

# **Reasons for Conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in West Bengal, India, and how these Conversions Affect People's Lives – An Empirical Study.**

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*This Master's Thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the MA degree at*

MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2015, Fall

AVH5010: Master's Thesis (60 ECTS)

Master in Theology

45 462 words

## **Preface**

To write a master thesis has been very interesting – especially being able to go to a foreign country and culture and conduct my own empirical fieldwork and also to research a topic I find very interesting and through this be able to contribute academically to the research theory on the topic of conversion. Although interesting, it has been a challenging process as well. A Master in itself can be challenging, but due to unanticipated situations like severe disease I might have gotten while traveling, it has taken a little bit longer than I had planned for. The Spring of 2014, I almost died at the hospital due to my severe condition. They never really found out how to give me the right treatment, so it has been an ongoing process the last couple of years with surgeries etc. It has been a challenge balancing being sick and effectively conducting research at the same time. In light of this, the journey from when I first began to where I am now – handing in my finished Master’s thesis – is one I am very proud of. I would like to thank some people who have helped me along the way. First, I would like to thank Jesus. Without him, I am not sure I would have been able to go through with this. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Jeppe, for good feedback and availability through all the supervision sessions on MF, Skype and e-mail. I would like to thank David – my husband – whom has been of great encouragement – and I would say a pillar for me in many ways through this process. Thanks for all the perusal, feedback, cheering, patience and support. I would also like to thank my dear friend and translator helping me conducting my interviews in India. Without your help I would not have gotten to do the research I am here presenting. Finally I would like to thank all of my informants for being so open and bold in sharing your personal stories and life experiences with me. It has been very interesting for me to hear and study these.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction and Theory Overview

## 1.1 Research Problem

Throughout centuries, the Western Church has had a huge impact on the rest of the World through colonization, mission and trade. Summarized, the direction of Christian mission and influence was from "the West to the rest". Today, however, we see a change has – and still is – taking place. During the recent decades Christianity has been increasing in the world. Since the beginning of the twentieth century a demographic change has also started to take place. Christianity is no longer necessarily a "Western religion". In the world today, the majority of Christians live in the Southern Hemisphere (Anderson 2004, Jenkins 2007 and Cox 1995). There are many reasons for this shift, but the form of Christianity increasing most rapidly, especially in the South, is Pentecostalism (Anderson 2004). The Pentecostal movement starting from 1906 and the Charismatic movement from the 1950s and 1960s has seen a remarkable Global growth, and has taken roots in local cultures around the world (Anderson 2004:14, 144, Andersen 2012:6,14).

Observers have spoken of the 'explosive' growth of Pentecostalism in several Asian countries, with an estimated 135 million Pentecostals/Charismatics in Asia comparing favorably with 80 million in North America, 141 million in Latin America, 126 million in Africa and only 38 million in Europe. According to these statisticians, Asia has the second largest number of Pentecostal and Charismatics of any continent and seems to be fast catching up with Latin America. Together with Africa, these three continents have some three quarters of all the Pentecostals and Charismatics in the world. Furthermore, at least a third of the Asian Christian population is Charismatic or Pentecostal, a proportion that is steadily rising. There are now more evangelicals in Asia than in the entire western world (Anderson 2004:123).

These movements have a strong emphasis on mission and World evangelization before the end times, and for reaching unreached people groups with the Gospel of Jesus before His re-

turn. They are also open to spirituality, spiritual gifts, healings and *divine interventions*<sup>1</sup>, which is very relevant for people in *the southern part*<sup>2</sup> of the world.

There are also a lot of indigenous Churches having surfaced in this period of time, which shows Christianity not just being a result of western mission. This has e.g. been the case in many African countries, but also in Latin America and Asia. In light of this, it can be argued it is no longer correct to call Christianity a western religion, because people are converting to Christianity despite of mission from the West or even without being in contact with western people (Yung 1997 and Anderson 2004:123). Today, it is no longer just the West sending out missionaries to other countries and continents, but there are missionaries being sent out from “the South” to all over the world. Brazil, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Korea (Anderson 2004 and Andersen 2012) are examples of countries sending out lots of missionaries – also to the West.

The fact that Christianity is growing and steadily increasing in the southern part of the world today is mainly because people are converting to Christianity. Reasons for conversion are a central theme in my thesis. However, to find reasons for conversion to Christianity in the World or in “the South” as a whole is a big question that is too wide to answer in a single Master’s thesis. I have therefore chosen to delineate my thesis to conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in India, which is a big part of “the South” and one of the largest and most populated countries in the world with a population of 1.25 billion people<sup>3</sup>, and which consists of 17% of the worlds’ population.<sup>4</sup> I will further delineate my thesis to a part of India.

India belonged to the British Colonial power until 1947 (Shinn, Folan, Hopkins, Parker and Younglof 1970:83). Christianity had a great social and religious impact on India during the colonial times. Before the British rule, there were areas under the influence of Catholicism from the Portuguese Colonial power, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries started to spread Christianity in India. Several areas in the South of India are dominated by Christian Catholics as a result of this and hill-areas in the North Eastern states are greatly influenced by Protestantism.

Although Christianity increased during the colonial times and under the influence of western missionaries, I find it interesting that, according to Fredrick S. Downs, the growth of Christi-

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<sup>1</sup> This term will be further explained in my discussion in chapter 6.5.3

<sup>2</sup> With the Southern part of the world, I refer to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Australia and New Zealand are not included in this term.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html> , (July 2015 est.) (01.01.2016)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/31/census-17-percent-world-indian> (01.01.2016)

anity has continued to increase also after the end of the colonial time. In his article "Christian Conversion Movements in North East India", he writes:

By the end of the century nearly 20 percent of the total Christian population in India lived in the North East. From under 600,000 in 1951 the number of Christians increased to 2,511,039 in 1991. In absolute numbers that represents almost a five-fold increase in Christian population. The conversion movement was also spreading to new areas [...] this despite the fact that the British government was gone and the foreign missionaries were being phased out. The work of the churches was now in the hands of indigenous ecclesiastical organizations. The foreigners were gone, yet the conversion movement intensified rather than decreased. (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:391).

Using the case of Pentecostalism as an example, there were, according to Anderson, approximately "33 million Pentecostals and Charismatics in India in 2000, only exceeded by Brazil, the USA, China and Nigeria. The majority of these are in South India" (Anderson 2004: 124).<sup>5</sup> Focusing on Pentecostalism in India, Anderson argues "Pentecostalism is clearly the fastest growing form of Christianity in what will soon be the most populous nation on earth" (Anderson 2004:128).

My focus will not be on a specific denomination, but I will, however, interview evangelical, charismatic Christians. I have listed the statistics above because I find it interesting to see the numbers of Christian growth in India. I also believe it says something about the relevance of further studying Christianity in this country.

I want to write about conversion in India, because I am curious to know reasons behind this. I have been to India four times, and have come to like the country and people very much. In Kolkata, I know a family who has a school and a church in a suburb of Kolkata. I have known them for many years. When first moving to their area, there was no church and almost no Christians there at all. After some years, the situation has changed. Today, many people have chosen to become Christians and joined the local church. I would like to talk with some of these converts and hear their stories and see what lies behind these decisions.

## 1.2 Theory Overview

Conversion to Christianity in India is a subject several researchers have studied and written about. It has been a controversial and loaded topic in India throughout the last Centuries. Un-

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<sup>5</sup> We can note that Anderson operates with a higher figure of Christians than the Indian census of 2001.

til now, researchers have mainly focused on Christian conversion in parts of India where Christianity already have become a majority or already reached a significant number to the total population. The areas I am thinking about are southern states like Tamil Nadu (Clarke 2003. 323-350), Kerala and Goa (Robinson 2003. 291-322). Although the majority of India's Christians live in the South, there are also some of the North Eastern states (Downs: 2003. 381-397 and Joshi 2012) that are greatly influenced by Christianity:

Christianity has emerged as the major religion in three North-Eastern states, namely, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Among other states/UTs, Manipur (34.0%), Goa (26.7%), Andaman & Nicobar Islands (21.7%), Kerala (19.0%), and Arunachal Pradesh (18.7%) have considerable percentage of Christian population to the total population of the State/UT.<sup>6</sup> There are more Christians in the hill-areas in the North East than in the lowland cities.

If I were to mention all of the contributors in this short summary, my thesis would be too long. In order to illuminate a few broad lines from the literature, however, I will now give a summary of a selection of books written about conversion in India. Here is an overview of the books and articles I have chosen:

1. Vibha Joshi – *A Matter of Belief*
2. Frederick S. Downs – “Christian Conversion Movements in North East India” in *Religious Conversion in India. Modes, Motivations and meanings*.
3. Rowena Robinson & Joseph Marianus Kujur – *Margins of Faith. Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*.
4. Paul G. Hiebert – “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle”
5. Sebastian C. H. Kim – *In Search of Identity*

After the theory overview, I will proceed by further delineating and underscoring what will be my focus of interest and my contribution to the conversion theory in India in my Masters thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx) (10.01.2016)



### 1.2.1 Vibha Joshi

*A Matter of Belief – Christian Conversion and Healing in North-East India* is written by Joshi, a Hindu and social anthropologist from mainland India who has studied and observed conversion and religion in the hill areas of North East India – especially Nagaland and the Angami tribal people for approximately twenty-five years from 1985 onwards. Her book gives a detailed insight into the history of the Naga people, their traditional religious customs and traditions as well as the British and American Baptists arrival to the Hills and how Christianity got a foothold there. The focus of her research is to study the traditional beliefs of the Naga people, their meeting with- and transformation from Christianity and healing in both these faiths. She also writes about the different Christian denominations influencing the Naga Hills from the 1950s (Joshi 2012).

Joshi gives a detailed account of the animistic and pantheistic faiths and how Christianity has become a majority in this area. Although approximately 90 percent of the population is Christians, there has been a blend of the traditional Angami beliefs and the Christian teaching the Baptist missionaries brought with them. She observes a broad specter of rituals, festivals and traditions, and she focuses on the social aspects of these peoples' lives and customs. Joshi is concerned with the healing practices by the different *themu-mias*<sup>7</sup> and Angami healers, shamans etc. as well as the practice of prayer for the sick amongst the Christians, revival meetings, prayer groups etc. (Joshi 2012:124f).

She mentions two major factors leading to Christianity getting a foothold in the Naga Hills – that being education brought there by Baptist missionaries through primary school and later also high school and biomedicine – both accompanied by the teaching of the Bible and the preaching of the Gospel. This again led to the Naga people associating education and medicine with the Christians. Joshi believes conversion happens after a gradual process that brings with it social changes and challenges as to how to deal with former traditions, celebrations, cultural customs and religious sacrifices (Joshi 2012).

Joshi claims many anthropologists have been concerned with Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, but fewer have written anthropological works about Christianity in India. (Joshi 2012:6). In the preface of her book, she writes many people convert in order to achieve a better life, bodily healing and different kinds of social uplifts.

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<sup>7</sup> The *themou-mias* communicates with spirits to heal and cure people who are suffering from illnesses.

Joshi notes something I too find significant about the importance of listening to the reasons for conversion from the adherent/converts own experience and not just the political and economic reasons behind it:

I sympathize with the point made by James and Johnson (1988) that the study of Christianity should start from adherent's interpretation of their experiences, and not reduce it to politico-economic explanation. But we do need to identify those situations, as among the Naga, where political and economic factors are strongly associated both with widespread Christian conversion and with a kind of rewriting of indigenous theological ideas and practices seen sometimes as antithetical to Christianity, but increasingly seen as complementary (Joshi 2012:10).

Her focus is not primarily on the reasons for conversion amongst the Naga – although she mentions a few reasons here too – but rather to give an overview and insight into their traditional beliefs and practices and how this has blend with Christianity. Being Christian is now common amongst the Naga and they are greatly influenced by Christianity in the different villages.

Similar to Joshi, my thesis will look into conversion in North East India. Contrary to her, I will write about conversion – not from animism in the Hill areas, but from Hinduism to Christianity in the lowlands. Joshi writes about Christianity in an area where it has already become a majority. My focus, on the other hand, will be on conversion in an area where Christianity still is considered a minority, but where, in spite of this, conversion do take place.

### **1.2.2 Frederick S. Downs**

Downs writes about conversion movements in his article: “Christian Conversion Movements in North East India” and separates between the first and second half of the twentieth century. He focuses on the tribal hill areas in North East India<sup>8</sup>, similar to Joshi Vibha, and not on the plain lands of the North East. (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:397).

North East India consists of a big blend of people from many different countries that have brought with them elements from their ethnic backgrounds, traditions and beliefs. This has over time created many social and political challenges and changes – one being conversion.

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<sup>8</sup> With North East India, he refers to the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

There are dozens of different languages in North East India, and Downs writes: “[...] one of the chief characteristics of the North East is cultural diversity” (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:382). Not to mention the religious diversity – consisting of primal religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The diversity of religions has in many cases led to conversion and assimilation of different religions (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:382).

Downs writes Christianity first came to North East India with the Portuguese in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and that the first Christian community in the North East was not established until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This community consisted of approximately 7.8% of India’s Christians at the time. Most of the Christians in the North East were until the middle of the twentieth century mostly “found in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and the hill areas of Manipur” when India was under the British colonial power. (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:382-383). Downs states:

The great majority of converts come from tribal communities. [...] But the highest concentrations of Christians are found among hill tribes. [...] In sum, most conversions took place among tribal communities in hill areas under the direct administration of the British” (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:383).

Downs writes: “That a very large Christian conversion movement has taken place is not disputed. The question of why the movement has taken place is” (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:383).

As a specialist on Christian history in North East India, a historical angle is naturally Downs approach on the subject. Why are people converting in North East India? Downs makes a distinction between the first and second part of the twentieth century – between the colonial period<sup>9</sup> and the post-colonial period.

## **The Colonial Period**

a. *The Political-Imperial Conversion-Explanation* (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:384).

This is about accusations towards missionaries for wanting to promote imperialism more than faith and through this be a part of strengthening the colonial power. Those accusing the for-

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<sup>9</sup> Until 1947.

eign missionaries of this believed Christian conversion was only an ‘imperialist or neo-imperialist strategy’ to override smaller people groups and tribes that were helpless in sticking to their own ways when faced with the great colonial power. (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:384).

The motive of the British was to divide-and-rule in order to protect their economic interests in the Assam plains (tea, forests and eventually oil) (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:384).

b. *The Foreign ‘Missionary Zeal’ Explanation* (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:385).

The imperialist and what might be called the foreign ‘missionary zeal’ explanations, both attribute the conversion movement to the successful methods adopted by outsiders among ‘simple’ people who were no match for the well-educated and well-funded representatives of either the British government or the foreign missionary societies. It is not thought necessary to take into consideration the people themselves. It is assumed that their culture and history have no bearing on the question (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:385).

Downs goes on saying this in itself do not explain the amount of conversions taking place, because although the colonialists were placed all over India, the conversion movement still did not occur everywhere. In order to understand the conversion movement in North East India, he believes the focus should be on the perspective of the people in these areas and not on the foreign missionaries acting upon them (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003: 386).

In spite of differences between the British Raj and the missionaries, they benefited from each other. The British government gave protection to the missionaries and the missionaries, on the other hand, took care of schools and helped accommodating the new changes the British brought with it on the people of the hill areas.

