the making of Methodist Christian community over a century from 1880 to 1980. To the best of my knowledge no research work has appeared in any form on this theme. Although there are general histories written by the priestly scholars of different denomination of Christianity in Gujarat, an academic monograph attempting a comprehensive study of different streams of the Methodist Church is found wanting. Hence the present thesis is a humble attempt in this direction.

The role of congregation, the followers, is quite important for the growth and development of any religious, social or political organization. Methodist church of Baroda has played very important role in the dispersion

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<sup>12</sup> Jakob De Roover and Sarah Claerhout, "The Question of Conversion in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 40, Number 28, July 9-15, 2005, p. 3048.

of Christian knowledge and in creating a sense of solidarity and community among its members.

The first generation of converts in Gujarat was baptized by Baroda Methodist Church during the first quarter of the nineteenth century turning itself into 'Mother Mission' of the whole Gujarat. The study covers a century of change for the poor and disadvantaged of Baroda. An effort has been made to situate this small Christian community within its socio-religious context, to discover not only what direction this community have taken in starting themselves away from the past degradations and deprivations but also to see at the same time what they have sought to sustain a sense of continuity in the midst of change. I have drawn on some case studies of several older members of the Methodist church and thereby tried to see why they left their old customs and embraced Christianity while acquiring a new identity. The forces of modernity and the challenges of mobility have also been explored.

Even though Christianity in south India (Kerala) is as old as it is in the west Asia, its spread to other parts is a much later story. If Portuguese brought the creed of Roman Catholics to western India in the sixteenth century, the Protestants took the lead to take it to the hinterlands of the subcontinent in the nineteenth century Methodists played a crucial role in this new wave. The Methodist church introduced an element of transformation of the lower class Indian communities bracketing them as 'Children of God' and converting them to Christianity. But this work of

conversion was not an easy and smooth affair. It was a contestatory action inviting aggressive reaction and at times incurring the wrath of the established orthodoxies. This also resulted in the negative image of the missionaries.

This study would hopefully correct that kind of misconception. During the crisis of 1899-1900 Great Famine the missionaries played a yeomanry role in providing the much needed succor to the dying masses. The means and methods of missionary services in those trying times kept coming on the lips of contemporary people even after sixty years of the calamity.

The establishment of the Methodist Church during the nineteenth century and as encouraged by Sayajirao Gaekwad III is remarkable in the history of Gujarat as well as in the history of Methodist Church. In the context of history of Indian women the contribution of Methodist Christian women missionaries and the local Dalit women converted to Christianity is very important. I try to highlight the role of Christian women in shaping the entire Christian community at Baroda.

Embracing Christianity brought many changes in the life of converts affecting their socio-economic and cultural life both in its material and non material aspects. The oppression and prejudices they suffered and a growing awareness of their social degradation forced lower caste people to choose an alternative path to upward mobility. So gradually there was social, economic and spiritual transformation of converts where the Methodist church's mission work assumes historical importance.

This study starts from a contextualizing historical introduction in chapter 1. The next chapter peeps into the background of Gujarat and Baroda under the Gaekwads. The beginnings of the Methodist Episcopal mission in India, then in Gujarat and subsequently in Baroda have been traced. The etymological origin of the Methodist Church has been discussed in this chapter. How the first establishment of Methodist Church in Bareilly, by Rev. William Butler and how in 1872 he was invited to Baroda by a group of army officers mainly Europeans and Anglo-Indian in the service of the Gaekwad of Baroda, how he organized a Methodist church in Baroda and how the Methodist Church constructed in Baroda in 1880 has been discussed at length. Rev. Edwin Frease's starting the Florence Nicholson Theological School in 1906 at Baroda is discussed in the context of the missionary need. The missionary work in Baroda in its wings of healing, teaching and preaching by the Baroda Methodist church with its special emphasis on the work of missionary women is highlighted. This chapter also deals with the administration of the church and its various activities. The process of urbanization and industrialization affecting the rural Christians has also been looked into.

