

**RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AMONG DALITS IN LELE OF  
LALITPUR DISTRICT NEPAL**



**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the MPhil Programme in Sociology,  
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this MPhil dissertation entitled “Religious Conversion among Dalits in Lele of Lalitpur District” is submitted by me to the Central Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, Nepal is an entirely original work prepared under the supervision and guidance of supervisor Prof. Dr. Surendra. I have made due acknowledgements to all ideas and information borrowed from different sources in the course of writing this dissertation. I am solely responsible if any evidence is found against my declaration.

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**LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION**

This dissertation entitled "**Religious Conversion among Dalit in Lele of Lalitpur District**" has been prepared by **MS. Pushpa Shah** under my supervision and guidance. I, hereby, recommend this dissertation for final examination to be undertaken by the Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of **MASTERS OF PHILOSOPHY in SOCIOLOGY**.

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**APPROVAL LETTER**

This dissertation entitled **“Religious Conversion among Dalit in Lele of Lalitpur District”** was submitted by **Ms. Pushpa Shah** for final examination by the Research Committee of the M.Phil. Programme in Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology. The Research Committee hereby certifies that this dissertation was found satisfactory and accepted for the degree.

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## ABSTRACT

The study “Religious Conversion among Dalits in Lele of Lalitpur District” focuses on theoretical concept and perspectives of religious conversion among Dalit community in Lele of Lalitpur District.

The research problem of the study is theoretical identification of Religious conversion, its motivating factors, causes and consequences. Following the research problems, the study primarily explores motivation, causes and consequences of religious conversion.

Therefore, to meet this objectives, mostly primary and qualitative data were used. Primary data were collected through in-depth interview, focus group discussion and case studies. Sample size of the study was 15.

Structuration theory is used as the theoretical framework to find out the structuration process of religious conversion.

It is mostly debated among agency approach and structure approach of shaping individual however this study concludes neither only agency approach nor structure approach which are strong to explain religious conversion. Therefore, structuration approach covers the religious conversion process.

This study finds agency and structure being interrelated. Individual and social network are shaping the religious conversion among Dalit. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering mutual respect and dialogue among diverse religious groups. Future research could focus on long-term impacts of conversion on individual well-being and community integration, as well as strategies to promote peaceful coexistence among different faith communities. Ultimately, acknowledging the motivations and consequences of religious conversion can help policymakers, religious leaders, and social organizations navigate interfaith relationships more effectively

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**ABBREVIATION/ACRONYMS**

CDS	:	Central Department of Sociology
FGD	:	Focus Group Discussion
GOs	:	Government organizations
GAD	:	Gender and Development
HOD	:	Head of Department
NGO	:	Non-governmental Organization
SHG	:	Self Help Group
UN	:	United Nations

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Founders of sociology, more or less, they studied religion as major structure, an institution, as super structures. Sociology of religion is the study of beliefs, practices and organization through sociological methods. Sociology offers and analyses of rich data from personal beliefs and practices to organizational setting. It examines socio-political analysis and critiques of cast based hierarchical system and religious conversion upon their implications for policy and practice. Religion conversion is a social. This conversion is assessed through Giddens structuration theory. Because, individual and social interaction are the main process of any social activities. There is structure and there is agent, these two are single process of a coin. Giddens (1994) argues, structuring the structures. However, mostly researches have neglected the in-between process such as mezzo process. This research tries to unpack this mezzo process applying Giddens theory.

Sociologists have long discussed social events from a sociological point of view. The three founding fathers of sociology—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—brought theories from the field of sociology of religion to their respective fields (Katuwal, 2022). He further writes that founders simply believed that modernity has replaced religion, however, religion is still a social force. Now it can be believed that religion still held significant influence in Iranian society. This is a phenomenon that sociologists find extremely important. Since the sociology was evolved, most of the sociologists draw their theories through studying religion (Katuwal, 2022).

### Conceptualization of Religious Conversion

“Conversion is the process of an individual or a group changing religious allegiance from one faith or community to another or from no particular religion affiliation to one with an identifiable name and organization” (Roof & Juergensmeyer 2012:251). Gooren (2018) writes religious conversion is a process that entails a change in religious affiliation, worldview, and identity. In turn, the conversion process dialectically establishes (and often changes) the very entities to which and from which people convert. Modernism theory argues that religious conversion increases when

society turns into modern. Moreover, United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 18 declares 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” (The United Nation, 2012).

Snow (1984) discusses on religious conversion in three broad categories. According to him, three categories are social network, affective and intensive interaction and impressive role learning. In the first category, he emphasizes it's crucial to keep in mind the distinction previously stated between membership and conversion while analyzing the connection between social networks and conversion. In order to understand how individuals are drawn into new religious movements and organizations, social networks are crucial. In second he focuses on how people interact with others group regarding conversion.

And third is role learning, which focuses on the active and impressive role. Those people who are playing crucial role might influence others easily. In attempting to account for conversion by focusing on social influences, a number of scholars have drawn upon the well-established tradition of role theory.

Conversion involves more than just a shift in identities, values, and beliefs; more importantly, it involves the displacement of one discourse universe by another or the rise of a once-peripheral discourse universe to prominence. Such an understanding does not limit conversion to only switching to a different religion or adopting a religious worldview in places where none previously existed. Furthermore, an inactive member of a religious group may start to see outdated but unimportant concepts with fresh vigor and clarity. As a result, what was previously on the periphery of consciousness becomes central, and nominal belief becomes "true" belief. Therefore, it is possible to think of both regeneration and consolidation as types of conversion.

Dhakal (2014) writes conversion is a process and general phenomena of religious change that take place in a dynamic field of people, ideologies and expectations. Religion conversion is a social phenomenon. That occurs in society due to social disparity and discrimination. Religious conversation was prohibited in Nepal, however, slowly, it has been increased and implored by the time and space.

Nunn (2010) writes religious conversion in Africa, history of conversion and how European claim themselves a developed and Christianity is the backbone of European, He further says, “ An unprecedented surge of missionary activity occurred in Africa throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.” The advent of colonial power, which demonstrated to Africans the advantages of European education, had a significant role in the missionaries' success at this time. "With the dawn of the twentieth century, Europeans became associated with power, and Christianity itself was perceived as a component of a broader system that included Western education, colonial governance, trade, and industry, and that everyone had to deal with going forward," writes Robin Horton. The atmosphere for conversion was greatly improved by these modifications.

An increasing number of Indian states have passed legislation in recent years to prohibit religious conversion, specifically focusing on conversions that occur through "force" or "allurement." The laws that exist today have their roots in the anti-conversion, apostasy, and public safety statutes that were enacted in British India and a number of princely kingdoms during the colonial era. It appears that enforcing such regulations would necessitate evaluating the intentions and volition of the converts in order to ascertain whether or not they were "lured" into becoming believers. Government evaluations of the legitimacy of conversions in modern India typically rest on two erroneous premises: first, that those converting in groups might not have done so voluntarily, and second, that members of particular groups are more susceptible than others to being seduced into converting to a different religion. These presumptions are prevalent across the anti-conversion (Jenkins, 2008).

### **Sociology of Religious Conversion**

Religion also interacts with modernity, often clashing with or adapting to secularization. While some theorists, such as Emile Durkheim, believed that religion would diminish in modern societies, contemporary scholars recognize a more complex relationship where religious movements adapt or react against social trends like globalization and individualism. Katuwal Further writes that Sociologists have always used a sociological perspective to the analyses of social events. Founding fathers of sociology Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, all of them brought a theory from sociology of religion; however, their main assumption was that modernization will

replace the religion. Future is not measurable, there is saying that the morning shows the day, however, that is only for a short time not for long time, the position and the learning is same for sociologists. What the founding fathers of sociology predicted was not always that in Iran when Khumaini Movement succeeded and then the sociologists have to think that religion still has power in society and it's a very important phenomenon for sociologists (Katuwal, 2021).

Critically, social change can provoke religious transformation as well. For example, feminist theology has emerged as a response to gender inequality within religious institutions, advocating for reinterpretations of sacred texts to promote gender justice. Moreover, religious conversion was used as tool for liberating humans from inhumane activities, promote their dignity, overcome from discriminations and deprivations.

The sociology of religious conversion examines the processes, motivations, and social contexts that drive individuals to change their religious affiliations or adopt entirely new spiritual identities. Conversion is understood not only as a deeply personal journey but also as a socially influenced phenomenon, often shaped by family, peer networks, cultural shifts, and global trends. Scholars like Lewis Rambo outline stages of conversion, including crisis, interaction, and commitment, while others explore the role of identity reconstruction during the process. The phenomenon reflects broader societal patterns, including the negotiation of tradition and modernity, and the ways in which religion adapts to social change. Conversion can serve as both a tool for individual transformation and a means to solidify community belonging.

The Lofland-Stark model of religious conversion, proposed by John Lofland and Rodney Stark in 1965, outlines a process of conversion that emphasizes both personal and social factors. It consists of six key conditions or factors that increase the likelihood of an individual undergoing a religious conversion:

**Rejection of Existing Beliefs:** Converts often experience dissatisfaction or a sense of disillusionment with their current religious or ideological beliefs.

**Exposure to New Religious Groups:** Individuals are introduced to alternative religious beliefs or practices, often through social interactions or encounters with proselytizing groups.

**Religious Group Commitment:** Converts develop a commitment to the religious group and its community, often through increased social interaction with group members.

**Isolation from Prior Influences:** Converts tend to distance themselves from previous social circles, which could include family, friends, or other societal influences that might hinder their conversion (Lofland & Stark 1965).

**Cognitive Openings:** Converts experience psychological states that open them up to new ideas, such as life crises or periods of vulnerability, which make them more receptive to religious messages.

**Opportunities for Learning and Reinforcement:** The individual is provided with ongoing opportunities for learning and reinforcing the new belief system, typically through teachings, rituals, and community support.

The model highlights the importance of both personal transformation and social networks in the conversion process. It also stresses the interaction between individual cognitive shifts and social group dynamics, showing how individuals are not only motivated internally but also influenced by the larger social environment (Lofland & Stark 1965)

## **1.2 Statement of the Research Problem**

There is a growing trend of non-Christian conversion, particularly among Nepal's Hindu population. Numerous Hindus have converted to Christianity for a variety of reasons, including attachment to Christian doctrine, needing to overcome specific obstacles, the influence of other converts—friends, family, coworkers, etc.—and general unhappiness or dissatisfaction with their religion in general. According to Rambo, "there is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process." Taking note of all these factors, the researcher in this thesis focuses on the Dalit community's conversion to Christianity within the Hindu faith, which appears to be more common than the conversion of non-Dalit within the nation. Due to caste prejudice and discrimination Hindu religious hierarchy has left people dissatisfied in the twenty-first century. Is conversion aiding in the eradication

of caste prejudice? Are they happy that they converted to Christianity? Is Christianity able to alleviate caste-based prejudice in their daily lives and society, or not? All of these topics, as well as the scenario of the lower caste Hindus becoming Christians and the background of caste-based discrimination in Nepal is the main topic to bring into discussion in this study.

The increase in the number of religious conversation is challenging. According to Fricke (2008) clearly argues that in the first census of Nepal shows that there were only 30 Christian people in Nepal, first census was held in 1950. However; that number was increased up to 200000 in 1990.

Cast based discrimination still remains an unabated even today (Louis, 2007:1404), he shows the case in Hariyana India, and however the case is similar to Nepal shown by the Fricke (2008).

The increase in religious conversion, particularly among Nepal's Hindu population, poses significant challenges and raises critical questions regarding the dynamics of religious identity, social stratification, and cultural transformation. Despite legal restrictions against proselytizing, the number of converts to Christianity has been steadily growing, especially among marginalized communities such as the Dalit, who face persistent caste-based discrimination within the Hindu faith.

Due to formidable task, therefore, this research focus on why the people converse their religion and either social structures are obstacles or motivating to conversion. Major research questions that this research tries to answer are:

1. How do Dalit convert their religion? What are the causes that encourage people to convert their religion?
2. How society and state encourage or discourage Dalit to change their belief system? What are the causes and consequences of religious conversion?
3. Why do Dalit people think about converting religion and how do they convert their religious belief/faith in Lele?
4. What happens in the social life, culture and relationship of people when they convert their religion in Lele?

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The general objective of the study is to explore respondents' views on conversion. To be specific, it aims to:

1. Investigate the mechanisms and motivations behind religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, Nepal:
2. Assess the causes and consequences of religious conversion, including changes in social dynamics, cultural practices, and interpersonal relationships within the community.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The review of theoretical literature on Marxism, neo-Marxism, and social construction of conversion with regard to the scope of this research assess the relevance of existing theories on sociology of religious conversion. Since this research aims to assess existing state policies to conversion, it sheds light on the gap between people's isolation through the caste system and Dalitization of system and cause of religion conversation. Overall, this research contributes to study state policy and social setting and religion conversion.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter highlights on review of related literatures on sociology of religious conversion, its causes and consequences. Moreover, this chapter reviews both theoretically and empirically.