With their dynamic view of culture, the missionaries took the position that change could bring positive benefits without destroying that sense of distinctiveness that is central to a people’s identity (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003: 388).

Downs believes large-scale conversion movements occur in the meeting with challenges and crisis. This changing environment was brought both by the British government and also by the missionaries and caused social challenges and changes both politically, socially, economically and culturally. The life of the people – especially of the tribals in the hill areas – were turned upside down in a short period of time (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:386). Since the political, cultural and social aspects of society was intertwined and went hand in hand with the traditional religious aspects of life, a change in one of these would have had a great impact on the rest. When several of these were challenged and changed, it was experienced as a crisis in need of solutions (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003: 386-387).

The missionaries from the nineteenth and twentieth century did not focus so much on preserving the local traditions of the people, but because many of these missionaries came from backgrounds of laymen, they understood, for instance, the importance of language. They therefore started to create written languages out of the oral tribal languages found in these areas. In sum, the missionaries created written languages to approximately fifty different languages (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003: 389). The creation of the written languages eventually led to the Bible being translated into the different tribal languages, making it easier to grasp the message of the Bible and the Christian Gospel, which again can be viewed as a reason for conversion. To give the tribes a written language was also part of “reinforcing the cultural identity of the people” (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:388-389).

Through their schools – and in the hill areas the entire responsibility for running the schools was given to the mission by the government – the Christian missions provided the people with the skills necessary to function in the [...] new worldview while maintaining many of the values of their traditions. [...] This combination of the new Christian worldview with the traditional polity undoubtedly made Christianity attractive to the people up till the middle of the twentieth century (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:390).

When the colonial reign ended in the middle of the twentieth century, so did most of the foreign missionary’s ministries too, because they left the country. Summing up, Downs says:

... what made Christianity attractive to many of the hills tribal peoples of North East India during the British period was the new cultural synthesis that it provided. Through their schools [...] the Christian missionaries provided the people with the skills necessary to function in the new world British administration had thrust upon them. It also provided

them with a cultural synthesis that provided a new worldview while maintaining many of the values of their traditions. Christianity and the special administrative arrangements adopted by the British worked together to make sure that the inevitable changes did not proceed at too rapid a pace (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:390).

### **The Post-Colonial Period**

The reasons for conversion mentioned above does not explain why there has been an ongoing growth of Christianity also after the end of the colonial time and after the absence of the western missionaries in the second half of the twentieth century. There was a fivefold increase in Christianity in North East India at this time. This requires new theories for conversion than those mentioned above. When the colonial power withdrew, the Indian government took over many areas – both areas left out by the British and that had resisted Christianity for a long time, but also areas where Christianity already stood strong. In order to show resistance to the new occupation of the Indian government and their Hindu culture, Downs believes many tribes chose converting to Christianity in order to have a greater impact on the new situation. Downs calls this '*patriotic conversions*' (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:392-394).

It is this context of the more or less complete breakdown of the old order and the insecurities created by political instability that makes intelligible the large-scale Christian conversion movements in the second half of the twentieth century (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:396).

In the middle of the twentieth century, many denominations and mission organizations handed the ownership and responsibility over to the local Christian leaders. Resulting from this, Christianity got indigenously rooted in the midst of a time of political instability. This indigenous rootedness not only maintained Christianity in the hills, but it also strengthened it to the point that it continued growing rapidly (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:396-397).

Downs writes out of a historical point of view and gives an account of the historical backdrop for the Christian conversion movement in the twentieth century in India. He does not go into individual cases of conversion, but focuses on the broad lines of history and the mass movements as a result of this. He does not focus on the plain lands and conversion from Hinduism, but rather focuses on the hill areas and the tribal people living there. From this perspective,

we do not get to hear so much the reasons for conversion out of a religious, individual perspective or from an area where Christianity is a minority.

### **1.2.3 Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur**

In the book: *Margins of Faith. Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, edited by Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur<sup>10</sup>, we find a collection of different articles about Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India.

The editors of this book are social anthropologists with an interest for religion. The book begins by claiming Dalit and Tribal Christianity have not been adequately treated and covered by the literature, and that this should be covered especially since around “65 to 70 % of Indian Christians have Dalit roots and around 15 to 20 % are tribals” (Robinson and Kujur 2010:5). In East India, we find many Dalit Christians in Bihar and many Tribal Christians in Jharkhand (Kalapura in Robinson and Kujur 2010:77 and 85).

This book is about how the Dalits and Tribal Christians are on the margins of society, struggling for their rights – both being discriminated against: “by the state, by the caste Hindus, by fellow Hindu Dalits, by the upper caste Christian community and by the subgroups of the Dalit Christians themselves” (S. M. Michael in Robinson and Kujur 2010:54 and 71). By the government, they are left out of the list over Scheduled Castes – and therefore without any Dalit rights from the state. Caste Hindus continue to deal with Dalit Christians as they deal with Hindu Dalits. They are therefore considered on the bottom of the caste system even after their conversion and treated thereafter (S. M. Michael in Robinson and Kujur 2010:54-57). “Thus, Christians of Dalit origin are not free from the tyranny of caste system even after their conversion to Christianity” (S. M. Michael in Robinson and Kujur 2010:57). Fellow Hindu Dalits accuse them for getting help and privileges from the missionaries and mission organizations, and that they therefore have no right to take the Hindu Dalits spot when it comes to seeking government substitutes (S. M. Michael in Robinson and Kujur 2010:57).

The Dalits can again be split up in different hierarchical sub-groups discriminating each other. Even when a Dalit converts to Christianity, they are being treated differently by the upper Caste Christians (S. M. Michael in Robinson and Kujur 2010:57ff).

The book states this discrimination – especially in the 19th century – was viewed as one of the main backdrops for religious conversion. People wanted to escape their hardships because

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to Robinson and Kujur, some of the authors are S. M. Michael, Jose Kalapura and Chad M. Bauman.

of their low social status in the society and saw conversion as an opportunity to get away from this caste oppression (Robinson and Kujur 2010:5).

Their Christian identity seems to represent their symbolic and religious re-formulation of a break from their past, their attempt to assume greater equality, freedom and justice, and to seek a new worldview under an alternative socio-religious system. Opting for this system is a 'repossession' of personal and social capabilities and a 'calculated cultural move' towards attaining desired aims (Kalapura referring to Khare 1984:30, in Robinson and Kujur 2010:84-85).

As you see here, the focus in this book when it comes to the Dalit and Tribal Christians are their social, political and economic reasons for conversion. When converting, the people did not necessarily leave all their former religious beliefs and practices behind, but added Jesus and the Christian faith to it when it was able to fit into their worldview.

... they have incorporate Jesus into the existing divine hierarchy that includes the entire range of beings with whom they have engaged in the past (Robinson and Kujur 2010:7).

Sebastian C. H. Kim gives a short summary of the conversion literature by saying about Robinson and some other social anthropologists:

In their estimation, the role of Christianity as a religion was either insignificant or irrelevant, and the people adapted Christianity to their needs rather than adapted themselves to it. Conversion took place only when Christianity was able to fit into the people's pre-existing value system and their traditional religiosity, and was perceived to further their struggle for modernity and identity (Kim 2003:3).

This claim goes well with what is written in this book about the assimilation of traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity:

There might be the elimination of only that part of such belief or practice which conflicts with the Christian faith while other aspects that can be reconciled with Christianity may be socially approved and retained (Kalapura in Robinson and Kujur 2010:87).



In difference to Robinson and Kujur, none of my interviewees mentions being Dalit or Tribal Christians. Therefore, I have chosen not to have this as the focus of my thesis, but rather conversion from Hinduism to Evangelical Christianity in spite of caste background.

#### **1.2.4 Paul G. Hiebert**

I find Hiebert's thoughts in his article "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" interesting and relevant when it comes to reasons for conversion in India. Hiebert was a western missionary in India. During his time there, he faced himself in situations where people were looking not just for rational and logic arguments for faith, but power demonstrations showing God stronger than any sickness or spiritual matter. He also read in the Bible about Jesus power demonstrations towards sickness and evil spirits. At first, he felt hesitant to act on this, and he started thinking why he – who came from the West, knew about these scriptures from before, had been a Christian his whole life and even gone to Bible seminaries and preached about the power of God through prayer – was hesitating and feeling insecure faced with these situations (Hiebert 1982:36).

Hiebert writes many Indian villages often are in need of healing in different ways. There are all kinds of sicknesses in need of treatment. Most Indians are open to the thought of supernatural spirits or forces interfering in human lives. Many Indians faced with problems like sickness, spirit possessions, bad luck etc. therefore go to a *sadhu*<sup>11</sup>, a *mantrakar*<sup>12</sup>, or a *vaidyudu*<sup>13</sup> and village *quaks*<sup>14</sup> (Hiebert 1982:37). Those Indians becoming Christians often turned to the pastor or missionary when facing illnesses and other kinds of problems. When the western missionaries denied the supernatural in black magic and spirit possessions, it created a big problem for many Indians who experienced this as a very real part of their lives and felt the need for help. Because of this denial of the spiritual world, many of the converts to Christianity continued to contact the magician for help in these matters (Hiebert 1982:39). Hiebert proceeds by saying:

In order to understand the biblical texts, the Indian scene and the failure of Western missionaries to meet the needs met by magicians, we need an analytical framework. To create this, we need two dimensions of analysis (Hiebert 1982:39).

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<sup>11</sup> A person who pray to God for healing.

<sup>12</sup> A magician who help by taking control over supernatural forces on the earth.

<sup>13</sup> A doctor who cure people by means of scientific knowledge based on the *ayurvedic* or *unani* systems of medicine.

<sup>14</sup> Who heal people with folk remedies.

## **1. The Seen-Unseen Dimension**

### The Immanence-Transcendence

On one side, it is the level of the empirical world that everyone can see and experience and relate to (Hiebert 1982:39-40). Above the level of the empirical world are

... the beings and forces that cannot be directly perceived but are thought to exist on this earth. These include spirits, ghosts, ancestors, demons, and earthly gods and goddesses who live in trees, rivers, hills and villages. These live not in some other world or time, but are inhabitants with humans and animals of this world and time (Hiebert 1982:41).

The third level is the transcendent world that is beyond the one we are living in – heaven, hell and eternity. It is at this level that e.g. the Hindu gods, Vishnu and Siva are located and also Jehovah in the Jewish religion (Hiebert 1982:41).

## **2. The Organic-Mechanical Continuum**

The organic analogy is about seeing the reality and describing it in terms of personal living creatures/beings with feelings, relations, wills and actions. The other analogy is about viewing the world as mechanic – “Things are thought to be inanimate parts of greater mechanical systems [...], controlled by impersonal forces or by impersonal laws of nature” (Hiebert 1982:41-42). Like natural laws in western science, we cannot control what happens to us (Hiebert 1982).

### **The Excluded Middle**

Hiebert writes the reason for his unease and hesitation when facing people with supernatural problems was because he excluded the middle level of the supernatural.

As a scientist I had been trained to deal with the empirical world in naturalistic terms. As a theologian, I was taught to answer ultimate questions in theistic terms. For me the middle zone did not really exist (Hiebert 1982:43).

According to Hiebert, the belief in the middle level started to disappear in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the enlightenment period and a Plutonic dualism. This led to a seculari-

zation of science and a mystification of religion (Hiebert 1982:43). According to Yung, many Christians in the South are dissatisfied with some of the Western theology and their enlightenment way of thinking which denies the spiritual and supernatural sphere and the miraculous which is a big part of the everyday life and worldviews of Christians in the South (Yung 1997).

Newbigin states Christianity from the West “have been one of the greatest secularizing forces in history”, because of its denial of the spiritual world (Hiebert 1982:44). Many Asian people often search for answers in the middle level when it comes to what will happen in the future or why different things have happened in the past. In the west this is often explained with luck or bad luck, coincidences etc. Hiebert writes that often in questions concerning the past or the future, trans-empirical questions can give better answers than the empirical ones (Hiebert 1982:45).

On the middle level, a holistic theology includes a theology of God in human history: in the affairs of nations, of peoples and of individuals. This must include a theology of divine guidance, provision and healing; of ancestors, spirits and invisible powers of this world; and of suffering, misfortune and death (Hiebert 1982:46).

On the bottom level a holistic theology includes an awareness of God in natural history – in sustaining the natural order of things (Hiebert 1982:46).

The openness to a God who can intervene in human lives and a spiritual reality on the middle level, seems according to Hiebert, important theological aspects when it comes to reasons for conversion.

### **1.2.5 Sebastian C. H. Kim**

In his book, *In Search of Identity*, Kim gives an overview on debates between Christians and Hindus on the topic of conversion from the time of Indian independence from the British Raj in 1947 and through the twentieth century. He prefers debates over dialogues, since the former tends to communicate the differences of opinion whilst the latter tends to seek common ground. By studying debates between Christians and Hindu's over several years, he helps in the difficult issue of conversion by letting the reader get a better understanding for *the others* point of view – why they think and act like they do.

In the preface of his book, Kim starts by giving an overview of conversion theory written concerning India in the post independence era and until the twentieth century. In his summary of different writings on the topic, he states many social- and anthropological aspects of conversion have been studied, but that there is a lack of focus and emphasis on the religious aspects of conversion. "... the religious aspect of the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism has not been sufficiently addressed" (Kim 2003:12). These religious aspects in the conversion debates between Hindus and Christians are the main focus in Kim's book: *In search of Identity* – a debate with very conflicting views.

The book begins with an account of how India, as a secular state, when creating the Constituent Assembly, decided to allow "every single individual freedom to profess, practice and propagate his or her faith" (Kim 2003). Kim quotes several Hindu and Christian people and their apologetics for their view on conversion. He writes about the movement of Hindutva from the mid and end of the 1990s, the Hindu radicals understanding of this and the Christian response. In his conclusion, Kim claims the reasons behind this discussion of conversion is deeply religiously rooted for both Hindus and Christians. He focuses on the importance of tolerance and viewing the issue in light of the Human Rights when the discussion continues in the future (Kim 2003).

Kim's main concern is not with the definition of conversion, but with the problem and understanding of conversion, and the debate and conflict this has created between Hindus and Christians. He states conversion is often offensive and provocative to people from the religion the convert leaves behind – especially for Hindus. He argues the problem are grounded in different ways of viewing the reasons for conversion by Hindus and Christians. What is a religious and spiritual matter in a Christian point of view, is often looked upon as socio-political by Hindus. Because of the colonization, many Hindus associate Christian conversion with something foreign, negative and with ulterior motives like political dominion.

The Hindus see conversion as a political move and that there is no need for conversion since they believe it is truth in different religions and that one should stick to the religion one is born into according to *Dharma* (Kim 2003). Dharma has both a naturalistic and a moral dimension [...] It refers to what is regarded as nature's ordinary and normal way of being and to social obligations and ethics (Jacobsen og Thelle 1999:51).

The Christians, on the other hand, take the view that it is the right of all people to choose and act on their religious convictions and this being about freedom of religion. They also state conversion is fundamental to being a Christian and they hold to their dogma of one truth – salvation through Jesus Christ (Kim 2003).

