Why Is Religious Conversion Controversial in India?

In Search of Identity – Debates on Religious Conversion in India by Sebastian C H Kim; Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003; pp xi+250, Rs 525 (HB).

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Debates on religious conversion have engaged in India right from the first half of the 19th century and have continued to date. Since it is no longer a mere intellectual debate and the issue of conversion has spoiled the relations between Hindus on the one hand and Christians and Muslims on the other, it needs serious attention. The book is a welcome addition to the current literature on the theme, as it discusses dispassionately and in detail and with scholarly fairness, the arguments on both sides right from the days of Ram Mohun Roy up to the beginning of this century. In this debate only the Christians seem to have joined issue with the Hindus, since Muslim participation in the debate is not audible in the book. It may be recalled, however, that Sir Syed Ahmed was also opposed to Christian proselytism in the 19th century.

The book is at a high scholastic level and its usefulness is further enhanced by Appendices containing a summary of the debate in the Constituent Assembly (1947-49) on the issue, summary of recommendations of the Niyogi Committee Report, the main provisions of the laws enacted in Orissa (1967), Madhya Pradesh (1968) and Arunachal Pradesh (1978) to regulate conversions, and the provisions of the aborted bill in parliament (1978) which had intended to regulate conversions in the country as a whole but was dropped leaving the states free to enact legislations to that effect. The author is understandably silent on whether this legislative activity was effective at all in checking conversions in practice in the three states.

The Christian accommodation to Hindu criticism through ‘contextualisation’ by Protestants and ‘inculturation’ by Catholics and the problems caused by it are some of the most interesting topics in the book. The very attempt to reduce social distance between Hindus and Christians led to protests both from orthodox Christians who were afraid of assimilation into Hinduism and also from some of the newly converted from the deprived classes who were opposed to upper caste orientation. The tragedy of Christian conversion in India, which the author of the book has pushed under the carpet, is that in accommodating the interests and the status of the converted elite, Christianity freely accommodated casteism too. This happened in the case of Islam too in India.

The most important question which bothers the author in the book is why religious conversion is so controversial in India. His answer in brief is that it is because of the mismatch between the perception of Hindus and that of Christians. Hinduism accepts all religions as equally valid, with all of them offering the possibility of salvation. Once oneness of god is conceded, there is no separate god for Muslims, Christians and Hindus. If both these propositions are accepted, attempts to convert from one religion to another are taken as signs of aggression and intolerance. This is the Hindu case. The Christian case on the other hand rests on the right to freedom of religion and conscience, which explicitly and inseparably includes the right to convert. The right to convert is part of Christianity itself and if this right is not conceded, it amounts to intolerance. These are irreconcilable positions and the author concludes that the debate will continue without either side yielding to the other.

I think that this philosophical answer is not adequate and lacks both a historical and spatial dimension. To really answer the question in full, the author should have gone beyond the British period in time and beyond India in space. Conversions took place all along in India before the British period too, particularly since the Buddhist period. Even after Muslims came and Buddhism totally disappeared thanks to the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries-cum-universities like Nalanda by Muslim invaders, conversion was not posed as a philosophical, social or ethical issue. India – both ancient and medieval – did have a tradition of heated debates, but conversion was never an issue till the Christian missionaries came during the British period. This may look surprising, because many times more Hindus were converted during the Muslim period. The author does not even raise this question, let alone answer it.

Two factors, which combined during the British period, must have contributed to make the issue a matter of debate during the last two centuries. The first is the rise of Hindu consciousness, and the second is the emergence of conversion as an option, rather than a matter of compulsion.

Though during the days of dominance of Buddhism, conversion was an option and not a matter of political compulsion, there was no Hindu consciousness as such. The line of distinction between Buddhists and Hindus (or, those following ‘sanatana dharma’) was very thin and unclear, even if theologically the line was clearer. Socially, Hindus and Buddhists were not distinct communities. During the Muslim period, a separate identity of Hindus as Hindus developed gradually and came in sharp focus during certain periods as during the period of Sikh Gurus and of Shivaji. Though Hindus and Muslims were distinct communities, there was a lot of social inter-mixture and interaction between them. However, the reason why conversion was not an issue of debate was that conversion then was not in the realm of an option freely exercised, but was a matter of political, economic and social compulsion. A large number of Hindus were converted to Islam in the context of conquests, or to avoid paying the heavy tax of jizia. When a matter is not one of free choice, an intellectual debate may appear meaningless. But it was during the British period that both these factors combined resulting in sensitiveness to conversions. By then Hindu consciousness had developed and matured thanks particularly to the Renaissance leaders like Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Vivekanand, Tilak, Gandhi...
and Aurobindo. All of them, while trying to purge Hinduism of its evils, also showed that the basic core of Hinduism was something of which one can feel quite proud. Secondly, it is to the credit of the British that they did not impose Christianity as a matter of compulsion on Hindus, and left it mainly as a matter of choice. They may have indirectly tried to make Christianity more attractive, but their rule was by and large non-partisan and secular.