#### **2.1 Theories on Religion Conversion**

Oxford dictionary defines religion as the belief in and worship of a superhuman power or powers, especially a God or Gods. Durkheim (1995) Religion is a unified system of belief and practices on sacred things. Sociologists are more interested in sociology of religion, however, reluctant to embrace it and has been taken as ghost. Marx saw religion as opium of the masses and Max Weber argued religion could be the force of social change, in particular, source of social action, in contrary, Marx saw religion as static and obstacle for social change, in doing so, he saw religion as alienation (Katuwal, 2022). I mentioned here some of the founding fathers view on religion. Some of the other founders such as Sigmund Freud argues religion and personality. He writes Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful impulses. Sociological theories focus on external observable and environmental factors which implies to conversion.

Gogoi (2019) writes that conversion is western ideas. And the root of this was is latin which means conceptually very fluid in nature and changes belief system one to another. However, we often realize that religious conversion means converting into Christianity. Religion conversion can be understood to convert to any religion which is different from the previous one religion which was adhered earlier.

Religion conversion is socially constructed (Cockerham, 2013; Olafsdottir, 2013; White, 2002; Dorothy, 1999). Social construction means that society or social practices have power to produce, expand, eradicate or reproduce any cause. Based on the idea of social constructionism (White, 2002), religious conversation, which is caused by multiple social realities. Cultural practices of a society, political-economic condition of a nation or state policies are equally important in shaping religious

conversion of the people. Religious conversion is a social phenomenon. Religious conversion occurs in society due to social inequality and discrimination. Those people who are deprived from larger social opportunity and polarized into a lower status due to Hindu dominant social system.

According to Andrew Wingate, there are four perspectives of religion conversion which are given as follows: namely they are religious/ theological, social/cultural, personal/psychological, and political/economic/institutional. However, my research is sociological research that is why, while doing sociological, we follow the sociological theoretical lens and sociological bases of research. My study focuses on social perspective of conversion.

This research explores the causes and consequences of religion conversation by applying Giddens structuration theory. This research unveils how people convert their religious faith, whether based on their individual choices or structural arrangement or both, if both are responsible on conversion, what is the mezzo process of structuration, this is the argument of this research and also argues the implication of this theory to measure the process of conversion.

Religion conversion in Nepal has been current issues in sociological studies. Now, it has been discussed in public domain. Christianization and Dalitization is being contested and has become salience issues. In India, huge initiatives have been made to encounter religious conversion, different anti-conversion laws have been passed.

### **Founding Fathers of Sociology and their View**

Émile Durkheim (1912) argued that religion is a collective social institution that fosters social cohesion and collective consciousness. In his seminal work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim posited that religious conversion can be seen as a shift in collective identity, where individuals move from one moral community to another. This transition is not merely spiritual but has social implications, as it redefines group boundaries and social belonging (Durkheim, 1912).

Durkheim's perspective highlights the social function of religion in shaping group solidarity. He believed that religious rituals and symbols create a shared sense of

identity, reinforcing moral norms and collective values. When individuals convert from one religion to another, they are not just adopting new theological beliefs but also integrating into a new social order. This process of conversion can bring about both acceptance and resistance within the broader community, as shifts in religious identity often challenge existing societal norms (Durkheim, 1912).

Furthermore, Durkheim (1912) emphasized the role of religion in providing meaning and purpose to individuals. Religious conversion, from this viewpoint, can be interpreted as an individual's quest for belonging and moral guidance within a structured belief system. Among marginalized communities like the Dalit in Lele, conversion to a different religion—often Christianity or Buddhism—can serve as an avenue for reclaiming dignity, accessing social support, and breaking away from historically oppressive structures associated with the caste system. This aligns with Durkheim's assertion that religion functions as a source of collective energy, offering individuals a sense of empowerment and renewal.

However, Durkheim also recognized that conversion can disrupt existing social structures, leading to tension and resistance from the dominant religious or social groups. In tightly-knit communities, shifting religious affiliations may result in social ostracization, loss of traditional networks, or even conflicts over cultural heritage. This dynamic underscores the dual role of religion as both a unifying and divisive force in society.

Overall, Durkheim's framework provides a valuable lens to examine religious conversion among the Dalit, illustrating how changes in religious identity extend beyond personal belief systems to reshape social affiliations, cultural practices, and community integration.

Weber's (1920) exploration of the relationship between religion and social structures, particularly in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, laid the foundation for understanding how religious beliefs influence economic behavior and social mobility. Weber argued that the Protestant Reformation, particularly the Calvinist branch of Protestantism, played a significant role in shaping the ethos of modern capitalism in the West. According to Weber, the values associated with Protestantism—such as hard work, thrift, and a sense of individual responsibility—

encouraged the development of capitalism by fostering behaviors that promoted economic success. This led to the idea that religious beliefs could influence not only individual actions but also broader social and economic structures.

In applying Weber's theory to the phenomenon of Dalit conversions in India, one can see a parallel dynamic at play. The Dalit, historically relegated to the lowest strata of the caste system, have faced systemic discrimination and social exclusion. This marginalization has often been compounded by limited access to economic opportunities, education, and social mobility. In this context, the adoption of new religious identities through conversion can be seen as a strategic move to escape the rigid caste hierarchies and associated socio-economic limitations.

Weber's theory suggests that individuals, including the Dalit, may seek to align themselves with religious groups that offer not only spiritual solace but also tangible benefits such as improved educational prospects, economic resources, and social status. Conversions, particularly to Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, have provided Dalit with avenues for upward mobility. These religious communities often offer educational institutions, social services, and economic support that are not readily available in the traditional caste-based structures of Hinduism. For instance, Christian missionary schools have played a significant role in providing the Dalit with access to education, which is seen as a key means for breaking the cycle of poverty and discrimination.

Moreover, Weber's concept of the "*Protestant ethic and Rise of Capitalism*" can be extended to the idea that new religious communities may instill values of individual success, self-discipline, and community solidarity that align with broader economic development. In the case of Dalit conversions, adopting a new religious identity can be seen as a pathway to social and economic mobility by providing access to new networks of support and a different set of values that may align more closely with aspirations of upward mobility.

Additionally, Weber's notion of the "*Protestant ethic and Rise of Capitalism*" provides a lens to view how religious affiliations can reshape the worldview and economic practices of individuals. The Dalit who convert to religions that prioritize education, self-improvement, and community development may adopt entrepreneurial

or self-reliant attitudes that empower them to break away from traditional occupations tied to caste-based discrimination, such as manual labor or sanitation work. Thus, religious conversion, in this sense, is not just a spiritual shift but a tool for social transformation, enabling individuals to negotiate their place in a modern, capitalist society where caste-based divisions may no longer be entrenched.

In conclusion, Weber's theory provides a useful framework for understanding how Dalit conversions can be motivated by the desire for social and economic upliftment. The adoption of new religious identities by marginalized groups like Dalit is not merely a spiritual act but a strategic decision aimed at accessing better opportunities for education, economic advancement, and social mobility. The interplay between religion, economic behavior, and social structure continues to be a critical factor in shaping the lives of those in marginalized communities, and Weber's insights remain relevant in examining these complex dynamics.

Marx (1844) viewed religion through a critical lens, seeing it as an instrument of social control that maintains class divisions. In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously described religion as the "opium of the people." He argued that religious conversion, especially among marginalized groups like Dalit, could be a response to economic deprivation and social oppression. However, he also cautioned that conversion alone does not dismantle structural inequalities but can sometimes reinforce them if it does not lead to material changes in social conditions (Marx, 1844).

Spencer (1896) contributed to the debate by applying an evolutionary perspective to religion. Spencer argued that religious beliefs evolve alongside societies, and religious conversion can be seen as part of an adaptive process where individuals and communities adopt new faiths that better align with their evolving social environments (Spencer, 1896).

In addition to scholars like Jürgen Habermas has significantly expanded our understanding of religion's role in modern societies, particularly focusing on the interaction between religion, social change, and public life. Habermas, in his later works, emphasized the notion of post-secular society, where religious and secular spheres coexist, influence each other, and are interconnected in shaping societal

norms. This view represents a shift from earlier secularization theories, which predicted the decline of religion in modern society. Instead, Habermas acknowledged the continued relevance of religious discourse in the public sphere, which shapes both individual and collective identities (Habermas, 2006).

Habermas, specifically in his writings like *The Future of Human Nature* (2008) and *Religion in the Public Sphere* (2006), argues that religious traditions can contribute to democratic discourse by providing ethical orientations that guide social action and policy. He believes that religious actors, while engaging in public debates, can offer insights into moral and ethical questions without necessarily demanding that religious doctrines dominate public policy. His views align with the idea of deliberative democracy, where diverse voices—including religious ones—can coexist and mutually enrich society through dialogue.

From a sociological perspective on religious conversion, Habermas suggests that the individual act of conversion cannot be understood merely as a private transformation of belief; it is also a social process shaped by wider historical, political, and cultural contexts. Conversion, in Habermas's framework, involves the negotiation of personal belief systems with broader societal structures, and individuals often make these transitions as part of a broader quest for meaning, moral clarity, or social mobility. The disenchantment with traditional beliefs or social systems can drive people toward new religious identities or communities, as they seek new sources of hope or ways of positioning themselves in the social fabric (Habermas, 2008).

Another important contributor to the sociology of religious conversion is Peter Berger, whose work on the sacred canopy explores how religious beliefs provide meaning and order in a society. In his later work, Berger revised some of his earlier ideas, recognizing that the process of secularization was more complex and less inevitable than he originally thought. Berger now acknowledges that while modern societies may witness religious pluralism, religious communities still play vital roles in providing identity and meaning to individuals. Religious conversion, from this perspective, is often driven by a personal search for meaning or a desire to break free from existing social constraints (Berger, 1990).

Moreover, scholars like Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge have examined religious conversion through the lens of rational choice theory. They argue that conversion can be understood as a strategic decision made by individuals seeking to maximize their benefits, including social status, psychological well-being, and material gain. This approach shifts the focus to the social and psychological incentives for conversion, viewing individuals as rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of their religious choices (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Emile Durkheim's earlier contributions also remain relevant in understanding the role of religion in social cohesion and the collective conscience. Though Durkheim's primary concern was the function of religion in maintaining social order, his ideas about the sacred and the profane continue to inform contemporary views on religious conversion. Durkheim argued that religion helps maintain social solidarity by reinforcing shared norms and values. In the context of conversion, this would imply that conversion is not just a personal experience but also a social act that involves integrating into new communal frameworks that provide a sense of belonging and collective identity (Durkheim, 1912).

Contemporary sociologists such as José Casanova and Talal Asad also provide critical perspectives on the interplay between religion and society. Casanova, in his work on the public sphere, explores how religion continues to shape politics and public life in modern societies. He challenges the idea that secularism and democracy are inherently opposed to religion, and instead argues that religious practices and beliefs can influence democratic processes, especially in multicultural societies (Casanova, 1994). Talal Asad's work, particularly his critique of secularism, emphasizes that religion is not merely a private matter but is deeply embedded in political, social, and cultural contexts. Asad's work on secularism and the politics of religious conversion highlights how conversion is shaped not only by personal spiritual needs but also by the larger sociopolitical forces that define the boundaries of religious groups and identities (Asad, 2003).

In summary, the sociology of religion and religious conversion has evolved with the contributions of scholars such as Habermas, Berger, Stark, Bainbridge, Durkheim, Casanova, and Asad. These scholars provide diverse perspectives on the social and individual dimensions of religious conversion, emphasizing the complex interplay

between individual choices, social structures, and cultural contexts. Conversion is understood not only as a personal transformation of belief but as a social process that engages with broader religious, political, and economic systems.

### **Marxist Arguments on Religion**

Marx argued that religion is a conservative force which inhibits social change by creating fate system. People are compelled to accept their fate and tolerate the unjust imposed by the bourgeoisie. He further sees religion as opium of the masses. In his own word, *'In religion people make their empirical world into an entity that is only conceived, imagined, that confronts them as something foreign Marx'* (1844).

Marxists sociologists associate the role of economic organization of society with the production and distribution. They argue that the material organization of society makes an enormous impact to religion conversion of people. Basically, Marx saw religion as opium of the masses. Religion exploits people and makes them to accept their own condition is created by their fortune. While accepting this, people are reluctant to accept change or take part into struggle. Class struggle is inevitable for the social change and transformation.

Religious conversion all over the world has been witnessed. The border lesion from the religious conversion and vibrancy of market requires continuous supply and demand of apostasy. Andrew (2022) conducted research on sociology of conversion, studying different sociological theories and argues that stories were shared and conversion is basically social. This argues that by and large, social interaction, impressive role is the prime force for religious conversion.