Kim argues, in contrast to Joshi, Robinson and others, that many people have focused on the sociological and anthropological reasons for conversion. In his book he mentions many people emphasizing different aspects of reasons for conversion. Weber and Hefner are examples of two authors he mentions focusing on the human aspects of conversion, like Christian rationality and dogmas as reasons why people are drawn towards converting to Christianity. On the other hand, he writes that authors like Fisher and Morrison are more concerned with the religious aspects behind the conversion, like supernatural phenomenon and inner convictions leading to faith. He argues much of what have been written about conversion until today lacks religious reasons, aspects and understandings of it (Kim 2003:3-4).

Though the findings of sociological and anthropological studies differ in their assessment of the role of religion in the process of conversion, they share the same premise that conversion needs to be understood as a social phenomenon [...] They fail to take into account *religious* factors in the process (Kim 2003:3-4).

In Kim's opinion, even theologians have tended to over emphasis the sociological and anthropological sides of conversion over the theological aspects. The understanding of the reasons for conversion needs to be reinterpreted. Many of the converts in India have been accused for converting only to achieve a social and economical uplift. The liberation interpretation excluded all other reasons than those promoting social justice (Kim 2003:194). Kim writes:

The motivations behind Christian conversion – in fact any religious conversion – are undoubtedly complex and have to be examined according to individuals and their wider context, but this needs to be done in a way respectful of the struggle of the people themselves, who possesses the willingness and ability to meet the challenge of religious conversion. Though they may not be aware of the wider socio-political context and theological implications at the time of their decision, conversion represents their decision to change or not to change according to their own understanding of truth, salvation and liberation (Kim 2003:194).

Although many aspects are central when it comes to conversion, "... the faith commitment of the converts should not be overlooked" (Kim 2003:197).

The testimonies of individuals and communities who have experienced this transformation cannot just be dismissed as socio-political movements or the result of missionary 'campaigns'. Despite the complexity of the socio-political situation of India, the question of the motivations of converts and of missionaries, and the less-than-ideal nature of Christian communities, the 'genuine' or 'spiritual' conversions that Hindus are asking for do take place and these cannot be disregarded by onlookers but only testified to by the converts themselves (Kim 2003:198).

### 1.2.6 Summary

To shortly sum up, Joshi Vibha writes about Christian conversion and healing in the mountain states of North East India with a special focus on Nagaland. She is a social anthropologist and her focus is not on conversion from Hinduism, but from animism and pantheism and between different Christian denominations. Rowena Robinson is a sociologist writing about conversion between different religions in India and about conversion to Christianity in Goa in the sixteenth century. She also has a special focus on the Dalits and tribal Christians and social, economic and political reasons behind their conversion. Sathianathan Clarke, a professor of Theology, writes about Christian conversion in Tamil Nadu in the South of India and Frederick S. Downs writes about Christian conversion in the North Eastern hill-areas of India out of a historical view.

Common for all these are the research in areas where Christianity already has become a majority. In addition to these, there are writers like Rudolf C. Heredia, Augustine Kanjamala and Chad M. Bauman amongst others who cover the subject of conversion in India, the two latter having come with recent contributions to the field.<sup>15</sup> Since I do not find these of major relevance for my thesis, I will not further introduce them here.

Sebastian C. H. Kim agrees there are many reasons for conversion, but contrary to many of the other writers, he believes the emphasis on religious aspects should be more highlighted. Kim also writes about the conflict of conversion in India.

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<sup>15</sup> Kanjamala, Augustine SVD. *The Future of Christin Mission in India. Toward a New Paradigm for the Third Millenuim*. Oregon, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014

and

Bauman, Chad M. *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

The writers I have given an overview over in the above, are some of the writers I will return to later in my thesis.

### 1.3 Research Question

In my thesis, I find Kim's call for more focus on religious aspects of conversion interesting. My intention is neither to confirm nor deny the content of Kim's book: *In search of Identity*, because he focuses on Indian Christians and Hindus as two large groups as a whole and looks at how these two groups could relate to each other, communicate and get along concerning the question of conversion. Kim has the opinion, however, that there has been a lack of focus on the religious aspects through the conversion process, and he calls for more focus on this – not only by looking at the groups as a whole, but also by looking at individuals own stories of why they have converted. Kim states spiritual and religious conversions do take place and can only truly be understood by looking at the convert's own testimony of this (Kim 2003:198). With my material, I will therefore look closer on a selection of my informants' conversion stories. By analyzing and discussing these, I will mainly research this:

1. What are my informants' reasons for conversion? Are these reasons social or religious?
2. Have my informants' lives changed in any way after their conversion?
3. What are the main religious reasons for my informants' conversions?
4. How important are the religious aspects of their conversion according to my material?

I will proceed by concluding with what I, based on my material, find the most central, important and prominent reasons leading to conversion. I will also be able to see whether I agree or disagree with Kim's view of the importance of the religious aspects of conversion. My thesis will out of this be an attempt to answer his call for more research and focus on the area of religious motives for conversion as well as a research on an area (West Bengal and Kolkata)<sup>16</sup> that has not yet been sufficiently covered by the literature.

A common denominator in the studies of those mentioned in the theory overview, is that they all are focusing on parts of India where a large percentage of the population already have become Christians and where Christianity already have gotten a strong foothold. Although the focus of attention when writing about conversion varies to some extent, several of these re-

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<sup>16</sup> I will explain my delineation to these in the following.

searches emphasize the political, social and economical consequences of – and some as motivations for – mass conversion or equate these as equally important motivations for conversion as religious motivations. I too agree the concept of conversion needs to be explained in many ways and that it contains many different aspects of life – not just the religious aspect. Still, I agree with Kim in that it should be looked more into whether the religious aspect should be further emphasized. Could these be viewed as the fundamental and most important aspects leading to conversion – and the social aspects come as consequences of the personal choice one takes? I am also interested in the consequences of conversion – not so much with the socio-political and economical aspects from mass conversions as with the individuals' reasons for choosing to change his/her faith to Christianity and the consequences this conversion has on the individuals' life. I want to write my thesis out of a theological and missiological point of view in order to shed light on some of these religious motivations for conversion that I believe I can better understand as a theologian. Still, I will distance myself from my material by looking at it critically and let the individuals' stories speak for themselves.

Although Christianity has made its way in many places in India, Hinduism is still the majority religion in this country. Approximately 80,5% of the population practices this religion, and about 2.3% of the population is Christians.<sup>17</sup> Because of the size and large population of India, I have chosen to further delineate my thesis to a part of India – West-Bengal and Kolkata – in order to do a more in-depth research. West-Bengal has a population of approximately 91.3 million people.<sup>18</sup> Kolkata Metropolitan, with a population of approximately 14 million people, is the capital of the West-Bengal state, situated North East in the country and constitutes the lowlands.<sup>19</sup> 70.54% of West Bengals' population is Hindu, and only 0.72% of the population is Christians.<sup>20</sup> Despite this low percentage of Christians, some people are converting from their Hindu faith to Christianity. I understand why others have studied and written about conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in parts of India where Christianity already has increased in numbers and received great attention and support. What I find interesting, however, is to look at the reasons for people to convert to Christianity in a place where the majority of the people are Hindu and neither the majority nor the culture suggests people will change their faiths. I find it interesting to look at reasons for people to choose to convert from

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<sup>17</sup> [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx) , (02.01.2016)

<sup>18</sup> [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data\\_files/wb/3-fig-wb-6.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/wb/3-fig-wb-6.pdf) , (30.12.2015)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/215-kolkata.html> (30.12.2015)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/215-kolkata.html> (30.12.2015)



a majority religion to a minority religion. I will therefore focus on West Bengal and especially Kolkata where Christianity is a minority, but where people nevertheless are converting to it.

In what I have read until now, I have not found anyone writing about conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in West Bengal or Kolkata (parts of the lowland of the North-East). Since it looks like few (if any) people have written academic literature and done research concerning reasons for conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in West-Bengal, I see this as about time to do something with. Reasons for conversion can vary from country to country and state to state – especially in such a huge country as India. There may also, however, be similarities between conversions in different places. Someone needs to look into why people are becoming Christians in West-Bengal and Kolkata, and that is exactly what I plan doing in my thesis.

Based on this, I will both follow up on Kim's call for more research on religious aspects for conversion and also research something new that has not been sufficiently (if at all) covered by other researchers – the area of West-Bengal and Kolkata. I will write my thesis about:

Reasons for Conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in West-Bengal, India, and how these Conversions Affect People's Lives – An Empirical Study.

Reasons for a person to convert can vary. Could it be social or historical reasons like Joshi, Robinson and Downs writes about, like benefits by leaving the cast system or as a result of the colonial times, to gain political influence or achieve a higher social status? Or could it be religious reasons like Hiebert writes about - having a supernatural or spiritual experience? Or could it be a combination of these? Since Christianity is continuing to grow after the end of the colonial period, I am curious to find reasons behind this continual growth and conversion to Christianity. My focus, however, will not be on the hill-areas in the North East like Joshi and Downs, but rather on parts of mainland India. Several of the writers mentioned above see the need for more focus on the individuals, their stories, beliefs and experiences – although the authors focus and conclusions concerning this differ. This is what I will focus on in my thesis. I will conduct an empirical study by interviewing a sample of people to hear their reasons for converting, what their religious reasons are and how the conversion has affected their lives.

This thesis will be written from a missiological and theological point of view, but it will also take some sociological aspects into mind. The latter will not be my main focus of interest alt-

though I understand the reasons for conversion are many. I believe viewing my thesis in a theological point of view opens up for understanding the religious aspects and the interviewees' personal experiences and convictions of Jesus better. As a theologian and a Christian, I believe my understanding for some of the things my interviewees told me is better than if I were only to look at it from a secular and sociological point of view. India is a country very open to the spiritual and its interaction in everyday life. This aspect often lacks in a western way of thinking. If I were to neglect the aspect of supernatural intervention and spirituality, I believe I would lose a dimension of what the interviewees are saying and believing.

#### **1.4 Research Material**

I went to India for a month to do my empirical fieldwork. There, I have gotten to know many people. I have done twelve, semi-structured, qualitative interviews of converts from Hinduism to Christianity in West-Bengal, India with the majority coming from Kolkata. I have a friend in India, I will call him Dipok for safety reasons (although this is not his real name), who helped me find my informants. Dipok is a pastor, so he knows many converts and their stories. Because of this, he was able to choose a variety of people for me to talk with. I interviewed both males and females between the ages of thirteen to ninety – some in their homes, some in my rented apartment and some in the church building where the pastor family lives. One reason for choosing the interviewees my friend suggested, were that after he and his wife moved to this area, many people have converted to Christianity. My friend therefore knows the people and their stories well. Due to privacy and safety reasons, I have anonymized my interviewees' names and the names of the different places. These conversion stories are some of the things I have wanted to hear more about by talking with the converts themselves. Most of the people I interviewed were from poor families and backgrounds and from low castes, but I also got to talk with a few rich people from high castes. The majority of my informants lived in the same area in a suburb of Kolkata, but a few were from the city and a few from a village in West Midnapur, West-Bengal. The variety of age, gender, social belonging and wealth is a strength for my material/my fieldwork, because I got to see and hear many different reasons for conversion and from my informants lives before and after their conversion.

I have chosen to do an in-depth research and delineate my thesis by choosing four out of the twelve people that shows a variety in gender, age, social belonging, former Hindu practice, experiences etc. A similarity, however, were them all having converted from Hinduism to Christianity and telling me their story of what led to this decision.

A weakness from my fieldwork is the language problem. Because my interviewees spoke Bengali and I do not, I needed a translator. My friend, the pastor, translated for me. A possible error source was him not being used to speak English and translate interviews and that he might not have translated word by word all the time, but more the content of what my interviewees were saying. This is difficult for me to ascertain, because I do not understand Bengali. Sometimes, he explained my questions or rephrased them in Bengali so the interviewees would better understand, and sometimes, he might have added on some things he knew about them from before when translating back to English. The translating process improved from the first interview to the last one, and seemed to become more and more accurate. All in all, I believe what I heard is very close to what the interviewees actually said, because I was there and saw their reactions and feelings while telling me their stories. The good thing about Dipok translating was that my interviewees knew him and were comfortable around him and therefore able to relax and be themselves during the interview when telling their stories. That was the goal for my fieldwork – to hear what the interviewees have experienced, changes in their lives and for them to open up to me.

### **Content Focused Transcription**

When transcribing, I chose to do a free transcription with a focus on the content of the interviews rather than a word by word transcription. (I have both the word by word transcriptions and the content focused transcriptions available on request). I chose to do a content focused transcription because the English was a bit hard to understand at times and in order to make the content of the interview as clear as possible. That being said, I have strived to emphasize a representation of the content as close to what was originally said as possible. A few places, I have written the transcription as it was said originally in order not to change the original meaning, because I have been unsure what to make of it. What follows is an overview of my interviewees:

1. Anushri

Age: 21

Gender: Female

Social status: Low caste and student

2. Ishayu  
Age: 90  
Gender: Male  
Social status: High caste, landowner and farmer
  
3. Kanti  
Age: 34  
Gender: Female  
Social status: Low caste and housewife
  
4. Gaveshan  
Age: 42  
Gender: Male  
Social status: High caste, Hindu student and later a Christian pastor and evangelist

## **1.5 Research Method**

There are several methods to go about when doing social research – the two main methods being quantitative and qualitative. These methods represent two different approaches to social research and to reality. Quantitative method often regards social reality in a positivistic way “as an external objective reality”, (Bryman 2012:36) while qualitative method, on the other hand, often takes a constructive stand where the emphasis is on how “the individuals interpret their social world” – to see through the eyes of the interviewees (Bryman 2012:36, 380 and 399). Additionally, there is a third stand – that of critical realism (Hiebert 1999 and Bryman 2012:74) that can be regarded as a middle stance of the two former since it both looks at the “external objective reality” (Bryman 2012:36) and how “the individuals interprets their social world” (Bryman 2012:36, 380 and 399), but approaches it in a critical way having in mind ones subjective interpretation and understanding of these through ones “lenses”. While quantitative data often has a deductive approach where the findings come as a result of the testing of theories, the qualitative method often chooses an inductive approach where theory is a result of the observations and findings (Bryman 2012:35-36). The latter will be my approach in this thesis.

Typical for the quantitative method is the focus on “measurement, causality, generalizations and replication” of the findings (Bryman 2012:175). The qualitative method is often

preoccupied with being inductivistic, constructionistic and interpretivistic. In qualitative research, the focus is more on the words than on the quantification (Bryman 2012:35-36 and 380).

Quantitative method is good for interviewing many people through surveys and to use the collected data to say something about a larger group of people. A problem here is that the questions being asked in the survey might be understood differently – or even misunderstood – by the different people answering. This method might miss out on what the individuals are actually meaning and thinking when answering like they do. The focus is on the generalization, and not on the individuals, and might because of this, in my case, miss out on some of the individuals' reasons for conversion. The qualitative method, on the other hand, is about choosing a sample of people in order to do a more in-depth study. The focus is not on how many have done or mean this and that, but how and why they do like they do or mean what they mean. Silverman says in his book *Interpreting Qualitative Data* that

Qualitative research's greatest strength is its ability to analyze what actually happens in natural occurring settings (unlike quantitative research which often turns this phenomenon into a black box, defined by the researcher at the outset) (Silverman 2006:351).