The third chapter entitled 'Church and the Local Society' looks into the structure of Methodist Christian community. The chapter maps out various areas of habitation of the local community. The background of the new Christians coming from poor and socially degraded status is discussed here. Most of the converts hailed from untouchable castes such as bhangis, dheds, chamars and vankars. Apart from this numerically strong local Gujarat there was a small number of English speaking Anglo-Indians, Europeans as there were also a few Hindi and Marathi speaking people in

the Methodist community at Baroda. A part of the chapter deals with the discrimination faced by lower castes in Baroda. The chapter also attempts to study the cultural continuities and discontinuities as a result of the church. This chapter's main emphasis is on the contribution of the church in the development of the local society. The chapter gets into the issues of growth of Christian community, social changes, the condition of old people, the political life of the people and the question of security as a Christian.

The fourth chapter deals with the position of Methodist Christian women in Baroda during the period of the study. Pre-conversion position of Hindu Dalit women has been discussed. Their double disadvantage and exploitation of being women and being Dalit women has been highlighted. Christian missionaries played their best role in the field of education and women's awakening was an integral part of it. Service minded Christian missionaries turned out to be the pioneers in the field of women's education. The position of Christian women in Baroda after their conversion to Christianity and the role of Methodist women missionaries from America in this respect have been studied in details. Personal interviews have been used as testimony and evidence as the self-expression of their pasts. The Chapter also deals with the position of single women in the Methodist Christian community. I have also discussed about the marriage system in the community. I have also brought in the case studies of some outstanding women of Methodist church in Baroda especially highlighting their role in opposing the derogatory laws for the Christian women.

The next chapter deals with the Methodist church and social services. History of the establishment and work of Methodist mission schools

in Baroda by the missionaries, the student activities, financial support, management of the schools and hostels have been discussed at length. The history of Methodist boy's hostel in Baroda has been traced. A brief history of web memorial girls hostel has also been discussed emphasis has been laid on the role of women missionaries in the establishment and development of this hostel in Baroda their services for the girl's development. The chapter also deals with the background of the Methodist Technical Institute in Baroda. It also covers the history of the Methodist Graveyard in Baroda. To get a fair idea of management of the burial place, the graveyard watchmen and grave digger have been interviewed. It also throws high on their family backgrounds. A person who makes the coffin boxes has also been interviewed to get the details about the support of the church to the family of the dead. Various functions of graveyard committee of the church have been looked into.

The last chapter looks at the theme in retrospect and offers certain conclusions emerging from the analysis of the data collected from different sources.

### **Methodology**

Writing a local history whether of church or of community means, doing it in somewhat unconventional ways. Without neglecting conventional reliance on primary sources, collection of oral evidence gets more importance out of necessity. Various repositories including Smt. Hansa Mehta Library of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, the Theological Library of Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur, Methodist Bible Seminary Library, Vasad, Methodist Church Library Baroda, United

Theological College, Bangalore, Methodist Church Library, Anand and Methodist Church Library at Nadiad were consulted over the long six years of research.

Primary sources and records available in the Methodist Archives at the Leonard Theological College Jabalpur, Methodist Church Archives, Baroda, Gujarat State Archives, Baroda Circle at Vadodara, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai, Gujarat United School of Theology (GUST) Archives, and Ahmadabad have been consulted.

#### **Fieldwork and Oral Evidence:**

Fieldworks were conducted in different Methodist Institutions located in Baroda. The surviving Methodist Christian community elders were interviewed at length. Pastors and community leaders were also interviewed about their experience of respecting change, opposition, decline and/or growth of the community. This necessitated the maintenance of daily dairy and recording of interviews on audio cassettes.

The thesis has come to completion after a long struggle due to lots of reasons and unforeseen circumstances. The Methodist Church of Baroda has not maintained regular records of its functioning. The frequent changes in the administration also made it difficult for the incumbents to preserve the regularity. Even when there would be records produced on regular basis, they were not properly preserved. Therefore lots of records have been missing as they also eaten by moths. In the event of natural calamities like floods and famines the priority was given to helping the people rather than saving the records. Many got destroyed in such calamities. For the gaps in



the records I had to rely on the memories of the elders of the community. As far as my interviews are concerned some people who are now in a good position were not ready to share the 'reality' which their ancestors experienced but on the other hand some people warmly recalled their elders' plights and sufferings.