### **Phenomenology Theory**

Phenomenology defines religious conversion as a subjective, transformative experience that involves a reorientation of an individual's consciousness, values, and sense of self in relation to the divine or transcendental. Central to this understanding is the focus on the lived experience of the individual, emphasizing how the phenomenon of conversion is perceived, interpreted, and integrated into their life.

Unlike other approaches that might reduce religious conversion to psychological or sociological factors, phenomenology approaches it as an intentional act—one where the individual directs their consciousness toward new spiritual meanings, practices, or beliefs. This process is deeply personal and reflects the convert's encounter with the sacred, often accompanied by feelings of awe, renewal, or connection with something greater than themselves.

Phenomenologists like William James and Max Scheler highlight the inner dynamics of conversion, such as the struggle with doubt, the longing for meaning, and the eventual embrace of a new spiritual identity. The process often involves a liminal phase, a state of transition where old beliefs dissolve, and new insights or connections emerge. This reorientation leads to a reordering of values and priorities, often described by converts as finding truth, purpose, or inner peace (James, 1902, Satre, 1943, Husserl, 1970).

In summary, phenomenology defines religious conversion as an act of meaning-making, driven by an individual's intentionality and shaped by their lived experiences. It is not merely a shift in religious affiliation but a profound transformation of one's worldview and relationship with the sacred.

### **Stratification Theory**

Stratification theory, when applied to religious conversion, posits that socio-economic and hierarchical structures within a society significantly influence individual and group shifts in religious affiliation. It argues that people from lower strata often convert to religions that promise social mobility, communal support, or an improved status within the existing social order. For instance, in contexts where certain religions are associated with higher social status or political power, individuals might convert to align themselves with these benefits. Conversely, religious movements that emphasize equality and social justice may attract those marginalized by existing stratifications, offering a sense of belonging and empowerment. This theoretical perspective underscores the interplay between societal structures and personal religious choices, highlighting how conversion can be both a personal spiritual journey and a strategic response to social inequalities (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980). Stratification theory, as applied to religious conversion, examines how social

hierarchies and inequalities influence individuals' decisions to change their religious affiliations. In the context of Nepal, a country marked by significant caste and ethnic stratification, this theory provides valuable insights into the patterns and motivations behind religious conversions. Scholars argue that for many lower-caste individuals, particularly Dalit, and ethnic minorities, converting to religions such as Christianity or Buddhism can serve as a form of resistance against the entrenched Hindu caste system that perpetuates their marginalization (Leve, 2007). Conversion offers these groups a way to escape social stigma, gain community support, and access new opportunities that are otherwise denied within the traditional Hindu framework (Gellner, 2005).

Moreover, stratification theory highlights that religious conversion in Nepal is not solely an act of personal faith but also a strategic response to broader socio-economic and political forces. The influx of foreign aid associated with Christian missionary activities, for instance, provides tangible incentives for conversion, such as educational and healthcare services (Bista, 1991). This intersection of external influences and internal social stratification creates a complex environment where conversion is both a means of improving one's socio-economic status and a way of challenging existing social hierarchies. Thus, stratification theory helps to elucidate how religious conversion in Nepal is deeply intertwined with issues of social inequality, power dynamics, and the quest for a more equitable social standing (Parish, 1996).

### **Religious Conversion in the World**

Barro (2024) writes that legal restrictions also plays vital role in religion conversion. He studied historical study of religious conversion from 1991 to 2018, founds that in some countries there is direct restrictions in conversion predominately in Muslim countries. More generally, attraction of any religion depends on the size of followers, also impacts to the religious conversion. Empirically, he has used the indicators of country's religious pluralism.

In India, Dalit were prohibited to use wells, specially Mada and Madiga castes were deprived and discriminated through derogatory terminology. Continuously deploring their conditions, missionaries took great chance to make Dalit convert through offering them equality in their religion. However, later missionaries showed some other benefits such as financial supports, healing and peaceful living (Chakali, 2019).

Parvez (2018) explores the intersection of religion, state secularism, and social justice, with a particular focus on Muslim communities in France and India. In her comparative ethnographic research, Parvez examines how different models of secularism shape the political and religious practices of minority Muslim populations. Her analysis highlights the pressures these communities face, such as heightened surveillance and discrimination, particularly in France, where debates around veiling and bans on religious symbols have fueled marginalization.

Parvez's studies also delve into the revival of Islamic healing practices as a response to the inadequacies of state healthcare systems, often observed in contexts of discrimination. This includes traditional healing rituals for aroqya and other methods for addressing spirit possession, with a particular emphasis on their gendered dimensions, as women are disproportionately affected.

Her work provides a nuanced understanding of how global political shifts and local religious practices interact, offering critical insights into power, trauma, and resilience within marginalized communities.

Litonjua (2022) on "Spiritual but Not Religious: Untangling a Seeming Paradox," explores the increasingly prevalent identity of individuals who identify as spiritual without affiliating with organized religion. This phenomenon challenges conventional definitions of religion by emphasizing personal spiritual practices over traditional, institutionalized frameworks. Litonjua examines the rise of this identity, particularly in the United States since the 1970s, where resistance to "organized religion" has grown due to perceptions of rigidity or exclusivity within established religious institutions.

Key themes include the fluidity and individualism in spiritual practices, which often draw from multiple traditions, such as yoga or meditation. These practices highlight a desire for meaning-making that transcends the doctrinal confines of specific religions. The author also delves into criticisms of this movement, such as accusations of self-centeredness or "cherry-picking" beliefs, and how proponents counter these by advocating for thoughtful, personal approaches to spirituality that allow for ethical living without dogma.

The work underscores a shift in how modern spirituality is defined, advocating for an understanding of religion as an evolving personal and cultural experience, rather than one bound by inherited traditions. The concept of teaching and learning in religious contexts, particularly within Islam and Christianity, emphasizes the transformation of individuals through pedagogy designed to inspire conversion and spiritual growth. For example, Islamic pedagogies often involve relational and participatory methods that integrate compassion, mutual respect, and conscious awareness. These approaches aim to cultivate ethical dispositions and a deep understanding of faith through immersive and reflective teaching practices (Goh, 2020). Similarly, in Christian education, the notion of conversion is tied to creating "Critical Communities of Religious Praxis," where learners are encouraged to critically engage with their realities, fostering spiritual openness and transformation through communal and reflective learning experience. The article "*How Religious Content Matters in Conversion Narratives to Various Religious Groups*," Ines W. Jindra examines the pivotal role of religious content in shaping conversion narratives among different religious traditions. Published in *Sociology of Religion* in 2011, the study utilizes qualitative data to explore how conversion stories are not merely personal testimonies but also serve as reflections of the theological and doctrinal frameworks of the respective faiths. Jindra (2011) discusses how these narratives reinforce individual identities while fostering a sense of belonging within religious communities. This work highlights the interplay between personal experiences and the structural influences of religious institutions.

Robert Barro's research on religious conversion explores patterns across 40 countries, focusing on changes between religious affiliations or transitions into or out of non-religion. The study identifies key drivers like intermarriage, social influences, and theological motivations. It reveals that most conversions occur before the age of 30, reflecting life-cycle dynamics. Barro's statistical models analyze conversion rates and transitions across different religious categories, emphasizing the complexity of such changes in diverse sociocultural contexts ( Barro, 2022)

Similarly, Eaton (1997) writes in his article Nagas were mostly converted because Missionaries already studied Nagas's God Ao, based on the Naga's mythology, there Ao was residing above the sky, missionaries have deeply studied this concept and

were quite familiar with this methodology and took good chance to convince them. It shows that missionaries were quite clever to convince the people to convert into Christianity. They were well equipped with knowledge, skills and financial support. Their goal was to make people their followers.

In medieval period, there was fight between crusaders and Muslims, Muslims were open and welcoming to their religion. Muslims fought holy war and those warriors who deadly fought with them from crusaders side were also welcomed if only they had accepted Islam (Barro, 2024).

The Islamophobia love jihad plot by the Hindu-right, which contends that Muslim males entice Hindu women with the intention of converting them, is a result of the propagation of anti-conversion sentiment. Furthermore, because these anti-conversion laws are paradoxical, "re-conversion" to Hinduism is not seen as conversion; this has given rise to initiatives like "ghar wapsi", which aim to "bring" Muslims and Christians "back" into the Hindu fold. Even active Hindu groups residing abroad, like the Global Hindu Heritage Foundation (GHHF) in the United States, made claims to be able to bring individuals "back to" Hinduism. This reflects larger fears among the populace and the diaspora regarding alleged dangers to India's Hindu identity, as seen by right-wing Hindu nationalists. (Indian Religion Rights, 2022).

This review show that religious conversion was everywhere, some religions were more welcoming and some were not. Christianity and Islam were more attracting religion. However, Christianity were missionaries.

### **Religious Conversion in Nepal**

A complicated and multifaceted process, religious conversion among Dalit in Nepal's Lalitpur District's Lele is influenced by social, cultural, historical, and economic reasons. Because of the deeply ingrained caste system, Dalit in Nepal have long experienced systemic discrimination, social isolation, and economic hardship. These circumstances can spur religious conversion since they frequently result in a need for identity, dignity, and better prospects.

Historical, cultural, and socioeconomic reasons all have an impact on Dalit religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur. Disenfranchised by Hindu orthodoxy and the caste system, Dalit frequently turn to other religions like Buddhism or Christianity in search of social equality, self-respect, and communal support. Important responsibilities are played by missionary outreach, healthcare, education, and spiritual inclusion. Additionally, conversion offers a way to resist institutional inequality (Katuwal, 2013).

Empirical review helps to find out the ground reality. This section gives some data on religion conversion and makes an empirical review on how conversion is affected or shaped by multiple social factors.

Fricke (2008) has conducted an explorative research on religious conversion in Tipling village of Nepal. He problematized the convert and perception of how people are compelled to convert their current status. This was in spite of the law against proselytizing, an offense punishable by 3 -years imprisonment if unsuccessful and by 6 years if a conversion resulted. Recent numbers are more controversial, ranging from the one million or so Christians that the government acknowledges to the nearly two million that church-related groups argue for. Whatever the actual number, their growth hugely accelerated following the re-introduction of party democracy in 1990 after a 30- year stretch of autocratic rule. Depending on who you want to believe, between four and eight percent of Nepal's population has converted to Christianity in the past 18 years (p-1).

Dhakal (2014) writes statistics indicate that the number of Christians in Nepal is steadily increasing, and despite disagreements, all responders acknowledge this reality. It's interesting to note that, despite facing numerous challenges both during and after their conversion, converted Christians are now more assured and content with their decision to become Christians as well as more optimistic about their own futures due to the blessing of Jesus Christ. According to him, Converted Christians do not disparage or criticize any other religions, with the exception of a response. He shows that positive way of conversion, however, I hardly buy that argument made by Sapkota (2018). He further argues that in Nepal, Christians are converted from the poor, marginalized and Dalit community.

Religious conversion has been a subject of sociological and anthropological inquiry, particularly concerning marginalized communities such as the Dalit in Nepal. Dalit are historically subjected to systemic discrimination and exclusion within the Hindu caste system, often seek religious alternatives to escape social oppression and attain dignity (Gellner, 2016).

Religious conversion among Dalit is often a multidimensional process influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and spiritual factors. According to Sharma (2013), Dalit in Nepal are drawn toward Christianity and Buddhism as these religions promote egalitarian principles and offer an escape from caste-based discrimination. Bhattarai (2018) further argues that conversion provides a sense of empowerment and social mobility, enabling Dalit to challenge traditional hierarchies.

In Nepal, proselytization by Christian missionaries has played a role in conversion trends. Churches provide educational opportunities, healthcare, and financial aid, making conversion not only a spiritual choice but also a pragmatic one (Pariyar, 2020). Moreover, many Dalit perceive Hinduism as a system that perpetuates social exclusion, leading them to seek alternative belief systems that recognize their dignity (Kattel, 2019).

The reaction to Dalit conversion varies between communities and state institutions. Nepal, as a secular state, constitutionally allows freedom of religion; however, anti-conversion laws restrict religious proselytization, which affects Dalit communities seeking conversion (Pettigrew, 2017). The societal response is often negative, as Hindu nationalist groups perceive conversion as a threat to cultural and national identity (Tamang, 2021). Furthermore, converted Dalit face alienation not only from their original communities but also skepticism from their new religious groups, which may not fully integrate them into mainstream religious practices (Gellner, 2016).

Religious conversion significantly impacts the social and cultural fabric of Dalit communities. Converted Dalit often experience an initial period of rejection from their extended families and local communities, leading to social fragmentation (Bhattarai, 2018). However, over time, they may gain access to new social networks and economic opportunities through their new religious affiliations (Pariyar, 2020).