I have decided to go for the qualitative method and the semi-structured interview. Compared to the quantitative structured interview, this has a more loose approach. The questions are more open, so the interviewees are more free to take their time when answering and sharing what they want to say. The questions can also be changed if the interviewee starts talking about something interesting for the topic. A problem with this kind of interviewing is that what people say in their answers to interview questions do not necessarily match how they would act in certain situations (Silverman 2006:39). The interviewee might say something in order to please the interviewer. This, I will try having in mind throughout the process. By choosing the qualitative method, I am interested in looking at the reasons behind the answers and to see the interviewees as a whole by listening to what they have to say and their stories while being in their own context. The qualitative method is a much more flexible method than the quantitative method.

The qualitative method also has limitations. The qualitative method are by some criticized for being too subjective, too difficult to replicate, problematic to generalize and also for having a lack of transparency as to how the interviewees were chosen, the approach to the material and how the conclusion for the study was found (Bryman 2012:405 and 406).

Although I am a theologian, missiologist and a Christian, I want to focus on my data with a certain distance and objectivity, but also let the interviewees speak for themselves. My wish is to combine an emic approach – where I look at what is being said from an inside perspective – with an etic approach – where I am critical to what is being said and take a step back in order to see if there could be any other reasons or factors behind the actual answers.

### **Interview Guide**

My interview guide consists of several open questions with follow-up questions. The questions starts by me asking them to tell me their stories – about their Hindu background, how they became Christians and if – and in that case what – they have experienced of changes, difficulties, social improvements etc. I also asked about the caste system, supernatural experiences as a Hindu and as a Christian and what Jesus means to them now. The reasons for using open questions was to hear what the interviewees chose to emphasize and focus on when answering and in this way let them be the ones to decide what is important. By letting them speak and tell me stories, it was easier to ask my follow-up questions if necessary.

For me, the important aspect was to hear my interviewees' stories and do an in-depth study of their answers. The goal was not to answer the how many, but the why – why is it like this? I am interested in the reasons behind their action to convert and I have chosen the semi-structured interview as my way of conducting interviews in my fieldwork (see attachment p.131-132 for my interview guide).

### **1.6 Research Outline**

In the introduction of my thesis, I began by giving an overview where I looked at the big picture of Christianity's shift from the *West* to the *South* and continued by narrowing down my focus and area of interest and why I have chosen this. I have included a theoretical part, where I looked into several contemporary researchers works, to see some of what have been written on the subject of conversion to Christianity in India until now. I ended the introduction by writing what my thesis will be about and will now briefly give an outline of my thesis.

In the first part of my thesis, I have given an overview of literature on the topic and my research of interest. I will proceed by presenting my material – four of my qualitative, semi-structured interviews and these informants conversion stories.

In the second part of my thesis, I will discuss this material. Firstly I will discuss their changes after converting. Secondly, I will see whether I find the different reasons being social or religious and if I agree or disagree with other contemporary researchers having written on the subject. Thirdly, I will present the religious aspects of conversion from my material, discuss these based on Kim's call for a higher emphasis on religious reasons, and see whether a conversion pattern exists.

Finally, I will conclude with my thoughts about reasons for conversion and to what extent the religious reasons are important in light of my empirical material.

## Chapter 2: Anushri

### 2.1 Introduction

I met Anushri in her village in the church my friends runs. Anushri, a twenty-one year old girl, born and raised in this area, came with her young son and met with me. I asked about her profession. Anushri had finished upper secondary school and was still a student. Some day, she wishes to study law. She had been married for some years, but her husband had abandoned her and their son. Anushri told me she comes from a Hindu family, that she grew up learning about the Hindu gods and how to pray to these – especially to Krishna. Now, as a grown up, she has become a Christian.

My intensions when interviewing Anushri was to hear her reasons for changing religion and convert from Hinduism to Christianity – especially since she is from a Hindu family and area where the majority of the people are Hindu and neither the majority nor the culture suggests she would change her faith. I was interested in hearing her conversion story – her own reasons for becoming a Christian and how this choice has affected her life. I wanted to hear whether there are differences in her life now compared to before, and also what being a Christian means to her. In light of this, the presentation of my material on Anushri is divided in two parts: (A) Anushri's conversion story and (B) Changes in Anushri's life.

### 2.2 Anushri's Conversion Story

I began asking Anushri how she became a Christian. At first, she was a little shy and not sure where to start, so her answers came in short sentences. After talking for some time, she started telling me her story.

As a Hindu, the important thing to her was having one god or one man to be dependent on to take care of her. Hindus believe in many gods, but they sometimes have one special god they dedicate themselves to. Anushri had grown up praying to Krishna.

One day, some of her relatives were in the city and got handed a Jesus tract on the street with an explanation of the Christian Gospel. They brought this with them and Anushri read it. This made her start thinking:

If I go to Christianity, maybe I will be more fruitful. [...] My life will be good and I will be a good girl.



Still, nothing more happened at the time. She met a boy, fell in love and got married. Her hope was her husband might be the one for her to depend on to take care of her. Shortly after marriage, they started to argue and fight a lot. At this point in life and in light of her problems concerning this, Anushri began remembering something mentioned in the tract – people are sinners because of the wrong things they do.

This is for my sin. I am a sinner, and because of that, maybe these things are going on in my life. [...] My husband is gone and I am suffering lots of things, because of my sin.

Anushri felt her life turning in a different direction than she had hoped for with marital and family problems. Again, she heard some things about Jesus that awakened her former thoughts about Christianity being a good thing for her life. One day, she decided to visit a Church in Bandel. In Church that day, they showed a movie about Jesus life. Particularly one scene – where Jesus dies for the sin of men – stuck out to Anushri. From the Jesus movie:

I got one question: Who in the Hindu family or in Hindu culture or Hindu god, who died for us?

By this, Anushri began looking into her own life – have anyone in my family or any of the Hindu gods taken my sins away or is anyone able to take them away?

That time I tried to find out who died for our sin, but I could not find any god who died for our sin.

A process had started in her mind about Jesus possibly being a god and that he might have died for our sins – in that case for her sins as well. Still, this was not clear to her. She kept on thinking about this. It came to a point where she wanted to give it a try and decided:

If anybody helps me to take baptism and to be a follower of Jesus Christ, it will be good for me, but no one was there to help.

Before, I was thinking: If I learn more and if I receive something – I tried to be a follower of Jesus, but no one could help me to do this things. [...] There was one question: How do I pray to Jesus and how can I receive prayer answers from Jesus?

There was no Church in the area of her husbands village and neither was there a church in her parents area at this time, and therefore no one to answers her questions and help her find out how to become a Christian. My translator started a Church in her area some time after this.

In India, the first year after marriage, the girl leaves her own family and village to live with her husbands' family. In her husbands' village, Anushri was given a very hard time by her in-law relatives that proved to be very challenging for her. The situation got to a point where she thought:

I have no meaning to live life, so I want to die. Maybe by suicide or something. [...] The situation was so bad and that day I was thinking: Maybe I will commit suicide today. Also before this situation, I prayed to God: God, if you are with me, please save me so that I can live in a good way. [...] The situation whether I should live or die, was going on that day. And I prayed to God: God, please give me an answer and let me know what I should do. [...] That same day, I jumped out into the river. Those who made the situation so bad, they came and saved me. [...] My husbands relatives saved me from the river and took me home.

Anushri was crying when telling this. The ones she had thought would care less if she died, were the ones to come and save her. After having jumped the river and being pulled out, Anushri was unconscious. Her husbands' family took her to their house. When she woke up, the first thing coming to her mind was fear they might kill her because of her suicide attempt. Anushri prayed – to Jesus this time too – to be able to go back and live in her own village in her parents house again. Instead of killing her, her in-laws called Anushri's parents who came and brought her back to their house. Back in her own village, Anushri were told by her parents:

You do not need to pray to Jesus, you can pray to Krishna. Maybe Krishna can solve your problems. But when I again tried to pray to Krishna, no answer was there. [...] Now, I have the experience that if I try to call on any other gods and I close my eyes, I

see the picture of Jesus in front of me, so I can pray there. I cannot pray to other gods.

I only pray to Jesus.

After Anushri's return, my friends had started a Church in this area. Anushri heard about the Church from her two younger sisters. They had already become Christians and were part of the Church despite their parents being Hindu, and not fond of them attending there. In Church, Anushri heard teachings from the Bible, received a New Testament and got answers to many of her questions.

From the church, I heard many stories from the Bible, and I believe that without Jesus, I cannot reach God and I cannot reach heaven. [...] From the Bible reading, because I got the New Testament, and by reading the New Testament I knew Christianity is the best thing. I have to follow Jesus.

Anushri started praying to Jesus for different things. Compared to before, she now only prayed to Jesus – no other god. Anushri's husband left her and their son for a very long time. One major prayer request she had was for him to come back to her. After three and a half years, he returned and stayed with them for fifteen days before leaving again. Although he did not stay for long, this to Anushri was a huge answer to her prayers and one of the final things leading to her decision to convert to Christianity.

By that Bible reading and by this prayer, I understood this: If I ask anything to Jesus, Jesus will give me everything. By this way, I am a follower of Jesus Christ.

Anushri's conversion was not instant, but rather a process taking place over time. Her own personal search for someone to take care of her, take away her sins, the prayer answers that spoke directly into her life and showed her Jesus responding and caring for her combined with the teachings in Church and the reading of the Bible all led to her converting from Hinduism to become a follower of Jesus and him alone.

### **2.3 Changes in Anushri's Life**

From her conversion story, Anushri has already mentioned several changes in her life. I will now give an overview and comparison of these and a few others she mentioned.

### **2.3.1 Dependency**

Anushri grew up hearing and learning many stories about Krishna – how to pray to and worship this Hindu god. She hoped either Krishna or a future husband would someday be able to take care of her. She prayed for this person or god to be someone she could come to with her everything and always depend on to help and be there for her.

I was thinking I will be given one man or god. When I was a Hindu, I was thinking that I wanted to depend on maybe one god or one man to take care of me.

She mentioned one example of a situation when she turned to Krishna for help. When pregnant, Anushri had lots of problems in her life. She prayed to Krishna for a son (not a daughter) in order for her and the child to be safe, get a good life and to improve her relationship with her husband. Because she got a baby boy, she viewed this as a prayer answer from Krishna.

I think that because I prayed to Krishna for a boy and I got a boy, I think that I received this boy from Krishna. Yes, and that Krishna answered me.

When I, later in the interview, asked whether she still prays to Krishna, her answer was blankly *no*. I proceeded by asking whether she, after her conversion, still believes in any of the Hindu gods. Her reply was that she no longer prays to any Hindu god. She had tried praying to Krishna after her parents told her this was the best for her to do, but there was no reply and when closing her eyes, she could only see Jesus. After this, she prayed to Krishna no more.

But when I again tried to pray to Krishna, no answer was there. I learned how to pray to Jesus from the church here, and now Jesus is giving answers to all of my prayers.

Despite receiving a son, Anushri's relationship with her husband did not improve and he left. Although she came to Krishna with her problems, they remained unsolved and unanswered and her situation did not improve. Her whole life she had been searching for someone to hear her, take care of her and help in her struggles. After receiving Jesus, Anushri claims finally

having found the one she had been searching for to depend on, answer when she calls and look after her.

Now, I am thinking: Someone is special who will take care of me. [...] I do not need to depend on some idol god or someone, but I know who the special man or god who will take care of me is. [...] From when I started being a follower of Jesus Christ, I have *woti*. It means to always trust someone. This is a Bengali expression. Always I trust you. Always I depend on you. This is from my heart. This is called *woti*. When I am a follower of Jesus Christ, I have not this dependence in other gods.

### **2.3.2 Prayer Answers**

After starting to pray to Jesus, Anushri claims she experiences several answers to her prayers. One of the major things leading to her conversion, was her husband coming back after praying for this – although she viewed this as impossible.

A few days ago, I thought: Maybe my husband will never come back to my place and meet with me. [...] I prayed to God: God, if you are a God, please give my husband back to me. [...] After three and a half years, my husband came back to my house and he lived with me for around fifteen days. After this, he left again. By the things here, I prayed to Jesus and Jesus gave me an answer and my husband came back. It was a very deep thing for my life.

As Anushri told in her conversion story, she prayed Jesus would help her before jumping into the river to commit suicide. The situation took a drastic turn when those creating the bad situation came to save her. Anushri also prayed she could leave her husband's village in order to go back to her own village and her own family's house after the suicide attempt. This too happened.

That time I prayed to Jesus: Please God, my mother is coming. Please, save me from here so I can go back to my mother's house and live there.

Now, Anushri is telling:

[...] now Jesus is giving answers to all of my prayers.

Before becoming a Christian, Anushri had many problems. She was from a deprived background, she did not get along with her family-in-law and she argued and fought with her husband who left her to raise their three months young son alone. Now, however, she says:

Now, if I have any problems or anything in my life, then I just pray to God. Pray to Jesus, and Jesus is giving an answer to me.

Although Anushri has received several prayer answers, she still experiences problems and struggles in her life. Contrary to before, she is now convinced the God of the Bible is present and acting in her life.

In my Christian life now, I still have some small problems from my husband's side. I have these problems, but I believe that when I pray to God, the Father of God, because the Bible [...] I am reading the Bible of God. Now I know God is with me, and He will solve my problems.

Anushri knows the God of the Bible is with her, and that she can depend on him to answer and help her when turning to him. Her current prayer request is for her husband to come back for good.

When my husband will come back to me [...] My prayer is that me, my husband and my son, will live together in our house. This is my prayer request.

### **2.3.3 New Family**

When I asked about changes in Anushri's life, she mentioned the contrast of her having a bad relation with her in-laws, who she lived with prior to converting, to her receiving a good family in Christ after converting. All those believing in Jesus have in common that they have God as a father and therefore consider each other brothers and sisters – not by blood, but in Christ. She also carried around guilt and awareness of sins in her life. Because of this, Anushri believed she deserved her bad marriage and what happened to her. Now she knows Jesus atoned for her sins on the cross.

I was in a bad situation and a bad family. It was not my family, it was my extended family through my husband. Now I am a follower of Jesus Christ and I received one good family – Christianity – in my life and I received joy. A special joy in my life. [...] Before, when I was in Hindu background my thought was that: Because I have sinned and I did something wrong, and because of my situation, my life is like this. My husband is gone and I am suffering lots of things, because of my sin. But when I am in the Christian family, I understand that Jesus took my sin and I am free and I receive [...] When I am follower of Jesus Christ in the Christian family, I receive salvation in my life.

When still a Hindu, Anushri thought the bad things happening to her, like her husband leaving etc., was her fault, because of her sins.

### **2.3.4 Difficulties**

As a Hindu, Anushri did not have to defend her faith and her Hindu practice because this was what the majority of the people in Kolkata and her family too were practicing. I asked whether she had experienced any difficulties because of her choice to convert.

The difficulties I have experienced is that my father does not like me to go to the church [...] When my father is saying these things: You do not go to the church. I am answering: We are going there for only two hours to receive the Word of God and then we will come back home. [...] My father has the question: If you go there, how will it benefit you? What good will you receive from there? [...] Every Sunday, we do not go there, but every time we do, his face is always a bit different. Angry. [...] My father is always telling us: In Christianity, they have Jesus. They receive blessings from Jesus. We have Krishna. You can pray to Krishna and Krishna will give you an answer. [...] You do not need to go to the Church.