The same conclusion is obtained if one goes beyond the spatial limit of India in answering the question. Why is religious conversion not controversial, say, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Saudi Arabia? Simply because, conversion is not available as choice, and apostasy can invite death as punishment. There can be no debate on this. We may also ask why religious conversion is not so controversial in the US or Europe, where in contrast to Muslim countries, conversion is available as a choice, but is controversial in India. It is not difficult to answer this question if one does not forget how India was broken apart into two countries, only because Muslims – at least a large section of them – wanted a separate country for themselves on the basis of a separate nationality, though most them were descendents of Hindus. When a Christian population becomes a majority in a given region, there also there is a tendency of a separatist and even militant movement. With this background, is it any surprise that Hindus become concerned about conversions? The US and modern Europe have not so far at least faced such a situation. Consciousness of threat to identity on religious lines or to national integrity is not acute among the majority there so far. When Europe faced the problem of ‘other’ religion in the medieval period, it showed far more ruthlessness and ferocity and on a much vaster scale than ever shown by Hindus.

One may argue that poverty, hunger, illiteracy and economic backwardness should have been more important concerns in India than religious conversions. Indeed, the former are more important. But what if our poverty, hunger and illness are taken advantage of in the name of humanitarian work to convert the poor in their vulnerable and gullible situations? Moreover, are Christian and Muslim populations free – at least relatively free – from poverty, hunger, casteism, etc, as compared to the Hindu population? Should the former not attend to poverty amidst their own populations rather than to conversion of the poor among the Hindus? If poverty alleviation is sought after for its own sake on humanitarian grounds, then why bother about conversion? Kim points out to the non-availability of positive discrimination (reservation, etc) to scheduled caste and tribe converts to Islam and Christianity as an instance of Hindu intolerance. Kim, it seems, wants to eat the cake and have it too. If conversion is supposed to remove the Hindu evil of casteism and thereby end social deprivation, how can there be a case for positive discrimination for those who are converted? If conversion does not end casteism and social deprivation, then why employ conversion as a tool and fish in troubled waters?

While the right to practise and even propagate one’s faith is admittedly a human right, right to convert is not, as was clarified by the Supreme Court in 1979 and as referred to by Kim himself (pp 80-81). What is more important at this stage for communal harmony is to create an environment in which followers of one religion can understand other religions and their principles, without the complications of conversion. Conversion only vitiates this environment and creates tensions. As Kim points out, even Christianity has now gracefully admitted that salvation is possible in other religions too (pp 147-48). This brings Christians close to Hindus and should remove tensions between them if they follow the logical course of giving up their obsession with conversion. Hindus can then develop a natural reverence for Christ. His preaching of love and service to humanity are already an inherent part of Hinduism. Similarly Christians can also develop respect for Vedanta and Yoga, without having to become Hindus. Such mutual respect and understanding is possible, if the agenda of conversion is withdrawn.

The real challenge before the Hindus today is not so much one of conversions, as of retaining their historically tested tolerant and nonviolent character of living amicably with pluralism and diversity, even while resisting aggression from other religions. Whatever be the provocation, no civilised society should indulge in lawlessness and insane cruelty.

I do not intend to summarise the arguments on both sides on the issue of conversion, presented chronologically and faithfully in Kim’s admirable book. To do justice to them will take several pages. It is better that readers go through the book itself, which they will find interesting and rewarding. Though I had only recently written on the theme of conversions in EPW (January 18, 2003), I had not raised this question of why religious conversion was so controversial in India. I am glad that Kim’s educative book raised this question and gave me an opportunity of adding something to his answer.