Culturally, conversion influences traditional rituals and customs. Many converted Dalit abandon Hindu practices such as caste-based restrictions, death rituals, and temple visits, replacing them with practices aligned with their new faiths (Sharma, 2013). This shift leads to a transformation in identity and community relationships, creating both challenges and opportunities for integration within a new religious framework.

According to the 2011 census, the fifth most practiced religion in Nepal, with 375,699 adherents, or 1.4% of the population and that is increased into 1.76 percent in 2021. 512,313, which seems almost double. Chakali (2019) unpacks social and cultural conversion of mass movement. Those missionary were stayed with Dalit, shared meal and changed the tag polluted into pure of Dalit and converted Dalit into Christianity. However, missionary's aim was not to abolish cast system but convert into Christianity. Religious conversion has been increased rapidly in recent decades. Mostly researches and studies has been focused on religious conversion as political and cultural setting, however, there is huge gap to study sociologically, how religious conversion occurs, how conversion becomes structures and how they produce agency. Moreover, the process among the structure and actions are explored applying structures vs agency.

The process of conversion is not merely a spiritual shift but is deeply intertwined with socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions. Scholars such as Sharma (2013) and Gellner (2016) argue that conversion among Dalit is often driven by a desire for dignity, equality, and an escape from entrenched caste discrimination. The caste system in Nepal, rooted in Hindu tradition, has historically marginalized Dalit denying them access to temples, education, and equal social status. This systemic exclusion has created fertile ground for conversions, particularly to Christianity and Buddhism, which are perceived as more egalitarian faiths that do not recognize caste distinctions.

Economic deprivation is another crucial factor influencing religious conversion among Dalit. Many Dalit families in Lele face extreme poverty, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate access to resources. Religious organizations, particularly Christian missions, have played a role in providing basic services such as education, healthcare, and financial support, thereby serving as an incentive for

conversion (Bista, 2019). Studies indicate that while some Dalit convert with genuine spiritual intent, others may do so due to the tangible benefits that accompany membership in religious communities. The economic dimension of conversion has led to debates about whether religious shifts among Dalit are based on faith or survival strategies (Subedi, 2021). Despite the humanitarian assistance provided by religious groups, the motivations behind conversion remain complex and multifaceted.

Social acceptance and identity transformation also play a role in Dalit conversions. Within the rigid caste hierarchy of Hindu society, Dalit often struggle with discrimination, untouchability practices, and social exclusion. Religious conversion provides them with a new identity, often granting them respect and a sense of belonging within a faith community that does not enforce caste-based hierarchies (Pariyar, 2020). However, research suggests that even after conversion, caste identities do not entirely disappear. Within Christian and Buddhist communities, converted Dalit still experience subtle forms of exclusion, as non-Dalit converts often occupy leadership roles while Dalit remain in subordinate positions (Baral, 2019). This underscores the enduring influence of caste, even in religious traditions that preach equality.

The reaction of broader society and the state to Dalit conversions has been mixed. Hindu nationalist movements in Nepal have actively opposed conversions, perceiving them as a threat to the country's cultural and religious heritage (Mishra, 2022). In some cases, Dalit who convert to Christianity or Buddhism face social ostracization from their extended families and communities, leading to strained relationships and isolation (Gurung, 2020). Nepal's legal framework presents further complications. Although the country's constitution guarantees religious freedom, anti-conversion laws criminalize proselytization, making it difficult for religious groups to openly support Dalit conversions (Acharya, 2023). This legal ambiguity creates challenges for both converts and religious organizations, sometimes resulting in arrests or social backlash against newly converted Dalit (Poudel, 2021).

The cultural implications of religious conversion among Dalit are significant. Conversion often entails abandoning traditional Hindu practices, including temple rituals, marriage customs, and funeral rites. Many converted Dalit adopt new religious

customs, leading to a shift in their cultural identity and interactions within the community (Sharma, 2013). This shift can result in generational conflicts, as older family members may resist abandoning their ancestral faith while younger generations embrace their new religious identity (Gautam, 2020). Women, in particular, experience unique challenges and opportunities through conversion. Studies indicate that converted Dalit women may gain greater access to education and healthcare, as many Christian and Buddhist organizations emphasize gender equality (Koirala, 2022). However, patriarchal norms still persist, and in some cases, women face pressure to conform to religious expectations that reinforce traditional gender roles (Rai, 2020).

Despite the benefits of religious conversion, challenges remain in achieving full integration within new religious communities. Converted Dalit often navigate a dual identity—seeking refuge from caste discrimination within their new faith while simultaneously encountering exclusionary practices within their adopted religious groups (Regmi, 2018). The Dalit Buddhist movement in Nepal, inspired by the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in India, has sought to address these challenges by promoting an explicitly anti-caste Buddhist identity (Shrestha, 2022). However, the movement remains relatively small compared to the larger wave of Christian conversions. As scholars like Gellner (2016) and Mishra (2022) suggest, religious conversion is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single cause. It is a dynamic process shaped by historical oppression, socio-economic conditions, and evolving cultural and legal landscapes.

In conclusion, religious conversion among Dalit in Lele, Lalitpur, reflects broader struggles for dignity, social mobility, and resistance against caste-based oppression. While conversion provides an avenue for escaping systemic discrimination, it also introduces new challenges, including social ostracization, legal constraints, and continued caste-based exclusion within religious communities. Future research should explore the long-term impact of conversion on Dalit identity, social relations, and economic well-being, as well as the role of the state in either facilitating or restricting religious transformations.

## 2.2 Religion and Social Change

Religion and social change are intricately linked, influencing and transforming societies through diverse mechanisms. Religion serves as both a conservative force that maintains social order and a catalyst for change that challenges established norms. The social change facilitated by religion can involve shifts in values, cultural practices, and even political structures.

Max Weber's seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* argues that Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, played a significant role in shaping modern capitalism by promoting values such as hard work, discipline, and frugality (Katuwal, 2021). Similarly, movements led by religious leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrate how religious values inspire social activism, promoting civil rights and justice.

Religious conversion is a significant driver of social change, particularly among marginalized communities. Scholars argue that conversion serves as both a means of resistance and a pathway to social mobility (Berger, 1967). In Nepal, where caste-based discrimination has historically shaped social structures, religious conversion—particularly among Dalit—has been a mechanism to challenge exclusion and seek dignity (Gellner, 2005). Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam have provided alternative social networks, disrupting traditional hierarchies and fostering new identities (Cox, 2013).

Social theorists such as Max Weber (1922) and Emile Durkheim (1912) have examined the relationship between religion and social transformation. Weber's analysis of Protestantism's role in capitalism highlights how religious values influence economic and social behavior. Similarly, Durkheim emphasizes the role of collective religious beliefs in shaping moral and social order. In the Nepalese context, religious conversion among Dalit aligns with these theoretical perspectives, as it offers an avenue for empowerment while also triggering societal resistance (Subedi, 2019).

Conversion is often linked to access to education, healthcare, and social support, which missionary organizations provide. Studies show that Dalit who convert to

Christianity often experience improved social status within their religious communities, although they may face discrimination from the broader society (Koirala, 2014). This dual effect of religious conversion—empowerment within the new faith and alienation from the dominant social structure—reflects broader patterns of religiously motivated social change observed globally (Tamang, 2021). However, religious conversion is not solely an individual act but is influenced by legal, political, and economic factors. Nepal’s constitution criminalizes proselytization, creating legal barriers for those seeking religious change (Sharma, 2020). This legal framework reflects the broader contestation between religious freedom and cultural nationalism, highlighting the tension between individual rights and collective identities (Thapa, 2018). Despite these challenges, conversion continues to be a dynamic force reshaping Nepalese society, altering traditional caste relationships and redefining social hierarchies (O'Brien, 2019).

The interplay between religion and social change in Nepal underscores the transformative potential of religious conversion. While it offers a means for marginalized groups to assert agency and seek better opportunities, it also generates resistance from established institutions. Future research should focus on the long-term impact of conversion on social cohesion and policy-making in Nepal.

### **Missionary Organization and Religious Conversion**

Religious conversion has been a contested issue in Nepal, particularly among marginalized communities such as the Dalit. Missionary organizations have played a significant role in the spread of Christianity, raising concerns about social, legal, and political implications (Gellner, 2005). This review explores the historical background, socio-economic factors, and contemporary debates surrounding missionary-driven religious conversion among Dalit in Nepal.

Nepal, a Hindu-majority country, has historically maintained rigid caste structures that have systematically oppressed Dalit (Cox, 2013). The promulgation of the Muluki Ain in 1854 reinforced caste-based discrimination, further marginalizing Dalit from mainstream socio-economic and religious activities (Hofer, 1979). The arrival of Christian missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries marked the beginning of religious conversion efforts, although Nepal remained closed to proselytization for

much of its history (Kansakar, 2007). After the democratic movements of 1950 and 1990, the country experienced increased religious pluralism, leading to a rise in Dalit conversions to Christianity (Gellner, 2005).

Several studies have highlighted the socio-economic motivations behind Dalit conversions. Christianity has provided an alternative space where Dalit can escape caste-based oppression and access education, healthcare, and social support (Koirala, 2014). Christian organizations often run schools, hospitals, and microfinance initiatives that appeal to economically disadvantaged groups (Bista, 1991). This social upliftment has been a crucial factor in Dalit conversions, challenging traditional Hindu hierarchies (O'Brien, 2019).

Nepal's legal framework regarding religious conversion has undergone significant transformations. The 2015 Constitution guarantees religious freedom but criminalizes proselytization, leading to arrests and persecution of Christian missionaries (Thapa, 2018). This legal ambiguity has created tensions between missionary organizations and Hindu nationalist groups that view conversion as a threat to Nepal's cultural identity (Sharma, 2020).

The rise of Christian conversions among Dalit has sparked resistance from Hindu fundamentalist groups and political organizations (Subedi, 2019). Critics argue that conversions disrupt traditional cultural norms and create societal fragmentation. However, advocates emphasize the role of religious freedom in empowering marginalized communities (Tamang, 2021). The debate continues as Nepal navigates its secular identity in a deeply religious society.

Missionary organizations have played a complex role in Dalit religious conversion in Nepal. While Christianity offers a pathway to social mobility, it also triggers socio-political backlash. Further research is needed to understand the long-term implications of conversion on Dalit identity, social cohesion, and religious policy in Nepal.

St. Mary's School in Kathmandu, established and run by the Sisters of the Congregation of Jesus, has played a notable role in the context of religious conversion in Nepal. As a prominent Christian educational institution, it provides high-quality

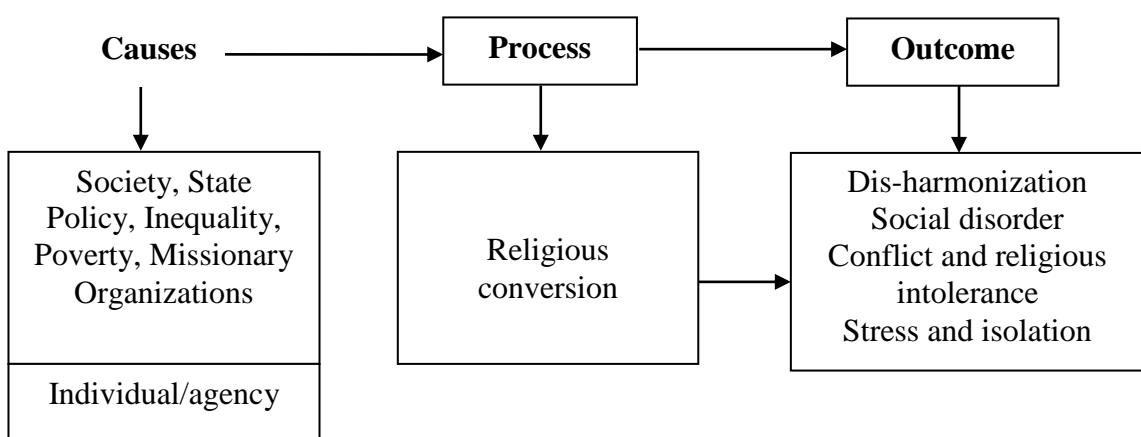
education to students from diverse backgrounds, including those from Hindu and Buddhist families. The school emphasizes not only academic excellence but also moral and spiritual education, often integrating Christian values and teachings into its curriculum and activities. This holistic approach to education, coupled with the compassionate and supportive environment created by the nuns and staff, can influence students and their families toward a deeper interest in Christianity. Over time, this exposure may lead to religious conversion, as individuals resonate with the Christian values and community they experience at the school. St. Mary's School's impact on religious conversion is thus intertwined with its educational mission, subtly fostering a shift in religious beliefs and practices among its students and their wider communities in Nepal (Leve, 2007). In Nepal, missionary hospitals have played a significant role in the landscape of religious conversion, particularly in rural and underserved areas. These hospitals, often established and operated by Christian organizations, provide much-needed medical services, including basic healthcare, surgeries, maternal and child health, and community health programs, in regions where such services are limited or nonexistent. The presence of these hospitals often introduces local populations to Christianity through the compassionate care and support provided by the medical staff. Patients and their families, who may initially seek medical assistance, are sometimes influenced by the spiritual and moral teachings shared alongside medical care. This dual approach can lead to religious conversion, as individuals express gratitude and find solace in the new faith introduced to them. In areas like Lele in Lalitpur District, where traditional Hinduism and Buddhism are prevalent, the impact of missionary hospitals can be profound, leading to shifts in religious affiliation and altering the socio-religious fabric of the community. These dynamics provide a rich field for research into the interplay between healthcare provision, missionary activity, and religious conversion in Nepal. The Leprosy Mission (TLM) is a UK based international non-government organization started its work in Nepal from 1957 with establishment of Anandaban Hospital in Lele, the southern part of Lalitpur. However, from 2005 TLM Nepal has been working as independent NGO in partnership with TLM international and the Government of Nepal to provide specialist tertiary care and technical support for leprosy control programs. It also undertakes internationally recognized research into leprosy and implements disability inclusive community development programs through its own activities and strategic partnership.