### **2.3.5 Caste**

Although Anushri has experienced several changes in her life, some things have remained constant. Her family's financial situation is unchanged – they are as poor as they were before. Anushri's family belongs to a very low caste in India. When asking whether she still considered herself part of this cast after converting, her answer was:

Still, I am in the same caste, because I did not take baptism. Without baptism, I cannot be a perfect follower of Jesus Christ. When I take baptism, maybe I will be complete and come out from the cast system.

### **2.3.6 Religious or Cultural Symbols?**

Towards the end of the interview, I was curious to hear where the line between Hindu religious- and cultural symbols go. I asked about a few aesthetical things I have seen Hindu woman wearing, like the red bracelets around the wrist and the black spot on the forehead of the small children. She explained the red bracelet's showed one is married.

I heard this thing is from some Hindu god. Now these things in my life are a part of our Bengali culture and symbolizes that I am married. Therefore I have to wear this thing.

The black spot on the forehead of her son was done because it looked good. Although some might do this as part of their Hindu belief, Anushri views it as Bengali cultural traditions.

This is a cultural thing. With the small children up to the age of five, it is a Bengali cultural custom to put a black spot on their forehead.

## **2.4 Summary**

Before her conversion, Anushri was filled with sadness and desperation. She was broken and somber over her different problems to the point she did not want to live anymore. After becoming a Christian, she still experiences struggles, but her life has been filled with joy and peace. She has faith and confidence in the God of the Bible, his forgiveness, help and response when she prays to him. I ended the interview asking what Jesus means in her life. Anushri replied:

I believe Jesus is my Helper and my Savior, and that He is always with me.



## Chapter 3: Ishayu

### 3.1 Introduction

I heard about Ishayu through my friend and translator. Ishayu was a dear friend to him and they had earlier lived in the same farming village for some years. My friend told me a story about Ishayu that made me curious as to who this man was and what he had experienced.

The farming villages are dependent on the monsoon rain for the crops to be successful. This particular year, the monsoon did not come. The situation deteriorated so much for the farmers and their crops that they started getting frustrated and desperate. This happened after Ishayu became a Christian. During this time, Ishayu strolled around the village and talked with his neighbors. He challenged them to pray to their Hindu gods for the rain to come, and that he himself would do the same to the God of the Bible in Church the coming Sunday. From this they could determine which God answered. The days went by and Ishayu's neighbors kept praying to their Hindu Gods for rain. I was told, by my translator who knew Ishayu very well, they even dug for groundwater with no result. Finally, on Sunday, Ishayu went to Church as he used to and prayed with the rest of the assembly for the rain to fall over the village. While still in Church, the rain started pouring down. It rained for a week after.

I wanted to hear more from Ishayu's life, so we traveled to his farming village to meet with him. His village belongs to the South-West Part of West-Bengal, and is about a four hours drive outside of Kolkata. In this village, people live very simple lives materially. The houses are mostly made out of mud and people subsist on agriculture and cow farming. The landscape was peaceful and flat with rice fields in all directions.

When first seeing Ishayu, I understood he had experienced something life changing. In India, the life expectancy is estimated to be 66.4 years.<sup>21</sup> Ishayu, however, had reached the age of 90 and seemed to be going strong. I was surprised seeing him so vigorous and full of energy since he had become a very old man and outlived most of his peers. His eyes were wide open and radiated with joy and he constantly kept telling me things from the Bible and about Jesus.

Ishayu did not have a high education, but has been a landowner and worked as a farmer his whole life. Because of this, he has become a rich man in his village over the years. He is from the Teli-caste.<sup>22</sup> Because of his high caste and good economy, he has had a great status in the

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/india-life-expectancy> (05.01.2016)

<sup>22</sup> According to Ishayu, the Teli caste is one of the highest castes on the level of the Brahmin caste.

village. Ishayu lives with his family in a two stories high mud house (which you do not find elsewhere in the village) with space enough to house both children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

My intensions when interviewing Ishayu was hearing why he has converted from Hinduism to Christianity – especially since he is from a Hindu family and an area where the majority of the people are Hindu and neither the majority nor the culture suggests he would change his faith. In addition to his reasons for conversion, I was interested in hearing about changes in his life, his new life as a Christian and consequences of his choice to convert. Last, but not least, I wanted to hear what being a Christian means to him. In light of this, the presentation of my material on Ishayu will be divided in two parts: (A) Ishayu’s conversion story and (B) Changes in Ishayu’s life.

The interview took place in Ishayu’s office on the second floor of his big mud house. We could hear birds singing outside, indicating we were in a quiet village, and a loud noise from the fan in the room constantly buzzing in the background to keep the temperature down. Even before I asked him any questions, he began telling me words and verses from the Bible and things Jesus had done in his life. As an old man, his thoughts jumped a bit and he had some digressions throughout the interview, but all of them were concerned with Jesus, his faith in him, the Bible, prayer requests, prayer answers etc.

### 3.2 Ishayu’s Conversion Story

Ishayu grew up in a Hindu family. As a Hindu he believed in many gods, but he particularly worshiped Kali. In Hinduism the celebration where they sacrifice, pray to and worship the different gods is called *puja* [*pūjā*]. Every year, Ishayu sacrificed a goat to Kali in a big puja celebration by cutting it in two. Nevertheless, he did not describe himself a zealous Hindu.

It is not like I used to. I was not so involved in that.

Ishayu’s father had not liked this sacrifice tradition or going to the temple, bowing his head for the Hindu gods. It was his uncle who started the annual sacrificing of a goat to Kali - a tradition his family and generation had adopted ever since. Since the rest of his family did this, he did it too.

My generation did this, so I did this. [...] My generation thought that it is good for us, so they did this. I am from that generation, so I also did this thing for our best.

Although Ishayu performed the pujas and annual sacrifice to Kali, his motivations for this may not have been pure religious. He partly claims having practiced these because everyone else was doing it, and since he wanted to show off his wealth. He used to gather many people in his house for big puja parties in order for people to acknowledge how well his life was going and how well he conducted the pujas.

During our puja time, I used to call many people, and I used to arrange a big party of puja. A big party and many people would come and they would see how big I am doing puja and they would have food in my house.

How, then did Ishayu become a Christian? It all began with one of his daughters converting. At first, Ishayu was furious with her. From my translator, I was told he even burned her Bible once. Ishayu was reluctant talking too much about some of these things from his past, because it seemed he does not associate himself with these actions anymore. He constantly states him now being changed. At the time of his daughters' conversion, he forbid her going to Church and had some friends try and help preventing her from attending, but there was no use in doing so. In spite of their efforts, she continued being a follower of Jesus.

Many ways, I and some Hindu people tried to block her from meeting the followers of Jesus Christ. When they thought it was not possible, they told me: This is the time, we cannot do anything. [...] When my daughter became a Christian, I told her: Do not do this. You do not follow Jesus. I told her this lots of times: You do not do this. After I failed, I told her she can do as she pleases.

Eventually, he gave up and let his daughter live as she wanted.

At an age of seventy-eight, Ishayu got very sick and was lying in his bedroom in his mud house with very high fever. His daughter was in another room of the house, praying for Jesus to help him. While she prayed, something happened. Suddenly, Ishayu saw, with his eyes, Jesus present in the room standing in front of him – his arms outstretched to each side – as on a cross. Although Ishayu did not know much about Jesus or Christianity, he understood it was Jesus.

One time, I was so sick, and I had high fever. Very high fever. Before this, my younger daughter had already become a Christian. She was in one room in this house, and she prayed to God: Jesus, please help my father. I did not know that she was doing this, but at the same time as she prayed, something happened with my fever and I saw Jesus standing in front of me with his arms out to each side. [...] In front of me, I saw the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross.

I asked Ishayu whether this was a dream or vision or how he claimed having seen Jesus, and he replied:

I saw it with my eyes. [...] Yes. And after a few minutes, He was gone.

What then happened was the high fever momentarily disappearing.

I had high fever before I saw Jesus, and after Jesus was gone, the fever went down.

Still, this experience alone was not the only decisive factor leading to Ishayu's conversion. After having seen Jesus and the fever disappearing, a thought process began in him:

That time, I felt that if there is a Savior in my life, for me, maybe it is Jesus. I have to know more about Jesus.

At this time, my friend and translator and his wife were pastors and had built a Church in Ishayu's village. In light of what had just happened, Ishayu went straight to Church to talk with them. He retold what had happened and asked about Jesus to know more about him, was explained the Christian Gospel and taught from the Bible.

When Dipok taught me the Bible stories and from the Word of God, there was particularly one Bible verse that touched my heart where Jesus is telling: Always, I am with you. From the last part of Matthew 28.

I told Dipok: Jesus is always with me and I can pray to Jesus and he will give me an answer. These things were very interesting and they were touching my mind to change my life to Jesus. [...] Dipok showed me how to come close with Jesus.

Ishayu did not view his life as lacking in any way. Neither was he poor or struggling with many problems. He was living the good life – both materially, financially and relationally. Ishayu was satisfied with his life as a Hindu and his conversion did not begin with a personal quest for God. Rather, it seemed it was God who interfered in his life and opened his eyes for his need for Jesus. The prayer intercession from his daughter on his behalf, the divine encounter and intervention when he saw Jesus and the supernatural experience with his fever going down, combined with the explanation of the Gospel of Jesus and the Word of God, were all factors in changing Ishayu's heart to the point that he chose to convert from Hinduism to Christianity and become a follower of Jesus. Materially, his life did not change, but his character and life goals did.

### **3.3 Changes in Ishayu's life**

My second subject of interest is whether Ishayu has experienced any changes in his life after becoming a Christian. I therefore asked him several questions concerning his life as a Hindu and his life as a Christian. This is what he told me.

#### **3.3.1 Change of Character**

##### **Different Mindset**

Ishayu told me he used to have a different mindset as a Hindu compared to what he has now as a Christian.

I had a different mindset that time. Now, I am doing better. A very bad mindset. I was thinking and doing things that were very bad in my life like adultery. Because I was a rich man, I was going here and there doing adultery with other woman. With many other wives. [...] I did not steal anything from anyone, but I used to do adultery. I spent money to others wives to have sexual relationships with them. Bad people have this mindset, and this mindset was mine.

Now, Ishayu has a different mindset and is not proud of several past actions, something he reiterates. He is grateful his daughter received Jesus and prayed for him too.

Now, I am thinking: My younger daughter – who is a Christian now – she is doing good. I think she took the good decision for her life and for me also. I think I am a good person because I believe in Jesus.

Because of his new faith in Jesus, Ishayu views his previous life as a Hindu and the bad things he did as forgotten and forgiven chapters of his life. They have no hold on him anymore. Because of Jesus, he is a good person.

### **Boasting, Puja-Celebrations and Hindu Religious Practice**

Before, Ishayu liked to boast and show off his riches and high status in the community. He is still a rich man, but not occupied showing off his wealth anymore to look good in the eyes of others. After becoming a Christian, he quietly farms his crops and attends his cows. He has also gotten a heart for serving others.

Jesus told me: The daily life you are doing good. It is okay, but you have to work for your food and you have to serve.

Ishayu does not like to eat much food either– although he has the money for it. Now, he does not have pride in his wealth, but he feels blessed for what he has been given. He credits God for the food on his table, but sometimes prefer a simple lifestyle and not to eat much.

Puja celebrations are a big part of the society in Ishayu's village. Unlike before, Ishayu does not practice any pujas anymore.

Many people are of different mindsets here. Every place has the puja. My three sons and my family always like to do this puja and that puja.

Once a year, one time, we had Kali puja. [...] I am not doing it now, because I am a Christian.

### **Unforgiving vs. Forgiving**

Before, Ishayu said he was unforgiving towards others. Now, he claims having changed and that he forgives and loves the people around him.

Before Christianity, I used to be unable to forgive people and I was so angry at people who were doing wrong things, but now I have changed. I like to love people, and I like to forgive people. Jesus is sometimes telling me: You have to do this because you are my son. Yes. Jesus chose me for this area to do these things. Jesus chose me.

Ishayu's new view on life is him being chosen by God as a representative for him for the people in his area, to be loving and forgiving.

### **3.3.2 New Worldview**

Ishayu had a change of worldview when it came to rejecting all the Hindu Gods in favor of his new faith in the God of the Bible. After telling me his conversion story, I asked whether he still believed in any of the Hindu Gods as well. He blankly answered:

No! I never saw Kali. No. My eyes are closed for him. [...] Before, I used to worship Kali.

Now he states:

I am a follower of Jesus Christ.

I asked Ishayu what he believes will happen when he dies. It seemed he had assurance as to what would happen.

[...] Who are the followers of Christ, their names are in the heavens book. [...] The Word of God is saying: Who believes in my Son, he will receive eternal life.

Still, he seemed somewhat dubious when it came to my direct question of what would happen to *him*.

Always, I call to Jesus, I pray to Jesus. I do not know if he will take me or not, but if it is Jesus will, you know? I have the assurance to go to heaven, but always I am calling to Jesus, but I do not know if Jesus will take me or not.

Ishayu believes in heaven after death and eternal life for those believing in Jesus.

You are receiving joy now. It is not a full joy. When Jesus will come, that time, we can get the full joy.

### **3.3.3 Ishayu's Religious Practice**

Every Sunday, Ishayu attends the local Church, started and built by my friend and translator. There are few Christians in the area. Since my translator does not live there anymore, Ishayu has the key and responsibility for unlocking and locking the Church on Sundays. In addition to worshipping and praying to Jesus in Church, he prays and worships three times a day at home. One of his main prayer concerns is for his wife, daughters and sons to convert to Christianity. Therefore, he tries impacting them as best he can with his faith.

Now, my main thing is faith. The Word of God is saying: Who believes in my Son, he will receive eternal life.

In my prayer time, I use to pray for those who are my relatives. Those I have a relationship with and those who are the Christian family who I have a relationship with. I have all their names. I always like to pray for them by name, their families and my daughters that married outside and their children. All are in my prayers.

I want my wife to be saved, so when my wife is in my bed, on my mat, I use to speak loudly so that my wife can hear the Word of God. [...] I am very sad because my sons still are not believing in Jesus.

To my translator and his former pastor, he said:

Dipok, I am praying for you everyday three times [...].

In addition to this, Ishayu prays for his enemies and wants to share his faith with people in his village.



I also use to pray for those who are the enemies of me. Everyday. [...] I have one small New Testament and I have many Bibles – small New Testaments. I am giving them to people in order to know more about Jesus.

### **3.3.4 Prayer for Good Health**

For himself, Ishayu prays for continued good health. He has outlived most of his peers. Although he is thin and his back bent forward, he looks incredibly strong and fit for his age. Several times in the interview, he brings up the subject of his health. To him, God has given him good health, strength and joy because he is a true believer in Jesus.

Now, I am becoming 90 years old. [...] God gave me strength, so I am a strong man. Still, I can sit, go here and there and walk. [...] If anyone is a true believer, or true Christian, he can get older and older, but in a good way. Not in a bad way. [...] True believer or true Christian. Then he can live a long and healthy life. Yes. How long I will live, my joy will always be with me.

### **3.3.5 Relation with Jesus**

Before, Ishayu practiced Hinduism, but did not claim having had a close relationship with any of the Hindu gods or being the most eager Hindu. Now, he is an eager follower of Jesus. When talking about his life as a Christian, he repeatedly uses words describing him having a daily conversation and relation with Jesus – not only him praying, but Jesus saying things to him.