Mostly researches and studies has been focused on religious conversion as political and cultural setting, however, there is huge gap to study sociologically, how religious conversion occurs, how conversion becomes structures and how they produce agency. Moreover, the process among the structure and actions is explored applying structures vs agency.

### 2.3 Conceptual Framework of the Research

Basically, this research is about religion conversation and its sociological analysis. Main focuses of the research is religious institutions and conversion process. Therefore, this research demands key literature on social construction of religion, classical Marxist ideas about religion, and neo-Marxist approach to state's response to its people. It further portrays into discussion the structuration theory of Giddens (1994).

After setting the objectives, followed by some key theoretical literature on sociology of religion, I come to visualize the society, government policies are a structures which shapes individual choices, and at the another side, there is an individual which is rational, active agent who can use his agency to produce change. The religious conversion is the process and interaction between structures and actors which Giddens says 'the structuration process. Specifically designed conceptual framework however is like this:



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Methodology is the detail plan of a research. Based on research questions, this research will be guided by the critical and social construction approach. That is why, this study is highly qualitative in nature. Qualitative research always seeks to find out the central phenomenon. This research seeks the answer of people's experiences, perception regarding their religious conversion.

#### **3.1 Nature of Research and Philosophical Position**

The research on the causes of religious conversion and its consequences among the Dalit people in Lele, Lalitpur, based on the research questions, adopts an interpretivist philosophical stance. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding and interpreting the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences. In the context of religious conversion, this philosophical position acknowledges the complexity of human beliefs, motivations, and cultural contexts.

Interpretivism is aligned with the idea that reality is socially constructed, and thus, religious conversion cannot be solely understood through objective measures but requires an in-depth exploration of individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. It recognizes the influence of socio-cultural factors on religious beliefs and the fluid nature of human experiences.

The research is qualitative in nature, aiming to explore the multifaceted aspects of religious conversion within the specific context of Lele, Lalitpur. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in religious conversion processes.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

Research design guides the collection, measurement and analysis of collected data. It is taken as an overall strategy of a research. It shows the connectivity of different tools and techniques that are applied during research. This research is exploratory and analytical, because it firstly explores social and larger causes to religious conversion.

The states policies and social force to conversion. A total qualitative measure is made in order to proceed with the given exploratory and analytical path. The explorative research design aims to delve into the causes of religious conversion and its consequences among the people of Lele, Lalitpur.

This design employs qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study. It involves interviews, observations, and document analysis to explore the complexities of religious conversion in the given context.

### **3.3 Research Field**

Lele, a small town in the southern part of Lalitpur District in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, offers a unique and multifaceted setting for various research endeavors. This region, situated at approximately 1,600 meters above sea level, features a subtropical highland climate and diverse topography marked by terraced fields, forests, and hills. The predominantly rural population comprises ethnic groups such as Newars, Brahmins, Chhetris, and Tamangs, speaking Nepali, Newari, and Tamang. The area is rich in cultural heritage, blending Hinduism and Buddhism, with vibrant festivals like Dashain, Tihar, and Buddha Jayanti. Lele's economy is largely agrarian, focusing on crops like rice, maize, and millet, with many families also reliant on remittances from abroad. Despite having basic education and healthcare facilities, there are significant gaps, particularly in higher education and advanced medical services. The town's infrastructure includes limited public transportation and variable access to utilities, with many residents depending on traditional water sources and alternative energy solutions. Environmentally, Lele is characterized by its natural beauty and biodiversity, though challenges like deforestation and soil erosion persist, prompting efforts toward sustainable agricultural practices. Potential research topics in Lele include the socio-economic impacts of migration, the interplay of religious practices and social stratification, sustainable agriculture, public health access, and climate change adaptation. This rich cultural, demographic, and environmental tapestry makes Lele an ideal site for interdisciplinary studies that can drive sustainable development and cultural preservation in the region. This rural community, predominantly inhabited by ethnic groups such as Newars, Brahmins, Chhetris, and Tamangs, traditionally practiced Hinduism and Buddhism. However, recent years have seen a notable shift with many individuals embracing Christianity, creating a unique

environment for examining the socio-cultural dynamics and impacts of religious conversion. The town's rich cultural heritage, combined with its changing religious landscape, provides a compelling backdrop for research into how new religious affiliations are influencing social structures, identity, and community interactions in Lele.

### **3.4 Universe (Population)**

In Lalitpur district, with a total population of 1,221,592, comprising 641,011 males and 580,581 females, the religious demographics depict a diverse landscape. Hinduism constitutes the majority at 72.3%, followed by Buddhism at 19.2%. Christianity holds a notable presence at 5.7%, while smaller communities adhere to Kirati, Muslim, Prakriti, and other faiths, collectively comprising 2.8% of the population. Regarding literacy, a substantial portion of the population, accounting for 86.0%, is proficient in reading and writing. Meanwhile, 1.6% can solely read, and 12.4% lack literacy skills. Language patterns exhibit a rich tapestry, with Nepali emerging as the primary language for 44.9% of residents, followed closely by Newar at 35.2%. Tamang, Maithili, Magar, Bhojpuri, and Rai are spoken by smaller segments, while English enjoys widespread usage, particularly as a secondary language. This cultural and linguistic diversity underscores Lalitpur's dynamic societal fabric, reflecting a blend of tradition and modernity.

Lele is a village in Lalitpur District in the Bagmati Zone of central Nepal. At the time of the 1991 Nepal census it had a population of 6928 living in 1245 individual households, but the population has increased greatly since then. Lele is 14 km from Lagankhel, Patan, the main city of Lalitpur. The total of Dalit population is 1156 (RM , 2022).

### **3.5 Population and Sample**

A sample is a subset or smaller group of individuals, cases, or elements selected from the universe or population for the purpose of study. The aim of sampling is to gather information from a representative portion of the population that accurately reflects the characteristics and diversity of the larger group. Sampling allows researchers to make inferences about the population based on the observations made within the sample.

The qualitative nature of this research demands the researcher to be more sensitive and purposive in conducting research work. Therefore, purposive sampling, a variant of a non-probability sampling, is followed to find required number of respondents. Among the converted people, normally, 15 recently converted people were met by the researcher at the time. However, the qualitative research requires information rather than quantity.

### **3.6 Research Method**

Based on the research nature, qualitative research method was applied.

**Qualitative Research Approach:** This research primarily employs qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the causes of religious conversion and its consequences among the people of Lele, Lalitpur. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of complex social phenomena in natural settings, which is suitable for this study's objectives.

### **3.7 Data Collection**

A depth-interview is the key tool to collect primary information. Hopefully, one interview with each respondent has worked for gathering the required information. But respondents are visited more than once as more data is felt needed. In-depth interview is necessary to collect data from the respondents because qualitative research by nature demands the qualitative tool of data collection. Besides, interview is the most desired type among the qualitative researchers and so many respondents. Interview opens the door for a researcher to make a good rapport with respondents, provides an opportunity to know each other in a more professional way, makes trustworthy relationship between them is extended depending on the situation of both the researcher and respondents, and is more comfortable to both sides because it is flexible and is made less structured and open. Case study is also beneficial to collect data for this research. So, case study of fifteen respondents, who are willing to share more information in detail to the researcher, are made cases.

#### **2.7.1 Interview**

In-depth interview helps to collect converted people's experiences, perceptions, their relationship with family and community and their expectation to state. Particularly in

qualitative research, the in-depth interview seeks the smaller sample because of the long engagement of a researcher with respondent to collect data in-depth. Place of interview is either the house or churches. Mostly questions are open ended.

### **2.7.2 Case Study**

Case study of 15 respondents are done in order to collect more data in a chronological way. All respondents who were unable to give the details of required information during an interview in a short period of time and the researcher did not have easy access to respondents in the home. Thus, one-third of the interviewees, who were ready to share their ideas in depth, which extend for hours or some days, was made as specific cases for this research. Respondents have sufficient time to talk to the researcher about their disease and their need without being interrupted by others due to time-constraints. Some information, which are difficult to collect from respondents by interview, is collected through case study. While doing case study, the researcher collected information about respondent's way of living, their surroundings, relationship with their neighbor, their status in society, difficulties they have faced due to being converted, their expectation with society, and their opinion to state policies on conversion. I think, the collection of information in this way make this research sociological in terms of systematic application of methods and authenticity of research.

### **2.7.3 Document Analysis**

Relevant documents such as religious texts, historical records, governmental policies, and media reports are analyzed to understand the broader context and factors influencing religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur.

## **2.8 Data Analysis**

Collected data in this research in the first phase is coded based on theme, and narratives are prepared. Thus, thematic and narrative analysis is the major methods of data analysis throughout this research. As per the thematic analysis, a set of interview data is thematically grouped based on similarities in meaning. Also, the respondent's experiences, views and opinions are categorized under common themes. Secondly,

listening to the stories of people and analyzing it by making sense of what it really means is the way of narrative analysis. How respondents shared their experiences, or the way converted people shared their lifestyle is analyzed in the similar way the respondent express. Content analysis is other method by which the theme, words, concepts, or phrases are contextualized. Also, triangulation method is also applied.

The detail of the data analysis is presented as follows:

### **2.8.1 Document Analysis:**

Examining religious texts, historical records, and cultural artifacts relevant to Lele, Lalitpur to contextualize the phenomenon of religious conversion within its historical and cultural framework. Document analysis supplements primary data collection methods and offers additional insights into the socio-historical factors shaping religious beliefs and practices.

### **2.8.2 Thematic Analysis:**

Analyzing qualitative data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis are used in thematic analysis techniques. This approach involves identifying recurring patterns, themes, and meanings within the data, allowing for a systematic exploration of the causes and consequences of religious conversion among the people of Lele, Lalitpur.

### **2.8.3 Research Reflexivity:**

The researcher has maintained reflexivity throughout the study, critically reflecting on their own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions that may influence the research process and findings. This reflexivity contributes to the rigor and credibility of the study

### **2.8.4 Triangulation:**

Multiple data sources and methods are used to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Triangulation involve cross-verifying data from different sources to ensure consistency and depth in the analysis.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AMONG DALIT IN LELE**

This chapter presents the key findings from in-depth interviews, case studies, and document analysis conducted with respondents in Lele, Lalitpur. The study explores the causes, processes, and consequences of religious conversion among the Dalit community. The analysis is structured around major themes that emerged during data collection.

#### **4.1 Mechanisms and Motivations Behind Religious Conversion in Lele, Lalitpur**

Religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, follows distinct mechanisms and is influenced by various motivations. Based on the case studies and qualitative insights, the findings suggest that conversion is a multifaceted process driven by personal, social, and economic factors.

##### **Sociological Motivations for Conversion**

One of the primary findings is that economic and social inequalities serve as major push factors for religious conversion. Dalit in Lele experience discrimination, limited access to education, and economic marginalization, making alternative religious communities attractive. Christianity, in particular, offers social and financial support, including education, healthcare, and community inclusion. The converts reported that religious organizations actively reach out to marginalized communities, particularly Dalit, offering spiritual guidance alongside material assistance. Churches in Lele provide free education, medical support, and social integration programs, making Christianity a viable alternative for those facing discrimination. One participant stated, *"I was asked to change my previous religious belief so that I would get material benefit" that is why I converted.*" This highlights the role of financial incentives in the conversion process, where economic vulnerabilities are exploited to attract followers.

Religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, is influenced by a combination of social, economic, and spiritual factors. The mechanisms of conversion vary, but a common theme emerges: individuals often seek a sense of belonging, dignity, and relief from social discrimination.

One of the primary motivations for conversion is the escape from caste-based discrimination. Dalit in Lele face systemic exclusion, limited access to resources, and social humiliation. In search of dignity and equality, they turn to Christianity, which provides an inclusive community. As one convert expressed, *“I was tired of being treated as an untouchable. In the church, they call me ‘brother’ and I feel like a human being.”*

Another significant mechanism driving conversion is the provision of social and economic support. Christian communities often offer education, healthcare, and financial aid to new members, making conversion an attractive option for those struggling with poverty. One respondent stated, *“Before, I could not afford my children’s school fees. But after joining the church, they helped me, and now my daughter is studying in a good school.”* The role of economic assistance in conversion decisions cannot be ignored, as many individuals view religious change as a path to a better life.

Spiritual experiences and personal transformations also contribute to conversions. Some individuals report having divine experiences, miraculous healings, or emotional relief upon embracing Christianity. A case study participant shared, *“I was suffering from a chronic illness for years. After joining the church, they prayed for me, and I started feeling better. That’s when I knew this was my path.”* Such experiences reinforce their belief that their new faith offers them protection, healing, and hope.

#### **4.2 Role of Missionary Organizations**

Missionary activities play a significant role in religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur. Respondents highlighted that Christian missionaries provide access to quality education, medical treatment, and community programs, which have influenced many individuals to embrace Christianity. Institutions like St. Mary’s School and missionary hospitals have contributed to a gradual increase in conversions over time.

One respondent shared, *“I decided to convert because the church helped my family when we had no one else to turn to. They provided us with food, education for my children, and support during difficult times.”*

Another individual expressed, *"The missionaries not only preached about faith but also showed kindness through their actions. They offered free medical checkups and education, which made a big difference in our lives."*

This is the testament of how missionary hospitals and schools are motivating people to convert their religion.

#### **4.2.1 Influence of Social Networks**

Social networks play a crucial role in conversion decisions. Especially Facebooks and Instagram are the usually and easily influential. Many respondents converted due to the influence of family members or friends who had already embraced Christianity. One respondent shared, *"My cousin was the first to convert, and he always talked about the peace and support he found in church. Over time, I started attending services with him, and I felt a sense of belonging I never experienced before."*

Religious gatherings and church activities provide a sense of belonging and community support, which is often lacking in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. Another convert explained, *"In the church, everyone sits together, eats together, and prays together there is no discrimination. That was very different from what I had known in my village."* These connections create a strong support system that encourages more people to join the faith, reinforcing the role of social networks in religious conversion

#### **4.2.2 Healing and Miraculous Experiences**

Religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, Nepal, is a complex phenomenon influenced by various socio-cultural and psychological factors. One of the most compelling aspects of conversion in this region is the role of healing practices. Several case studies highlight how individuals experiencing chronic illnesses or personal hardships sought solace in religious groups that offered spiritual healing. The testimonies of miraculous recoveries and improved well-being served as a catalyst for many to embrace a new faith. Healing prayers and the unwavering support of the religious community provided an emotional and psychological anchor, leading individuals toward conversion.

One such case is that of a middle-aged woman, Sita (pseudonym), who had suffered from severe joint pain for over a decade. Traditional medical treatments and indigenous healing practices had offered little relief. However, after attending prayer sessions at a newly established Christian fellowship in the village, she claimed to have experienced a dramatic improvement in her health. Recalling her journey, Sita stated, *"When I was at my lowest, they laid hands on me and prayed. Within weeks, my pain had lessened, and I could walk without support. I felt as if I had been reborn."* This experience strengthened her faith in the new religion, leading her to abandon her ancestral beliefs and fully embrace Christianity.

Another case is that of Ram (pseudonym), a young man struggling with depression and alcohol dependency. He had lost hope after multiple failed attempts to overcome his addiction. A friend introduced him to a religious group known for its healing sessions. The sense of community, along with the teachings of self-discipline and spiritual guidance, provided him with a renewed sense of purpose. He described his transformation, stating, *"The prayers gave me strength, and the people around me made me feel valued. I no longer needed alcohol to numb my pain; my faith became my healing."* His conversion not only improved his personal well-being but also restored strained relationships within his family.

The causes of religious conversion in Lele extend beyond personal healing to encompass broader social dynamics. Many converts feel a deep emotional connect to their newfound religious community, which offers them a sense of belonging and acceptance often absent in their previous social circles. Moreover, conversions have led to shifts in cultural practices, particularly in rituals related to birth, marriage, and death. While some families support these changes, others view conversions as a break from ancestral traditions, leading to familial and communal tensions.

In conclusion, religious conversion in Lele is driven largely by the search for healing, both physical and emotional. The testimonies of individuals who have experienced personal transformations through spiritual practices reinforce the appeal of conversion. However, these changes also bring about shifts in social and cultural dynamics, affecting interpersonal relationships within the community. The phenomenon of conversion in Lele, therefore, is not just a religious shift but a complex interplay of faith, healing, and societal adaptation.

## Causes of Religious Conversion

The causes of religious conversion in Lele are deeply intertwined with socio-economic struggles, caste oppression, and the search for a supportive community. However, the consequences of conversion vary and often lead to significant shifts in personal, familial, and social dynamics.

One of the most evident causes of conversion is economic hardship. Many low-income generating families see Christianity as a way to access resources that were previously unavailable to them. One convert noted, *“My husband lost his job, and we were struggling. The church provided us food and support. That’s when we decided to become Christian.”* Economic security through religion provides a strong incentive for individuals to change their faith.

The consequences of religious conversion, however, are complex. Converts often experience social isolation and strained relationships with their families and communities. Traditional Hindu families sometimes see conversion as a betrayal, leading to tension and even ostracization. A woman who is a convert shared, *“After I became Christian, my parents stopped talking to me. They say I have abandoned my ancestors and our culture.”* Such emotional and social conflicts highlight the challenges faced by new converts.

Another major consequence is the transformation of cultural practices. Many converts adopt new ways of worship, dietary habits, and social interactions, which can create a divide between them and non-converts. A former Hindu priest turned Christian shared, *“I used to lead rituals in my village, but after conversion, I no longer participate. Some of my old friends refuse to even greet me.”* This cultural shift can create friction between religious groups in the community. However, not all consequences are negative. Many converts express a newfound sense of community and emotional well-being. The church provides them with a sense of belonging and identity that they lacked in their previous religious setting. One individual stated, *“Now, I have a family in my faith. They accept me, support me, and stand by me no matter what.”* This positive social reinforcement encourages individuals to stay committed to their new faith.

In summary, religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, is driven by a complex interplay of caste-based discrimination, economic incentives, spiritual experiences, and social support. While conversion provides many with dignity, opportunities, and a sense of belonging, it also brings significant social and cultural challenges. Understanding these factors is crucial to addressing the broader implications of religious conversion in the community.

#### **4.2.3 Consequences Faced Post-Conversion**

Religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, is a complex process driven by diverse motivations, including personal spiritual fulfillment, socio-economic opportunities, and exposure to new religious teachings. Many converts cite a deep sense of peace and belonging in their new faith, often coupled with tangible benefits such as access to education, healthcare, and community support. However, conversion also brings significant challenges, as individuals navigate social ostracization, strained familial relationships, and discrimination from their former communities.

One respondent shared, *“After I converted, my neighbors stopped inviting me to community events. Even my own relatives refused to share meals with me.”* This sentiment reflects the broader experience of social exclusion faced by many converts, particularly in tightly-knit traditional Hindu communities.

The consequences of religious conversion extend beyond interpersonal relationships, affecting cultural practices and community participation. Some converts express a sense of loss, particularly regarding long-held traditions and rituals. *“I miss celebrating Dashain with my family the way we used to. Now, they see me as an outsider,”* one individual lamented.

Economic and social barriers also emerge, with some converts struggling to access community resources. *“I lost my membership in the local committee after converting. They said I had betrayed my culture,”* reported another respondent. Such exclusion underscores the challenges converts face in maintaining their livelihoods and social standing.

Furthermore, many face pressure to reconvert through initiatives like the “*Gai Firta*” program, which promotes the return of converts to Hinduism. “*They told me I could come back if I performed purification rituals. But I have found my own path now,*” said one respondent, highlighting the internal and external conflicts surrounding religious identity.

Despite these challenges, converts also find new opportunities, including a supportive faith-based community and avenues for personal growth. “*I have found peace in my faith, even if it has cost me my old life,*” one individual reflected.

Ultimately, religious conversion in Lele is a transformative experience that reshapes social dynamics, cultural practices, and personal identities, revealing both the promises and perils of spiritual change in a deeply traditional society.

Initially, his conversion brought material benefits, including small financial aid and occasional food support. However, the social consequences soon became apparent. The majority Hindu community in which he lived began to view him as an outsider. Friends and relatives distanced themselves, and he faced discrimination in social and economic interactions. Traditional community events, rituals, and even shared labor opportunities became inaccessible to him. The exclusion extended to his employment opportunities, making it difficult for him to sustain his livelihood.

As time passed, he experienced increasing social isolation. Despite his new religious identity, the sense of belonging and communal support that he had enjoyed within the Hindu social structure was lost. The emotional and economic burden of social exclusion outweighed the material benefits he initially received. After two years of struggling to integrate into Christian society while facing hostility from his Hindu community, he decided to return to Hinduism.

Society acts as a powerful force that shapes religious choices through mechanisms such as inclusion, exclusion, and economic dependency. While economic incentives might initiate conversion, social dynamics play a crucial role in determining its sustainability.

From a sociological perspective, Emile Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness is evident in this case. The Hindu community in Lele maintained strong social cohesion through shared rituals, values, and traditions. When the subject converted to Christianity, he disrupted these collective norms, leading to social sanctions in the form of exclusion. His reversion to Hinduism can be understood through Durkheim's theory that individuals seek social integration and belonging, which often outweighs individual economic incentives.

Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital is applicable in explaining the subject's decision to revert. In Hindu society, social relationships function as capital, providing economic and emotional support. Once he lost access to this capital, his survival became difficult, compelling him to return to his original faith.

This case study highlights how society, rather than personal belief alone, plays a dominant role in shaping religious conversion and reversion. Economic motivations may initiate conversion, but social inclusion, cultural practices, and community relationships determine whether the conversion is sustainable. The Hindu-majority society of Lele, Lalitpur, acted as a vital force that influenced the individual's religious identity, reinforcing the idea that religious conversion is not solely a spiritual decision but a deeply social one.

The findings reveal that religious conversion among Dalit in Lele is a complex process influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and personal factors. While conversion provides new opportunities, it also brings challenges, including social exclusion. The study underscores the need for policies that protect religious freedom while addressing caste-based discrimination.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This study explored the causes and consequences of religious conversion among Dalit in Lele, Lalitpur. Using a qualitative approach, the research examined how caste discrimination, economic deprivation, and missionary efforts contribute to conversion. Fifteen case studies highlight the diverse experiences of converts, illustrating both the benefits and challenges of adopting a new religious identity.

#### **5.1 Summary**

This study explored the mechanisms, motivations, and consequences of religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, Nepal. By analyzing case stories, the research sheds light on the deeply personal and social dimensions of religious transformation.

The investigation into the mechanisms of conversion revealed that individuals undergo a multifaceted process influenced by spiritual experiences, personal crises, social networks, and missionary efforts. Many converts described moments of personal realization, divine intervention, or dissatisfaction with their previous religious practices as key triggers for their transition. The role of external agents, such as religious organizations and evangelists, was also significant in providing guidance, community support, and theological justification for conversion.

The motivations behind religious conversion varied widely. For some individuals, conversion was a means of finding solace and healing during times of emotional, financial, or health-related distress. Others were drawn to new religious beliefs due to a sense of inclusion, moral clarity, and perceived spiritual fulfillment. Additionally, economic factors, including access to social services and educational opportunities, played a role in influencing conversion decisions.