Jesus is sometimes telling me: [...] Jesus chose me. [...] Jesus told me: [...]

This indicates him now, contrary to before, has gotten a personal relationship with the God of the Bible.

### **3.3.6 Supernatural experiences**

As a Hindu, Ishayu prayed to several Hindu Gods – especially to Kali. I asked him what he prayed for. He might have misunderstood my question, and answered by telling me a dream

he had as a Hindu, during a Kali puja, about the possibility for supernatural healing. This was his dream:

### **The Dream of the Tree Root**

One time during Kali puja, I saw one thing: The name of one of the gods is Pir. One day I saw a dream. If I go to the Pir temple and there is one tree there, if I collect that tree root and give this to any person who is dying, then that person will be alive. I saw that dream directly: If I give this root to anyone who died just today and put it in their mouth, they will be alive. In this dream, I saw that I collected the root. The dream told me: When you are coming to the room with the root, if any snake is in front of you, it will not work. In this dream, I saw that when I tried to keep it in the room, one snake was there. Because of that, the root was not working.

I found it interesting to hear about his dream as a Hindu and asked whether he had any other experiences like this as a Hindu.

Before, I did not have any supernatural experiences, but after I met Jesus, I have a miracle that happened to me.

### **The Rice Stack**

Even before I got the chance to ask him, he goes on telling me a supernatural experience as a Christian. Earlier that year, he had been on the rice paddies, working with his crops. After cutting the rice, they stack it on top of each other in a big pile for it to dry out. This haystack can be approximately two meters high. This year – an old man of 90 – Ishayu had still worked with making these haystacks. When finishing one of them, he fell down and landed on his arm.

When I tried to make this tall pile of rice, I fell from high up on the top and all the way down. That time, I felt Jesus was saving me. When I fell down, my hand was bent in a painful position. I fell down and something happened. I got a little bit pain in here, but I did not go to the hospital or get any medical help [...] but Jesus saved me. I used the oil and put it here and prayed – all the pain disappeared.

When I felt pain here, I just prayed to God and it went away. Yes. When I prayed to God, Jesus: Please help me, it stopped hurting. When I pray for any pain, it stops. The pain was very hard. It was like someone was biting my bone, but when I prayed to God, Jesus, Jesus healed me.

### **Ishayu's Encounter with Jesus**

Ishayu became a Christian after claiming to have seen Jesus with his own eyes – not in a dream or vision, but present in the room (see quotes above under the section A, p:44).

### **The Elijah Story**

See the introduction for the Elijah story. I heard this story from my translator who is a close friend of Ishayu. When I asked Ishayu to tell me this story, he only told the first part before his mind began wandering and he changed the topic. The way he told it was a bit more modest than how I heard it the first time. Still, the main storyline confirmed what I had already heard.

### **3.3.7 Persecution**

Because of being rich and having a high social status, people are mostly not treating Ishayu so badly. Nevertheless, his neighbors are sometimes scolding and mocking him, calling him *Jishu [Jesus]*.

In his family, especially one of his sons is giving him a hard time for his faith in Jesus. Ishayu recognizes this from his own treatment of his daughter when she became a Christian. To Ishayu, this is a sign his son will someday receive Jesus – like he did.

I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I am a Christian, so he [my younger son] is giving a hard time to me. I think he will be changed for Jesus. It is like the story of Paul: Paul persecuted the people who were the followers of Jesus the first time. It is like when Saul became Paul. In a similar way, those who are persecuting me, they will one day be changed.

There have been some incidents with physical persecution in his village at the time when my translator worked there as a pastor. One day, Ishayu was with my translator, his wife and their six year old son in the Church. While there, a group of zealous Hindus, from the Brahmin

caste, came with bamboo sticks, bound their hands behind their backs and started hitting them – especially Dipok. My translator and Ishayu retells:

We were there and lots of people came to hit Dipok with the bamboos. Damyanti and I were there too, so Damyanti told me: Please, you do not need to talk more. If you talk, the people will hit you. Because of that, I was silent, but the people were doing something wrong with us. [...] It is their fault. It is because we are followers of Jesus Christ, they will do like that.

A long time had passed since this happened and it had not been repeated in several years. Still, Ishayu did not want to talk with these people because the Bible says not to spend time with or sit down with the wicked and sinners. He freely recounted the verse from Psalm 1:1<sup>23</sup> in the Bible:

I do not want to spend time with them or do not want to talk with them.

Ishayu tells the Brahmin Caste people are trying to counteract the spreading of the Christian Gospel by creating fear and skepticism towards Christianity and Christians. They make up rules and rumors to denigrate them. This way, they are trying to prevent people from converting.

Jesus is going here and there and touching peoples' hearts. In the Hindu area, they have leaders – the Brahmin. We call them Brahmin. They are the leaders for the Hindu worship – the Hindu priests. They always use to bind their people so they cannot hear the Gospel and so they cannot follow Jesus. [...] By making people skeptical and prejudiced and making up many rumors: If you go here or there, they will give you beef or pork meat or some different kinds of meat to eat. In this way, they are binding people.

To eat pork or beef is very taboo for a Hindu and is regarded unholy with big consequences. In some places, people do not e.g. get to rent apartments if they eat beef.

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<sup>23</sup> “Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers” (Psalm 1:1. NIV).

### 3.3.8 Caste System

Ishayu's family belongs to the Teli-caste [Vaishyas] – a high caste close to the level of the Brahmin caste. Ishayu knows the caste system very well. As a Hindu, he used to practice and follow the caste system. At the age of fifty, he had an affair with a woman from a lower caste. Although he thought it might benefit him economically marrying her, the caste system prevented him from going through with it.

Before, I used to go through the caste way. Because I followed the caste system, I was acting in a bad way. My life was bad. [...] Because of the caste system, I had lots of money. Because of the caste system, I was a rich man. There was one woman from a lower caste. I went there, and I had a sexual relation with her. I wanted to marry her, but because of the caste system, I did not do it. I lost also, because she was rich too, but from a lower caste. I lost lots of money and that good girl also. Because of the caste system. Because I was from a higher cast and she was from a lower caste. [...] If I had married her, then maybe I would have been a richer man. Because her family had no other generation than her. Her family was very rich, but they were also from a very low caste. If I had got married to that girl, I would have been richer and maybe I would have used four lakh rupees for my house – a bigger, nicer house that time. There was fear. Because of the caste system, I was unable to marry that girl.

Because this woman had no siblings, she was the only heir to her parents. To marry a person from a higher caste would be beneficial for her too. Her father therefore took measures of the land to estimate the value and told Ishayu the property would belong to him if he took his daughter as his wife. Ishayu declined the proposal.

Because of the caste system, I answered that time: I am a higher caste and she is a lower caste. I have lots of money, why should I take her as a wife? You are from a lower caste.

The caste system had been a big decisive factor in his life when still a Hindu. When asking how he viewed the caste system now as a Christian, he said:

I do not like this now. [...] Now, I do not practice the caste system. [...] If I follow the caste system, maybe I would lose many relationships, like the relationship to our neighbors. We would lose something, so the caste system is not good.

The caste system divides the higher castes from the lower castes and keeps them from having relationships with each other. In practice this means you cannot get to know your neighbors and have fellowship with them if they come from a different caste than you. As a Christian, Ishayu believes:

Because of Jesus, we are the same.

### **3.3.9 Social Involvement**

As a Hindu, Ishayu claims he had no social involvement. Now, however, he says:

I want to do many things for this place, but now, because of my situation, my heart cannot do these things. [...] If Jesus will, I will live this year. Next year I will die. Before I die, I want to see the church fixed.

Ishayu's biggest wish for social engagement as a Christian, is to make the Church look attractive to the area before he dies, so this can be part of drawing the people of the area to Jesus.

Still, I have one heart. I want to fix the boundary in the Church area and I want to paint it. I want to see this happen before I die. I want to see the new way for my Church building – new things so that people can see. Like in other Hindu temples, they can see good things in our church. [...] Maybe I will die, but then people can see when they look at the Church: This is the temple. We have to worship God.

Ishayu wishes he had converted at a younger age, so he could have done more for the Kingdom of God. Still, he believes God might have waited to reveal himself to him until he got old – so he would not go astray through his life and to make sure he will go to heaven. Social work for Ishayu as a Christian is to work for the Kingdom of God – to do God's will.

If I had known Jesus when I was younger, I could have done more good things for the Kingdom of God. It is like the Word of God is saying: If I had known Jesus in my younger years, the bad things I have done would be gone, and all would become a new way. All good things would be here and also good things in my life and good things for

the Kingdom of God. When I was very old, I got to know Jesus. I can do it. It is one thing: Maybe God knew that if I had received him in my younger years, I might have gone astray and be back to where I was in my past life. Maybe it was because of this God chose me as an old man, so I cannot go back.

Okay. Maybe I am a rich man, but if I had known Jesus at a younger age, in my youth time, my fund would be bigger. But I did not know Jesus that time, and because of this, I used lots of money in a bad way. That time, if I had known Jesus, I would have had more money, and I would have done more things for the Kingdom of God.

### 3.4 Summary

Now Ishayu has a different mindset and goals in life than he used to have. He is much more eager in his religious life than what he claimed to be as a Hindu. Before, his engagement in Hinduism was arranging pujas from time to time to look good in the eyes of others and the annual, traditional sacrifice to Kali. Now, as a Christian, his involvement is daily. He prays to and worships Jesus several times a day and goes to Church every Sunday. Additionally, Ishayu had a change of character and worldview. He likes to love and forgive people, yearns for his family and the people in his area to receive Jesus – like he did, has had several supernatural experiences as a Christian, wants to do social work for the Kingdom of God so the area can be drawn to Jesus and believes all are equal in the eyes of God. Because of this he does not practice the caste system anymore. I ended the interview asking Ishayu what Jesus means to him in his life. Ishayu described this with these words:

Two words I will use to describe this – friend and brother. And one more thing: My father died, but because of Jesus I got one great Father. Now I am not a fatherless man. I have a Father – Great Father, my Father in heaven. Jesus is my brother and friend. One song is there: My things, my sin – all carried Jesus. [...] My thoughts, my mind, lots of thinking were there. All my thoughts, like bad or good, and my sin Jesus took away. I did many things wrong, but Jesus took away all my sin. All people have sin. Many unrighteous things are past.

## Chapter 4: Kanti

### 4.1 Introduction

Kanti – a member of my friends' church agreed to talk with me and tell me her conversion story. We therefore went to Kanti's parents house, not far from the church/school my friends are running to meet her. Kanti is thirty-four, married and has one son and daughter. She stopped her education at sixth grade and is a housewife. Her husband has a bicycle repair store in the city. Originally, Kanti comes from an area much closer to downtown Kolkata, but has lived in her current village with her family for eleven years.

From childhood, she was brought up a Hindu, actively practicing Hinduism her whole life. In 2004, she became a Christian. My intensions when interviewing Kanti, was to find out her own story of what made her convert – especially since she is from a Hindu family and area where the majority of the people are Hindu and neither the majority, nor the culture suggests she would change her faith. Besides hearing her reasons for conversion, I wanted to hear whether she had experienced any changes in her life because of this – good or bad. I also wanted to hear what Jesus means to her. With this in mind, I have divided my presentation on Kanti in two parts: (A) Kanti's conversion story and (B) Changes in Kanti's life.

### 4.2 Kanti's Conversion Story

#### Hindu Background

I started off asking Kanti about her Hindu background and was explained she had been raised a Hindu and practiced Hinduism ever since. She performed several pujas and gladly did lots of sacrifices – both symbolic things like fruit, but also behavioral sacrifices like fasting.

Yes. I was born in a Hindu family, and my generation did this things. By the generation way, I started to do puja. From my childhood, I did puja. [...] I did many Pujas. [...] I did many rules, and I offered many fruits. I cut many fruits and I offered them to the gods. [...] Yes. Joyfully I did these rules. If I fasted, it was no problem for me. I felt joy when I did this. Joy when I am doing puja. Fasting and going through all these rules were no problem for me.



Kanti believed in several Hindu gods, but especially prayed to the Indian guru and philosopher called Lokenath Brahmachari [*Baba Lokenath*]<sup>24</sup>. Her belief was she could ask Lokenath for anything, and she would receive it. She prayed for protection over her family and for peace in their house.

If I asked anything to Lokenath, Lokenath would give it to me. Because of that, I like Lokenath puja and I did this puja. [...] Always, I asked Lokenath: Please protect my husband and protect my son and give him the right way to go. I also prayed for the social improvement in our family life now.

To give an example, Kanti mentions a story she is unsure whether was Lokenath helping or not. She had prayed to Lokenath for the situation, and it was resolved.

I do not know if it was from Lokenath or not, but one time something happened in our family. There was arguing in our home and my younger brother ran away from our house. We did not know where he went, but I prayed to Lokenath: Please, let him come back to our house. After that day, both my father and I were searching for him. Where is my son? Where is my brother? That time, my father went to one railway station. My father saw my brother on a train. He was planning to go far away – to Delhi or Bombay. Far away he liked to go. That time, my father found my brother and they came back home again.

As a Hindu, Kanti cherished family and fellowship and valued this as some of the most important things in her life.

During the puja time, we invited lots of families, and we stayed together and had fellowship. This was a very joyful thing for me in my life.

## **Church**

Kanti's husband has a Christian friend. One day, he invited them to his church to hear a message. One Sunday service, they decided to attend. This decision turned out to be a huge change in Kanti's life.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.babalokenath.org/about-baba.php> (05.01.2016)

One time, we went to their church. That time, I felt something change in our life, and slowly, we gave our hearts to Jesus. [...] it changed my life.

In Church, they heard the Christian Gospel about Jesus atonement for the sins of men.

There, I received one thing: Forgiveness. I think I did many things wrong, but I did not know how my sins would be forgiven. From the message in church, I received forgiveness, and I also learned how to forgive others. [...] From church I received the message and after I heard this, I changed my life. That time, I saw lots of dreams about Jesus.

Kanti's conversion was a process leading to her giving her life to Jesus. It started with an invitation to Church to hear the Christian Gospel, which again led to her receiving forgiveness and Jesus into her life. Kanti's recounting of her conversion story was short and right to the point. Since she had already been a Christian for some years, it was natural for her to focus on her life after the conversion. Immediately, she continued telling me of changes in her life.

## 4.3 Changes in Kanti's Life

### 4.3.1 Change of Character – Forgiveness

After becoming a Christian, Kanti has had a change of character in several areas – both her views on her religious practice and the caste system, but also behavioral things like being able to forgive.

After I started believing in Jesus, one main thing has changed in my life. [...] Sometimes, I liked to scold my neighbors who had done something wrong to me. But when I tried to do it, it would not come out of my mouth. No bad words or any bad things came out [...]

I learned from the Bible – I am not much of a reader, so I read it slowly – but in the Bible, I know that if I forgive people, God will forgive me.

### **4.3.2 Supernatural Experiences**

#### **The Cross on the Wall**

After converting, Kanti began attending the Church. Every Sunday, she heard people tell of various answers to prayers they had received, what Jesus had done in their lives and people testifying to have seen Jesus. At this point, Kanti was a new believer still finding out more about Jesus. At home, one afternoon, during her prayer time, something happened.

I started to pray to God: Many people have seen you, so why can I not see you?

While praying for Jesus to reveal himself to her, she gazed on the empty wall. Suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared a cross. Out of the cross, light flowed.

In my prayer time, I saw a cross show up on the wall. From the middle of the cross, light was coming. [...] That time, when I saw the cross, I started crying from my eyes, but my heart also cried. [...] What I saw that time, I do not know what it means for me. I do not know that things, but I saw it.

#### **The Dream of Her Fathers Death**

After receiving Jesus, Kanti got lots of unusual dreams at night. One time, she dreamt her father died and she got a glimpse of what happened to him.

One day, I saw a dream. I saw that my father died and that angels took my father to a light place. That place was so nice, so beautiful and so peaceful.

According to Kanti, this dream was from Jesus and meant something good awaits after death.

My thought was: When people die it is a very hard time. Very bad things will happen in their lives. But in this dream, I saw that it is not like that. After we die, we can live a joyful life in a very happy place. A good place where it is peaceful and everything is good there. That was the meaning for me.

### **The Same Picture as on the Book**

Shortly before I interviewed Kanti, she received another dream of a man with an angel soaring back and forth over his head. When she woke up, the meaning was not clear to her. She therefore went to the pastor of the Church, asking if he could make any sense of it.

In Church, Kanti suddenly spotted a book with illustrated Bible stories.

There is a Bible book in the church where I saw a picture. It was the same picture that I had seen in my dream.

Although Kanti had not made sense of the dream, having it confirmed by the book, made her feel there was more to this dream that was yet to be discovered.

### **4.3.3 Prayers, Answers and Healings**

#### **Prayer for Her Family**

Kanti spends lots of her time praying for her family – both for salvation and forgiveness.

I went to church and prayed for my family – my father, my sister and my other family members. I especially prayed: God, you saved me, please save all of my family members.

My prayer is that God can forgive me if I do anything wrong, and that God can forgive my son too if he does anything wrong. Forgive our sins so that we can live with Jesus in a good way.

This was Kanti's prayer request:

Please pray for my son, my daughter and my husbands relatives – my brother in law, my sister in law and my mother in law – that Jesus will call them by name and say: Hey, you change your life. In this way, they can change and they can believe in Jesus.

Kanti is bold with her new faith. She fully believes Jesus to be who he says he is in the Bible. This shows through Kanti's life in practice. On several occasions, she has prayed to Jesus for people and seen them getting healed.

Her husbands' family is not Christians. The day before I interviewed her, her brother in law was sick. Kanti asked if she could pray for him.

I am praying, but since this happened yesterday, I still have not received any prayer answer. [...] But many of those I have prayed for healing for have been healed.

When her father in law was still alive, he got tuberculosis once. Kanti prayed for him and he recovered. Afterwards, he lived a long life and died a normal death as an old man.

When my father in law was alive, he got tuberculosis. [...] But when I prayed for him, God healed him. For a long time he was alive and healthy. When he became old, he died.

Kanti has also interceded for her sister.

There was something wrong with my sisters' mind. [...] My father and I prayed for her: God, please heal my sister so she can live in a right way. [...] Many times when my sister was acting like this from her childhood, my mom went to many places – to many temples to receive something supernatural. We went to a doctor and the doctor told me: It is only one person who can heal her. You need to go to the church, and maybe you will receive healing from there. [...] After that, my family – especially my father did not want to go to this doctor. [...] Now she is doing good.

### **Kanti's Father Receives Jesus**

One day, because one of my legs was not good, my father went with me to the church. That time, my father heard the Gospel of Jesus. After this, he went home. He had lots of different stone rings on his hand.

My translator explains many Hindu people wear several rings on their fingers with stones representing different spiritual things in Hinduism. Out of hearing the Gospel in Church that day, Kanti's father decided to take off these stones to symbolize his change of religious alliance. Dipok tells:

He found out something in the church, so he came back to the church and took off all the stone rings and threw them away.

Because of this, Kanti explains his hand started aching. She believes this to be a spiritual attack because of his new faith.

That day, my father got so much pain in his hand. [...] Because he took off all the rings, he might have pain because of a spiritual attack. I prayed to Jesus: Jesus, please heal my father and protect him and save him. That time, my father got healed. Still, my father believes in Jesus.

Kanti's father did not only get healed from the pain he was experiencing. That he converted to Christianity was a huge prayer answer to Kanti as well.

#### **4.3.4 Hunger to Learn More**

In 2004, Kanti received Jesus. A year after, my translator started a Church in the area. Kanti closely observed the construction of the church and could not wait for it to be finished. During this time, my translator visited Kanti's family every Wednesday and Sunday for Christian fellowship and Bible studies.

#### **4.3.5 New Worldview**

##### **Jesus as the Only God – No More Pujas**

Before, Kanti liked to pray to the Hindu philosopher Lokenath since she believed in receiving from him whatever she prayed for (See quote in 4.2).

Now, however, she is stating:

Everyday, I was reading the small, New Testament. There, in my Bible study time, I saw it is written that Jesus did many things for me. If there is anything I need in my life now, I pray to Jesus [...] I do not know how it is fulfilled, but I believe Jesus is giving answers to everything everyday.

This she repeats in the interview:

If there is anything I need now, I pray to Jesus and Jesus is giving me answers. All things are going the right way.

I asked Kanti whether there were any Hindu gods she still believed in or any Hindu pujas or rituals she still practiced.

No. I do not do any pujas and there is no Hindu culture. In this home we do not practice puja. [...] Our hearts do not want these things anymore.

Only my brothers' wife [...] is doing puja there. In my home, there is no puja and no idols. [...] I believe that one day, Jesus will call her and she will change.

From my husbands' family side, I am the only Christian person. When I like to go there and live with them, that time is too hard for me, because they are always doing puja. Sometimes they tempt us, but that times I pray to God, Jesus: God please forgive me and please save me from their lifestyle.

Dipok explained all of her family comes from a Hindu background. Now, both her mother father, sister, son and daughter have stopped doing pujas. Kantis father have taken baptism and Kanti wants to do it too. She also wants the rest of her relatives to receive Jesus.

My father took baptism and I want to take baptism. My family, all my family must know Jesus, but they still have not taken baptism.

I went on asking whether she believed Jesus is one of many gods or the only God existing? Or if she still believes other gods exists, but that Jesus is stronger?

I believe that Jesus is stronger than anyone and that Jesus is still alive. I believe Jesus did many things in my life, and I am hearing many stories from the Church of people having received something from Jesus. I believe myself also, and I am hearing things also. Because of this, I believe Jesus is still alive. The Bengali Hindu people, they do not know Jesus. Because of this, they believe their god is alive. I believe Jesus is alive and that Jesus is the part from God.

### **Reincarnation vs. Heaven**

I was curious as to what Kanti, when still a Hindu, believed would happen when she died. To my surprise, she talked about heaven and hell and being born again a human being as one of the biggest goals for some Hindu people.

The Hindu people believe in karma. If I do good work, I will go to heaven, if I do bad work, I will go to hell. [...] Some Hindu people believe that if I do good work, maybe I will go to heaven, or if I do very, very good work, then god will send me again as a human.

After interviewing several people, I have understood there are a big diversity of beliefs and directions in Hinduism. Kanti tells about one belief many Hindus have that she too believed before converting.

It is lots of things. One type of faith people has is this: In a family, maybe one woman is pregnant. At the same time, maybe an old man dies in the family. They are thinking: Oh. He came back again and was reborn as that newborn baby.

Now, however, as a Christian, Kanti gives me a big smile and says she believes she will go to heaven when she dies.

I will go to heaven. [...] Yes. I have fear that if I eat any offering food – fruit offered to an idol, maybe God will send me back and I will go to hell. Because of this, I do not want to do puja, and I do not want to eat this fruit. I want to go to heaven.



Now, if anybody try to invite us to please come to their puja, we do not like that. There are many fruits being offered in puja [...]. If they give us the food that they are offering to the puja, we are unable to eat these things. We do not like this now.

#### **4.3.6 Hardships Because of Conversion**

People have not reacted or treated Kanti badly because of her conversion, but her father, however – who is also a Christian – experienced resistance when his mother died.

They did not give any hard time to us, but when my grandmother died, my relatives gave a hard time to my father.

In Hindu culture and religion there is a custom that if someone's mother or father dies, the relatives – especially the son and daughter – have to wear white clothes and put a rose on their clothes. The Brahman has one rose there, so that things they have to wear. Because my father is a follower of Jesus Christ, he did not want to do these Hindu customs.

They told my father: You are a Hindu from a Hindu background. Why do you want to change your life to Jesus? This is wrong. You do not need to do this. If you do like this and do not wear the white clothes, your mother will not go to heaven. Because of this, many people were scolding him. My fathers' reply was: I am a follower of Jesus, I know where my mother will go. I do not go through the rules of Hinduism, but I will mourn her in my own way and follow what Jesus told us to do. I will do these things.

Another way they experience hardship because of their faith in Jesus is when Hindu people accuse them of having converted out of a bribe.

There is one bad thing people are always saying about us: Because they were given something, they changed their lives from Hinduism to Christianity. People are saying these things: Because they believe in Jesus, maybe other people are helping them financially. Because of this, they made this house. [...] Yes. Because we are Christians. They are doing this, because me and my father converted. But it is not right what they are saying. My father is doing hard work and my brother is praying to Jesus and Jesus is giving everything to us.

### **4.3.7 Caste System**

Kanti belonged to one of the lower castes. Before, she did not want to associate herself with, talk to or let into her room people from lower castes or those without castes (like muslims or “paraiyar and other ‘untouchable’ groups” viewed by the Brahmins as “inherently dishonored or impure” (according to Deliége in Robinson and Kujur 2010:5).

Before I became a Christian, one thing changed my view on the cast system. Before I was a Christian I did not want to take water from a Muslim person or from their family. I did not want to give him water and if he came to my home, he would not be allowed to come into my room.

When still a Hindu, something happened that changed her opinion.

When my younger son was born, I lost lots of blood and became anemic. The doctor told me: You need to get more blood. That time, they put two bottles of blood into my body and I thought: I do not know whose blood they are giving me – if it is from a Hindu or a Muslim or from a low caste family or low caste man. I received this blood and was healed. I do not know which caste blood was given to my body. That is why I still do not like to practice the cast system. I like to love everyone, and I do not like the caste system.

As a Christian too, Kanti has a different view on the caste system than what she had as a Hindu.

Now I am a Christian. There it is no caste. [...] I believe there are two things – man and woman – no cast.

### **4.3.8 Social Improvement and Social Engagement**

#### **Social Improvement**

Kanti tells about some social improvements in her life:

From our family finance we have had improvement. My husband used to work as an employee in a bicycle repair store. Now, my husband has rented a place to have his own store. Yes. And now, he has people working for him and he gets lots of profit from his store. Be-

fore, my husband was unable to help his family financially – his mother, father and brother, but now, because of the profit, he is able to help his family too. [...] I have bought a land, so, soon I will build a house there.

I asked if the land was bought after she became a Christian:

Yes. After I became a Christian. I bought this land because of the grace of God, but also because my father and husband helped financially. Because of all this, I have bought this.

### **Social Engagement**

Kanti grew up learning she should help others as far as she is able to.

From childhood, we learned something. If a beggar comes to our house to beg, we always [...]. We do not have much financially, but what we have, we use for our needs, or else, I will give to them.

She continues by giving an example of a time she helped out a friend who was saving money to build a house for his family. He gave the money to Kanti to look after it, but died soon after. Instead of keeping the money, Kanti gave everything back where they rightfully belonged. Even before she became a Christian, she was concerned with helping and doing what is right.

That time I did not know Jesus. Always I had one thing on my mind: If there is someone out there that is the main judge of our good and bad deeds, I thought that if I do something good, he will give us the right things. [...] I knew there was one person there that was always watching us, but who this was, I did not know. I did many pujas, because I knew someone was there that was always watching us.

Now, as a Christian, giving is equally important to Kanti and she believes it is good for her life to give. She gives an example from her Christian life where her family helped out her brother in law with some materials for their house.

This is an example of a time we learned from Jesus about giving.

### 4.3.9 Hindu Cultural Things

I asked if there were symbols and things Kanti had used as a Hindu that she still practices now as a Christian. She mentioned the red hand bracelets and I asked about the red painting of the parting of the hair<sup>25</sup>. She used to regard them as Hindu spiritual symbols. As a Christian, she has given them a different meaning. Now it is just a Hindu cultural thing to her.

Before, my faith was connected to this. It comes from the Hindu spiritual things. Now I do not believe it is like that. [...] This does not matter to me now. It is a Hindu cultural thing.

## 4.4 Summary

Kanti has experienced several changes of character, daily routines and opinions on different issues after receiving Jesus. Now, she describes herself as forgiving and loving towards others in situations where she used to be angry. Many things have happened after she converted. She has prayed for people to become Christians and to get healed. On several occasions she claims having seen this happen. Dreams and visions, that to Kanti is from Jesus, have come frequently. In contrast to her former faith, she now believes Jesus is the only true God, and that forgiveness for her sins comes from him. Resulting from her conversion, she no longer practices any pujas – something she had done her whole life up to the point of her conversion. In addition to this, Kanti does no longer believe in any of the Hindu gods. She only prays to Jesus and believes he will answer her – whatever she prays for. There has been little resistance from Hindus because of her choice to convert. Still, it seems some have problems understanding their reasons for conversion. Because of this, rumors have been set out about them converting out of a bribe to get money to build their house etc. – an allegation Kanti rejects.

Although there have been many changes in Kanti's life, there have been some constants too. Kanti has always liked helping people, being honest and valued family and relationships. Concerning the caste system, Kanti already disliked this as a Hindu. At first she practiced it, but later changed her standpoint. After becoming a Christian, she has totally rejected the caste system. When asking what Jesus means to her, this was Kanti's reply:

Jesus is only one Father. If anyone can forgive my sins, it is Jesus.

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<sup>25</sup> Which is a Hindu symbol of being married.

## Chapter 5: Gaveshan

### 5.1 Introduction

I met Gaveshan for the interview in the school building my friend and translator are running. We sat down at the roof of the school, surrounded by tall palm trees and a view of the surrounding village. The sun was shining, birds singing and bugs buzzing in the background. Far away, a political party eagerly promoted their campaign for the coming election.

I had already met Gaveshan a year before, while visiting my friend and translator and his family. That time, we went to his village, a few stops with the train and a very crowded rickshaw drive (seventeen or eighteen people packed together in one rickshaw) from the village of my translator. Gaveshan had been a Hindu throughout his whole adolescence until he became a young adult. He was now forty-two. The time I first met him, he had already been a Christian for seventeen years, working as a pastor and evangelist in Kolkata, West Bengal. That time, we attended a Church fellowship in his house. I had not gotten to hear much of his story. Gaveshan is a close friend of my translator from the time they both went to Theology College. When my translator suggested Gaveshan as a possible interviewee, I was excited and interested in hearing his conversion story.

My intentions when interviewing Gaveshan was to hear what led him to convert from Hinduism to Christianity – especially since he was from a Hindu family and community and had eagerly followed and practiced Hinduism his whole life. Additionally, I wanted to hear about changes in his life and what Jesus means to him. Similar to the other presentations, I have divided this presentation in two parts: A. Gaveshan’s conversion story and B. Changes in Gaveshan’s life.