Summary of the findings are as follows:

Many Dalits facing caste-based discrimination have turned to Christianity in search of dignity, equality, and support, but their conversions often come at a cost. A Dalit woman, excluded from social spaces, found dignity and community in Christianity but distanced herself from her family. Similarly, a man who suffered untouchability in

his Hindu community embraced Christianity for the respect it offered, though it strained his relationships with relatives. For some, conversion was a means of overcoming personal struggles—one man battling alcoholism and despair found hope in Christianity, which transformed his life but altered his social ties. A young man, rejecting the caste hierarchy of Hinduism, embraced Christianity for its promise of equality, leading to family conflicts that eventually subsided. A couple converted primarily for financial support and better education for their children, but their extended family accused them of doing so for material benefits. The transition between religions was not always smooth—a woman struggled to balance her Christian beliefs with Hindu traditions, losing cultural connections but gaining a supportive faith community. A local leader converted to escape caste-based discrimination, facing severe rejection from his village yet remaining steadfast in his beliefs. Another man, rejecting Hindu rituals based on fear and karma, found peace in Christianity but paid the price of severed ties with his relatives. Some conversions were acts of defiance—a woman turned to Christianity after her daughter was denied temple entry due to caste, gaining a community of acceptance but losing ties with her in-laws, while a young man secretly explored Christianity as an escape from discrimination, only to struggle with both Hindu and Christian communities. Social rejection was a common experience—a single mother, shunned by her community, found solace and acceptance in Christianity, though her old friends distanced themselves. The difficulty of abandoning cultural traditions was evident in a man who converted yet found it hard to let go of Hindu festivals, eventually merging old customs with new beliefs to maintain his cultural roots. Not all conversions were permanent—a Dalit man, initially motivated by financial incentives, later reverted to Hinduism after facing social exclusion in his new faith. Meanwhile, a schoolteacher who embraced Christianity for its message of equality lost her job in a Hindu-run school, only to emerge as an activist promoting Dalit rights and education. These stories highlight the complex interplay between faith, caste, identity, and social acceptance, showing that while conversion can offer dignity and support, it also brings challenges of cultural displacement, familial conflict, and societal exclusion.

Many converts faced rejection from their communities, losing social privileges and facing pressure to revert. However, they found solace and purpose in their new faith, despite hardships

The study also assessed the broader consequences of religious conversion within the Lele community. One of the most notable changes was the shift in social dynamics. Converts often faced resistance, ostracization, or strained relationships with family members and neighbors. The shift in cultural practices was evident, with new religious customs replacing traditional rituals. This transformation sometimes led to tensions between different religious groups, affecting community harmony. However, some converts reported experiencing stronger communal support within their new faith groups, which helped them navigate social alienation.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

Religious conversion is often driven by a desire for dignity, equality, and social acceptance, particularly among marginalized communities facing discrimination. Many Dalits convert to escape caste-based oppression, finding in Christianity or other religions a sense of respect, community, and hope. Personal struggles, such as addiction or social rejection, also lead individuals to seek spiritual transformation. In some cases, economic incentives, education, or healthcare opportunities motivate conversion. However, the consequences can be complex—while conversion can provide emotional and social support, it often results in estrangement from family, loss of cultural identity, and social exclusion. Some individuals struggle to reconcile new religious beliefs with old traditions, leading to internal conflicts. Additionally, societal backlash, such as job loss, discrimination, or accusations of conversion for material gain, can create further challenges. Despite these difficulties, many remain committed to their new faith, viewing it as a path to personal empowerment and liberation.

Religious conversion in Nepal remains a sensitive and complex issue shaped by social structures and personal choices. While conversion offers an escape from caste-based discrimination, it also leads to new forms of exclusion. Policymakers must ensure that religious freedom is upheld while addressing systemic inequalities that push marginalized groups towards conversion. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of conversion on social mobility and identity formation among Dalit communities.

Religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by personal, social, and economic factors. The case stories highlight that while conversion can be a source of personal empowerment and spiritual fulfillment, it also carries significant social implications, including familial conflicts and cultural shifts. The findings suggest that religious transformation is not merely a private choice but a socially embedded process with far-reaching impacts on community cohesion.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering mutual respect and dialogue among diverse religious groups. Future research could focus on long-term impacts of conversion on individual well-being and community integration, as well as strategies to promote peaceful coexistence among different faith communities. Ultimately, acknowledging the motivations and consequences of religious conversion can help policymakers, religious leaders, and social organizations navigate interfaith relationships more effectively.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Questionnaire Name:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Ethnicity/Caste:
4. Religious Background (Before Conversion):
5. Current Religion:
6. Duration Since Conversion:
7. Marital Status:
8. Education Level:
9. Occupation: .....
10. Monthly Household Income:  Less than 10,000 NPR  10,000 - 20,000 NPR  
 20,000 - 30,000 NPR  30,000 - 40,000 NPR  More than 40,000 NPR   
 Prefer not to say
11. Languages:
12. Have you ever participated in religious discussions or events?:  
 Yes  No
13. If yes, please specify the type of events or discussions you participated in:
14. How do you perceive religious diversity in Nepal?:  Very positive  Positive  
 Neutral  Negative  Very negative
15. Do you feel comfortable discussing your religious beliefs with others?:  Yes   
 No  Sometimes
16. How do you rate the level of acceptance of religious conversion in your community?:  Very accepting  Accepting  Neutral  Not accepting   
 Very not accepting
17. Additional Comments or Information (Optional): 
  1. How do individuals perceive and experience religious conversion in their lives?
  2. What factors influence an individual's decision to convert to a different religious belief system?

3. How do societal norms and cultural practices shape the process of religious conversion?
4. What role does community support play in facilitating or hindering religious conversion?
5. How do individuals navigate conflicts between their original religious identity and the newly adopted one during the conversion process?
6. What are the social and psychological consequences of religious conversion for individuals and their communities?
7. How do individuals reconcile their past religious beliefs and practices with their newly embraced faith?
8. How does the process of religious conversion contribute to the formation of personal identity and sense of belonging?
9. How do religious institutions and leaders influence the conversion experience of individuals?
10. What are the long-term effects of religious conversion on an individual's worldview, relationships, and social integration?

**B Focus Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Can you share your understanding of religious conversion and what it means to you personally?
2. Have you or anyone you know experienced religious conversion? If so, could you describe the circumstances surrounding it?
3. How do you perceive the role of family, community, and societal expectations in the process of religious conversion?
4. What are some common reasons or motivations that may lead individuals to convert to a different religious faith?
5. How do religious institutions and leaders influence or shape the decision-making process of individuals considering conversion?
6. What challenges or obstacles do individuals face when undergoing religious conversion, both internally and externally?
7. Can you discuss any positive or negative consequences that may arise from religious conversion, either for the individual or their broader community?

8. How does the broader social and cultural context impact the acceptance or rejection of religious conversion within society?
9. In your opinion, what are some misconceptions or stereotypes surrounding religious conversion, and how do they affect individuals who have undergone this process?
10. What recommendations or insights do you have for addressing the needs and concerns of individuals going through religious conversion within our society?

### **C Interview:**

1. Can you tell me about your personal experiences with religious conversion, if any?
2. What factors or events led to your decision to convert to a different religious faith, if applicable?
3. How did your family and community react to your decision to convert, and how did their attitudes influence your experience?
4. What role did religious leaders or institutions play in guiding you through the process of conversion?
5. Can you describe any challenges or struggles you encountered during your conversion journey, and how did you overcome them?
6. How has your religious conversion impacted your sense of identity, belonging, and relationships with others?
7. What support systems or resources did you find helpful during your transition to a new religious faith?
8. Have you faced any discrimination or stigma as a result of your religious conversion, and if so, how have you coped with it?
9. Looking back, what are some lessons or insights you've gained from your experience of religious conversion?
10. How do you envision the future of your religious identity and your role within your religious community?

## **Annex II: Case Studies**

### **Case Stories**

#### **Case Study 1: The Story of Ram Maya**

Ram Maya, a 38-year-old Dalit woman from a rural village in Nepal, faced relentless discrimination throughout her life due to her caste. From a young age, she experienced exclusion in her Hindu community, being denied entry into temples, barred from using common water sources, and subjected to social ostracization. Despite her hard work and resilience, she was often treated as an outcast, even within spaces that were meant to foster communal harmony.

The discrimination intensified after her marriage, as her in-laws and neighbors imposed severe restrictions on her participation in social and religious gatherings. She was often humiliated, forced to eat separately, and denied opportunities that others in her village took for granted. As a mother, she worried about her children's future, fearing they would inherit the same cycle of marginalization.

In her search for dignity and acceptance, Ram Maya encountered a local Christian community that welcomed her without prejudice. Through them, she found a new sense of belonging. Encouraged by their teachings of equality and love, she decided to convert to Christianity. Her decision was not easy, as it came with serious repercussions. Upon learning of her conversion, her extended family disowned her, severing all ties and branding her a traitor to their traditions. Many villagers shunned her, accusing her of betraying her heritage for material benefits.

Despite the hardships, Ram Maya found solace and support among her new faith community. With their help, she secured educational assistance for her children, ensuring they had access to opportunities she never had. The church also provided her with emotional support and practical aid, including vocational training that enabled her to earn a livelihood independently.

Although she has gained a new family in faith, the pain of losing her biological family remains. She has made multiple attempts to reconcile with her relatives, but the wounds of societal stigma run deep. While some members have shown signs of willingness to reconnect, others remain steadfast in their rejection.

Ram Maya's story highlights the profound struggles of caste-based discrimination and religious conversion in Nepal. It underscores the complex interplay between tradition, faith, and the pursuit of dignity. As she continues to navigate these challenges, she remains hopeful that one day, her family will accept her not just as a daughter and sister, but as a human being deserving of love and respect.

### **Case Story 2: Breaking Free from Social Discrimination**

Maya Pariyar, a 38-year-old woman from Lele, grew up facing untouchability and discrimination as a Dalit. Despite her hard work, she was often barred from entering temples and participating in social events. Five years ago, she converted to Christianity after attending a church gathering where she was welcomed without judgment. She found a sense of belonging and dignity in her new faith. However, her conversion was met with resistance from her extended family and neighbors, who saw it as a betrayal of tradition. Over time, she learned to navigate these tensions, and though some relationships suffered, she believes that her new faith has given her the inner strength to stand against societal discrimination.

### **Case Story 3: The Search for Spiritual Peace**

For years, 45-year-old Ram Sarki struggled with alcoholism and poverty, feeling abandoned by society. His search for peace led him to a group of Christian believers who introduced him to prayer and spiritual healing. Encouraged by their support, he embraced Christianity, hoping for a fresh start. His conversion was not just about religion but also about escaping a cycle of despair. His decision, however, was met with mixed reactions—some friends cut ties with him, while others respected his choice. Today, Ram is sober and actively participates in social work, helping others who face similar struggles.

### **Case Story 4: The Youth Perspective on Religious Freedom**

Santosh Nepali, a 22-year-old college student, grew up in a Hindu Dalit household but never felt a deep connection to the rituals and traditions that seemed to reinforce caste-based discrimination. He often questioned why certain religious practices placed him and his family at the bottom of the social hierarchy, no matter how educated or

capable they were. As he pursued his studies, he was introduced to Christianity through a friend who invited him to a church gathering. Santosh was initially hesitant, knowing that religious conversion was a controversial subject in his village, but he was deeply moved by the message of unconditional love, equality, and salvation. For the first time, he felt that his worth was not determined by his caste but by his faith and inner character.

As he began to explore Christianity further, he started attending Bible study groups and interacting with pastors who spoke about hope, dignity, and breaking free from societal oppression. The idea that all people were created equal in the eyes of God gave him a newfound sense of self-worth. Eventually, Santosh made the life-changing decision to embrace Christianity, believing that it aligned with his values and aspirations. However, his decision was met with strong resistance from his family. His parents feared social exclusion, knowing that Dalit who converted often faced hostility from their relatives and neighbors. They tried to convince him to return to Hinduism, warning him that he would be ostracized from family gatherings and community events.

Despite the emotional struggle, Santosh remained firm in his beliefs. His conviction gradually softened his family's resistance, and over time, they accepted his decision. Though some extended relatives distanced themselves from him, his immediate family saw that his new faith gave him a sense of purpose and strength. Santosh's conversion was not just a personal journey—it had broader sociological significance. It challenged the deep-rooted caste-based discrimination that had dictated his community's way of life for generations. Now, he actively leads discussions on religious freedom among Dalit youth in Lele, encouraging them to think critically about faith, identity, and social justice. His story reflects a growing trend where Dalit see religious conversion not just as a spiritual shift, but as a means of reclaiming dignity and escaping the oppressive structures that have historically marginalized them.

### **Case Story 5: Conversion as a Family Decision**

Kamal and his wife Sita had struggled with financial hardship for years, often facing social exclusion due to their Dalit identity. When a Christian organization offered

them financial support and educational opportunities for their children, they began attending church services. Over time, they embraced Christianity, feeling that it provided them with a sense of equality and hope for their family's future. However, their relatives accused them of converting for material gain, creating rifts in family gatherings. Despite the criticism, Kamal and Sita remain steadfast in their faith, believing that it has brought positive changes to their lives.

### **Case Study: 6**

#### **Religious Conversion and Its Social Implications in Lele.**

Religious conversion is a deeply personal yet socially significant phenomenon that reshapes individual identities, interpersonal relationships, and community dynamics. In the case of Anjali, a 26-year-old teacher from Lele, Lalitpur, her journey of conversion to Christianity highlights both the motivations behind such a shift and the consequences it brings within a traditionally Hindu society.

Anjali's conversion was catalyzed by her participation in a Christian youth camp, where she encountered teachings that emphasized equality and empowerment, particularly for women. In Nepalese society, which is historically influenced by hierarchical caste structures and patriarchal norms, Christianity's message of inclusivity resonated deeply with her. As a Dalit woman, Anjali had faced systemic discrimination and limited opportunities for social mobility. The Christian teachings she was exposed to provide her with a sense of dignity, worth, and agency that she had not previously experienced within her community.

However, the social repercussions of her conversion were immediate and severe. Anjali lost her teaching position at a local Hindu-run school, a consequence of religious and cultural biases that persist in Nepalese society. Her decision to embrace Christianity was perceived as an act of defiance against the dominant socio-religious order, leading to her exclusion from her former workplace. Such instances of job loss due to religious conversion are not uncommon in Nepal, where the intertwining of religion and social structures often dictates opportunities and social acceptance.

Despite the professional setback, Anjali found a new sense of belonging and purpose within the Christian community. She secured a position in a Christian school, where she could continue her passion for teaching in an environment that supported her newfound faith. Furthermore, her conversion did not merely represent a shift in religious identity; it also reinforced her commitment to advocating for Dalit rights. Empowered by Christian teachings on equality and justice, she actively engages in social activism, challenging caste-based discrimination and promoting educational opportunities for marginalized communities.

Anjali's case illustrates the complex interplay between religious conversion and socio-cultural dynamics. While conversion may offer individuals spiritual fulfillment and social empowerment, it also disrupts traditional structures, often leading to exclusion, economic consequences, and strained relationships. Her journey highlights the broader patterns of religious transition in Nepal, where faith is not just a matter of belief but also a catalyst for social change and resistance against systemic injustices.

This case study contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind religious conversion in Lele, Lalitpur. It reveals that beyond theological appeal, conversion can be driven by social aspirations and the pursuit of equality. At the same time, it underscores the challenges individuals face when their personal choices conflict with entrenched societal norms. Anjali's story is a testament to the resilience of converts who navigate the tensions between faith, identity, and societal expectations in contemporary Nepal.

### **Case Story 7: Cultural Tensions After Conversion**

When Radhika Bishwokarma converted to Christianity, she faced unexpected cultural challenges. She could no longer participate in traditional Hindu festivals like Dashain and Tihar, which had been an essential part of her upbringing. This created emotional distance between her and her childhood friends. She also stopped visiting family members who still followed Hindu traditions, as she felt torn between her new beliefs and her past customs. While she enjoys the support of her church community, she sometimes feels nostalgic about the cultural bonds she had before. The transition has been difficult, but she remains committed to her faith.

### **Case Story 8: Facing Backlash from the Community**

Narayan Nepali was a respected local leader in Lele who had followed Hindu traditions for most of his life but was deeply troubled by the persistent caste-based discrimination that Dalit like him faced. As a leader, he had often spoken against untouchability and social exclusion, yet he himself was not spared from these discriminatory practices. Despite his contributions to the village, he was never fully accepted by the upper-caste groups, and his presence in temples and public feasts was always met with subtle, and sometimes open, resistance. Over time, Narayan became disillusioned with the rigid social hierarchy within Hinduism, where Dalit remained marginalized no matter how educated or influential they became. His turning point came when he was invited to a Christian prayer meeting by a close friend. He was initially hesitant, fearing backlash from his community, but the welcoming atmosphere of the gathering deeply moved him. The emphasis on equality before God, the rejection of caste, and the idea of personal salvation resonated with his lifelong struggle for dignity and respect.

Gradually, Narayan started attending more Christian gatherings and reading the Bible, where he found passages that reinforced his belief in justice and social equality. He was particularly drawn to the teachings of Jesus Christ about love, forgiveness, and breaking social barriers. After much contemplation, he made the bold decision to convert to Christianity and publicly declared his new faith. His conversion was met with outrage from many villagers, who accused him of betraying his ancestors and abandoning his cultural roots. Some of his old friends stopped speaking to him, and he was no longer invited to important community events. Even his extended family distanced themselves, fearing that associating with him would damage their social standing. The rejection was painful, but Narayan found solace in his new faith, which gave him the strength to endure the opposition.

Despite the backlash, Narayan did not retreat into isolation. Instead, he used his new spiritual path as a platform to continue advocating for social justice. He started organizing community dialogues, where he encouraged open discussions on religious freedom, caste discrimination, and human dignity. His transformation also had a sociological significance—his conversion symbolized a silent protest against the systemic oppression embedded in traditional Hindu structures. For many Dalit in

Lele, Christianity was not just a religious shift but a pathway to reclaim their dignity and find a community that accepted them without prejudice. Narayan's journey inspired several others who had long suffered under the weight of caste discrimination but had been afraid to break away from societal expectations. Over time, he became a bridge between the Dalit Christian community and the rest of the village, promoting coexistence while firmly standing against discrimination. His story reflects the broader sociological phenomenon of religious conversion among Dalit in Nepal—where embracing Christianity is often not just about faith but also about escaping centuries of exclusion and seeking a life of equality and respect.

### **Case Story 9: Escape from Superstition and Fear**

Sundar Damai, a 50-year-old tailor, grew up in a deeply superstitious Hindu environment where illness, misfortune, and poverty were often blamed on past karma or the wrath of deities. His family strictly followed religious rituals, including animal sacrifices, in the hope of pleasing the gods and improving their circumstances. However, no matter how much they prayed or performed rituals, their financial and social conditions remained unchanged. Sundar often questioned why the gods seemed indifferent to his family's struggles, but he feared challenging these long-held beliefs. His life took a different turn when a Christian preacher visited his village and spoke about a God who loved all people equally, regardless of caste or social status. Sundar was intrigued by the message that faith should be based on love and hope, rather than fear and sacrifice.

Curious, Sundar began attending Christian prayer meetings in secret, listening to sermons about grace, forgiveness, and dignity. He was especially drawn to the idea that all people are equal before God—a stark contrast to the caste-based discrimination he had faced throughout his life. The more he learned, the more he felt a sense of inner peace that he had never experienced before. After months of contemplation, he made the bold decision to convert to Christianity and abandon the rituals he once believed controlled his fate. When his relatives learned of his conversion, they were furious, accusing him of rejecting his ancestors and dishonoring their traditions. Some family members cut ties with him, while others tried to persuade him to return to Hinduism by warning him of divine punishment.

Despite the backlash, Sundar remained steadfast in his faith. He found strength in the Christian community, where he was accepted and respected, free from the caste-based hierarchy that had always dictated his social status. His conversion carried a significant sociological impact—not only did it challenge the traditional power structures in his village, but it also symbolized a shift away from fear-driven beliefs towards a faith that emphasized equality and compassion. Though he lost some relationships, Sundar believes he has gained something far greater: freedom from guilt, fear, and social exclusion. Today, he actively shares his story with others who feel trapped in the rigid structures of caste and superstition, hoping to inspire them to seek a life of dignity and spiritual fulfillment.

### **Case Story 10: A Mother's Search for Equality**

For decades, Manju Pariyar struggled with the deep-seated caste discrimination in her village. As a Dalit woman, she was often humiliated and denied equal participation in religious and social gatherings. She was particularly hurt when her daughter was stopped from entering a temple during a festival. Feeling helpless, she began searching for a community where she would be treated with dignity. A Christian neighbor invited her to a prayer gathering, where she felt a warmth and inclusivity that she had never experienced before. Gradually, she and her family converted to Christianity. However, this decision came with consequences—her in-laws refused to visit her house, and she was excluded from her village's women's savings group. Despite these hardships, Manju believes she has gained something more valuable: a life free from caste-based discrimination and a supportive faith-based community.

### **Case Story 11: A Silent Rebellion through Religion**

Dilip Nepali, a 19-year-old student, never openly questioned his family's Hindu beliefs but often felt that the caste system was unfair. He had witnessed his parents being disrespected by upper-caste landlords and saw how his community struggled for basic rights. While studying in Kathmandu, he met a group of people who introduced him to Christianity. He was fascinated by the concept of universal brotherhood and the rejection of caste discrimination within Christianity teachings. Without informing his family, he started reading bible texts and even observed Ramadan fasting. When his parents discovered his interest in church they were deeply worried, fearing

backlash from society. However, Dilip remained firm in his beliefs, and after two years, he officially converted. His conversion is seen as a quiet form of rebellion against the caste system, but he still faces challenges in being accepted by both his old and new communities.

### **Case Story 12: From Isolation to Inclusion**

Nirmala Bishwokarma had always been an outcast in her village. As a single mother abandoned by her husband, she faced extreme hardship, barely managing to feed her two children. Many people in her community treated her as cursed and avoided her. One day, a group of Christian social workers visited Lele and provided support to struggling families, including hers. They helped her find work and introduced her to their faith. Overwhelmed by the kindness she received, she began attending church services and eventually converted to Christianity. Her life took a positive turn—she gained confidence, secured stable work, and built new relationships within the Christian community. However, her old friends distanced themselves, claiming she had betrayed her traditions. Despite this, Nirmala is grateful for her decision, as it gave her a fresh start and a sense of belonging.

### **Case Study 13: Religious Conversion in Lele, Lalitpur, Nepal**

Religious conversion is a deeply personal and often complex phenomenon influenced by social, economic, and emotional factors. In Nepal, particularly in rural areas like Lele, Lalitpur, religious conversion has been a topic of discussion due to its impact on community dynamics, cultural practices, and interpersonal relationships. This case study explores the motivations and consequences of religious conversion through the experience of Mina, a 30-year-old single mother who embraced Christianity following personal hardship.

#### **Mina's Story: Motivation Behind Her Conversion**

Mina's journey to Christianity began after her husband abandoned her, leaving her to care for their child alone. Struggling financially and emotionally, she found solace and support within the local Christian community. The church provided her with material aid, including food and shelter, and emotional comfort, giving her a sense of

belonging and purpose. Unlike her biological family, who were unable to support her during this crisis, the church community welcomed her, reinforcing her decision to convert.

### **Causes of Conversion**

Mina's conversion was driven by both practical and spiritual factors. The need for financial stability and emotional security played a significant role, but she also found spiritual fulfillment in Christianity's teachings, which emphasized compassion and resilience. Her conversion, however, did not come without challenges. While she gained a new support system, she faced hostility from her in-laws, who accused her of abandoning family traditions and blamed her conversion for the failure of her marriage. This highlights a broader societal tension where religious conversion is often met with suspicion and resistance, particularly when it challenges entrenched cultural norms.

### **Social and Cultural Impact**

Mina's case illustrates the broader implications of religious conversion in Lele. Her experience reflects how religious communities can act as alternative social support networks, especially for marginalized individuals. However, her ongoing struggle with familial rejection underscores the social costs of conversion, including strained relationships and potential ostracization. The shift in religious identity often leads to conflicts within families and communities, as traditional belief systems and new religious affiliations clash.

### **Conclusion**

Mina's story sheds light on the complex interplay of faith, survival, and societal acceptance in religious conversion. While conversion can offer hope and support, it can also create social fractures. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in assessing the broader impact of religious conversion in Nepalese society and developing approaches to promote religious tolerance and social cohesion.

**Case Story 14: The Struggle to Maintain Cultural Identity**

Ramesh BK, a 42-year-old farmer, converted to Christianity five years ago after feeling disillusioned with the caste-based discrimination he faced in Hindu society. He was drawn to Buddhism's teachings of equality and self-awareness. However, after converting, he found himself struggling with cultural identity. Many of the festivals and traditions he grew up with were deeply connected to Hinduism, and abandoning them made him feel disconnected from his past. While he fully embraced Buddhist philosophy, he missed the communal celebrations of Dashain and Tihar, which had been an integral part of his childhood. His new religious path gave him peace, but it also created a cultural gap between him and his extended family. Over time, he has tried to merge Buddhist values with some of his old traditions, finding a balance between faith and culture.

**Case Study 15: The Role of Society in Shaping Religious Conversion**

Religious conversion is a complex social phenomenon influenced by various economic, cultural, and social factors. This case study examines the religious conversion experience of a Dalit man from Lele, Lalitpur, Nepal, who transitioned from Hinduism to Christianity due to economic incentives and later reverted to Hinduism due to social pressures. His journey highlights the significant role society plays in shaping religious choices and identity.

The subject of this case study, a Dalit man in his early thirties, lived in a socioeconomically disadvantaged community in Lele, Lalitpur. Struggling to meet his daily needs, he encountered a group of Christian missionaries who offered him financial assistance upon conversion. The promise of monetary support and a better life compelled him to embrace Christianity, as his immediate concern was survival rather than religious doctrine.