### 5.2 Gaveshan’s Conversion Story

#### 5.2.1 Gaveshans Hindu Background

Gaveshan grew up in a Hindu family, learning how to practice the different Hindu pujas from a young age. He claims his dedication to these gods did not come out of love, but rather because of fear of punishment if he did something wrong or refrained from worshipping them.

From childhood, my parents told me how to follow the rules for puja and everything. That way, I grew up in a Hindu family. I had fear about that god. My thought was: If I do something wrong and if I do not serve that god, he will punish me. My love was not there, but I had fear. Because of fear, I worshipped that things also.

Gaveshan believed in several Hindu deities and gives me a few examples of gods being worshiped for different reasons:

All Hindu families believe in many gods – not one god. Because, money, [her] name is Lakshmi, education's name is Saraswati, the weather god is Burun, and the sun god is Indra, eh, Surya, and rain..this someone in the sky, its name is Indra. Many, many, many gods. All community people believe these things. I know this. I know this part. [...] I depended on all these gods.

Although he worshiped many gods, he especially preferred praying to Lakshmi who he describes as the one presiding over economy – money, property etc. His whole life, he prayed to Lakshmi and attended the different pujas.

I was involved with [one] main god. I liked her. Her name is Lakshmi. Lakshmi has the authority to give money or give property and everything. Because of this, I always worshipped her.

### **Drawn Towards Hindu Spirituality**

Gaveshan told me it is very common in India to have a Hindu spiritual mentality. Because of the many gods of Hinduism, Indian people are very proud of this and believe India to be the best spiritual country. As a Hindu, this was Gaveshan's mentality as well. He was drawn towards the Hindu spirituality and was a very eager practitioner of Hinduism. He not only attended the different pujas. Many times, he was the main person to arrange these worship ceremonies and festivals.

Many occasions and puja times, I involved with them. In some ways, I was the main man to organize the pujas or some type of Hindu festival.

Several times during his adolescence, Gaveshan had seen and admired the religious leaders, monks and priest. According to Gaveshan, they are normally dressed in orange uniforms symbolizing their spiritual dedication.

My thought was that especially the orange uniform was special for the spiritual things to wear and go around with [...] Outwards, they showed a spiritual way, so I thought this is one good thing for my life.

He viewed these people as very spiritual and good. Inspired by them, he too wanted to dedicate his life to a Hindu mission.

I thought some of the Hindu leaders were so spiritual. When I grew up, I thought that I needed to do that things. I went there and I joined with them and followed their rules, and wore their uniform too.

Gaveshan's uncle and grandfather were both *Maharaj's* and role models for Gaveshan in his life. Gaveshan describes the Maharaj's as priests.

Because I was born in a Hindu background, and my family – my uncle on my mothers' side was one of the higher priests – a maharaj. My grandfather is the maharaj of Barainusi. [...] And this is to live like a monk disciple. It is s a religious way to live. They were role models for me. I also wanted to do what they were doing and live like that. It should be good for my spiritual life. That faith was in me.

As he got older, Gaveshan therefore decided attending a Hindu mission called *Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission*. This he believed to be good for his spiritual life. Because of his faith in karma, he wanted to get involved in social work through this school.

I also believed in karma. If I do good work, I get good things in the future.

Gaveshan moved to the school, wore their uniform and practiced their rules. This was good for a while, but after some time, he started noticing something.

### **The Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission**

At the *Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission*, the priests [*maharaj*] taught the importance of serving others, being generous and giving and to strive to be self-sacrificial to do what is best

for others. They also had a teaching about a man called *Bibikanando*<sup>26</sup> [Shāmi Bibekānondo/ Swami Vivekananda] – born and raised in Kolkata. He was to be worshiped as a Hindu god.

At several occasions Gaveshan experienced double standards at this school. What they taught and what they lived did not match. As monks and priest they are supposed to live in celibacy, but Gaveshan saw many of these Hindu leaders leaving for their village to live a normal family life with wife and children simultaneously as pretending to be very spiritual and dedicated to asceticism.

They lived the maharaj position and they went down and mixed with the culture and their old society at the same time. They mixed with the society and marriage life and lived the family life.

They taught the importance of serving others. Still they had servants courting them. He also experienced them raising above others by refusing to sit down and eat with the students and hiding away extra food to bring home to their families. At one occasion he saw something really making him question the integrity of the school. The *maharaj's* were sitting together, having lunch. One of the men got a smaller piece of fish than the others. He got irritated and threw it away. The servant replaced it with a big piece of fish. This ungrateful attitude from one of his leaders was painful for Gaveshan to witness and contradicted their teaching.

That episode touched my heart and I hated that things, so I came out from the school.

To Gaveshan, this double life and inconsistency between their teaching and practice was very hypocritical. After six months at the *Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission*, Gaveshan had enough! He chose to break with the school and move on. He did not break with his Hindu faith, but broke with the hypocritical duality he experienced there. Social work was still important to him and led to his next destination – *the Baruipur Palli Unnayan Samiti*.

### **Baruipur Palli Unnayan Samiti**

*The Baruipur Palli Unnayan Samiti* is a Christian Catholic Mission practicing social work. Gaveshan joined this mission. One day, when waiting for the bus, close to where he lived, he saw some Korean and Bengal people doing something in the name of Jesus.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv.htm> , (05.01.2016)



They were preaching, and I stood there listening. When they finished, I received a tract from them where it was written: For I have the authority to save people. In the tract, there was written: I have the authority to save you.

After reading the tract, Gaveshan was left with many questions. He was told an evangelist would be there to answer peoples' questions. Gaveshan therefore came back and received many answers. He was invited to a Church. Going there, he had lots of questions he received answers to from the pastor.

The coming Sunday, I went to the Sunday service and I had many questions. I asked all the questions to him and he gave me answers. The answers he gave were so right for me.

I asked Gaveshan what questions he had asked the pastor. These are two of them. The first was about social status and caste. The pastor also came from a Hindu family. His father was a soldier and his grandfather a lawyer – highly regarded professions. Gaveshan's first question was why the pastor changed his faith when he was from such a respectable Hindu family with a high social status?

Because I was thinking about my caste, I was wondering why he would change his faith when our, and his, social position was so high? The pastor answered by saying: God captured me.

The pastor explained God had drawn him close and called him out of the life he was living. Similar to his calling, he believed Jesus was drawing on Gaveshan too.

God is here and God is also pulling you to come out too. God is calling you and God chose you to come out. Because of this, you are here to ask me questions.

Gaveshan's second question had been how he could understand Jesus being the only Savior?

The pastor talked about God sending Jesus to the World – a perfect and holy man – as a sacrifice for men. When Gaveshan heard the words: For you! – that Jesus had died for him, it

touched his heart to the point he realized he was a sinner in need of Jesus. After this, he slowly became a Christian.

The pastor told me directly: For you Jesus sacrificed his son. When he said directly to me: For you! That Jesus sacrificed himself and was crucified, that was so hard and touching like electricity to my heart. That time, my thoughts instantly changed. I began thinking that I am a sinful man and a sinner. Yes. [...] Slowly, I started to believe in Jesus.

Gaveshan received a New Testament and through reading this, he slowly came to his decision to change his faith.

In the New Testament, I found out who is my Savior. In this way, I made the decision: If anyone is my Savior, it is Jesus. I changed my faith and I started to believe in Jesus and I became a follower of Jesus Christ.

### **5.2.2 Hardships**

Gaveshan would soon find out converting to Christianity could cause difficulties.

When I started to believe in Jesus, many people had an opinion of this. Therefore, when I changed my faith to Jesus, it was a very hard time for me. My family members did not accept my faith.

He was left by himself without money, property or a social network and rejected by his family and parents who disinherited him and refused calling him a son.

When I decided to believe in Jesus, my family – especially my parents – did not want to call me as a son. They wanted to reject me from their property, land and money.

Gaveshan explained the majority of his community hated Christianity. Because of the British Colonial power and mission activity impacting India until 1947, they viewed Christianity as a foreign – not Indian religion, especially disliking those converting to Christianity.

My society did not accept my choice. My family members too did not accept me. My family, society and community thought is that Christianity has not originated in India. It is from

the outside. It is from the British or English people. Because of this, they cannot accept it, and they hate it. Because they were thinking like this, they hate those who are followers of Jesus Christ – especially those who are changing their faith to Jesus.

Right after his conversion, his neighbors and the people in his community bullied him mentally, saying mean things to and about him. When confirming his faith in Jesus, they ostracized him and refused having anything to do with him.

I asked Gaveshan what made him endure all this hardships. In conversation with his pastor when converting, he had been prepared for this.

I learned something from my pastor. He discussed about when our faith will change, maybe enemy would attack like this way. That time, he told me: If you go through that way, you only do one thing – you pray to Jesus. Many times I spent in prayer during this period.

Gaveshan told me of something that changed when he started to pray. When still a Hindu, he fell in love with a girl from his village. After changing his faith, this girl did not want any contact with him and refused meeting or talking with him. Because of this, Gaveshan got very depressed. He followed the advice given by his pastor: to pray when times got tough. He prayed Jesus would give him an opportunity to meet and talk with her. After some time, this finally happened. Gaveshan shared – not his own story at the time – but instead the Christian Gospel.

That time, she took the decision: I love you, but I will never love Jesus. I will not accept that. Just, I love you and I will marry you. I will live with you, but I do not want to accept Jesus.

After this, Gaveshan started praying to Jesus for her. Six months later, the situation changed. In their conversation, she had confessed her love for him. Gaveshan was leaving for Theology College and asked her to pray to Jesus for him while he was gone.

After our conversation, I went back home and I prayed to Jesus. I think that because of my prayer, after six months, who is now my wife, took the decision: I will be a follower of Jesus Christ.

### **5.2.3 Gaveshan's Wife Becomes a Christian**

In addition to his intercession, two main things happened leading to her choice to convert to Christianity, according to Gaveshan.

#### **The Strangle Incident**

Although she was not a Christian, she agreed praying to Jesus for Gaveshan. One time, when praying in her home and her eyes were shut, she suddenly felt someone had a grip around her neck, trying to strangle her. When opening her eyes, there was no one there. When Gaveshan returned, she told him about this incident.

I [Gaveshan] told her that Satan do not want good things for us and that you and I meet, live together and get married. Satan wants to destroy our relationship.

#### **The Kitchenware**

The second incident leading to her conversion was another day she prayed to Jesus for Gaveshan. Suddenly she heard a loud noise like all of her kitchenware suddenly fell down from the shelf. Again, when opening her eyes, everything was nicely stored on the shelf with no sign of anything having fell down.

That time, her mind changed and her faith also changed. She started to believe in Jesus [...] and she is a follower of Jesus Christ. After that, when our faiths were the same, we got married [...].

### **5.2.4 Summary**

Gaveshan grew up a Hindu, eagerly following and practicing Hinduism his whole life. He believed in karma and was drawn towards Hindu spirituality that led him to attend a Hindu Mission school as a young adult. After experiencing a big gap between their teaching and behavior, he broke with the school. His involvement with social work was a driving force in his life, so he went to Baruipur where he joined a Christian Mission practicing social work. In Baruipur, he received Jesus and converted. The main things leading to this was him hearing the Christian Gospel and receiving a tract with an explanation of this, getting answers to many of his questions, hearing Jesus had died for him, and through reading the Bible. This choice to convert was followed by struggles and hardships. His neighbors did not want to speak with

him, the girl he was in love with did not want anything to do with him, and his parents disinherited and rejected him as a son. Through prayer and a close relationship with Jesus, Gaveshan recounts how he overcame his struggles one by one.

## 5.3 Changes in Gaveshan's life

### 5.3.1 100% Change

According to Gaveshan, his character changed one hundred percent after his conversion. As an example, he mentions a change in his patience.

Patience was one of the things I lacked in my character as a Hindu. [...] Always, I wanted to do this thing and that thing, but when I became a follower of Christ, I started to get patience. Now, my patience is one hundred percent.

### 5.3.2 New Worldview

#### Visual Dead Gods vs. Invisible Living God

I asked what used to be most important in Gaveshan's life as a Hindu and what is most important to him now, as a Christian.

Before, I believed in many visual gods, but there was nothing more. Now, I do not have a visual god, but he is a living God, and he gave me peace and joy in my heart.

Gaveshan claims having worshipped the different Hindu gods out of fear – not love. After becoming a Christian, he claims having been filled with peace and joy. He used to follow the different Hindu gods he could see physically through pictures and statues. Now, he follows an invisible God, but experiences him as living and daily acting in his life.

When converting, Gaveshan rejected all his former Hindu gods in favor of believing in Jesus and the God of the Bible as the only living God.

From the time I accepted and started to believe in Jesus, I never followed the Hindu gods I used to follow – only Jesus.

He gives an example of him not worshipping the Hindu gods anymore to the point that he had to break with his family. Right after converting, Gaveshan still lived in his parents' house. Gaveshan's family was Hindu and practiced the different pujas although Gaveshan had stopped doing this. When the puja time began, it was normal for the priest to come and worship in the different homes. In his family's house, they had a statue they worshipped and sacrificed to during puja. Because the priest knew Gaveshan had lots of questions and knowledge of both Hinduism from his time in the Hindu mission school and Christianity, the priest did not want to come to his parents' home while Gaveshan was there. This became a big problem for his family, ending with Gaveshan moving out and building a house for himself.

### **What Happens After Death?**

The first major change in Gaveshan's worldview was his rejection of his former belief in multiple gods. After converting, he believes there is only one living God. The second major change in his worldview was his view on what would happen after death. As a Hindu, he believed in reincarnation, but thought he would go to heaven when he died. This he had no assurance of, however. What would happen was closely linked to his belief in karma.

Only when I do the karma – when a person does nothing wrong, but lives a good life and does the perfect work – he will be born again as a human. Otherwise, if his work is not good, he will be born again as an animal – a dog, a cow, a bird or some kind of tree or the like. And many times, he will have to be reborn. If the person is born as a dog, he will again be reborn as something else when he dies. This will go on until his righteousness will finish. After all this, he will go to heaven.

I asked Gaveshan what heaven means to a Hindu compared to a Christian.

In Christianity there is described and explained in the Bible what heaven is, how it is like and how it looks like etc. In Hinduism, on the other hand, they know that the heavens are there, but they do not know that much about it. It is not clear to them different things about heaven – whether it is a place to live or not. [...]

As a Christian, Gaveshan's view on this has changed. He no longer believes in reincarnation or karma. Instead, he has a linear worldview – people are born and die only one time and believers in Jesus have assurance of their salvation.

I am born one time, and one time I am reborn. One time I am born as a child, and one time I am reborn. [...] Born again, and one time I will go to heaven.

### **5.3.3 Social Work – Motivations Before and Now**

Because of his belief in karma, social work had been a driving factor in Gaveshan's life from his childhood – especially after attending the Hindu mission school. He wanted to do good to later receive good things in return.

Before I believed in Jesus, I believed in karma. Social work was a part of my belief in karma. [...] My thought was that if I do good work, I will be born again. The maharaj have one book. How much good work you will do, you will receive more good things in the future life. [...] I think maybe all Hindu people have that same way of thinking.

His wish to do social work did not change when converting, but his motivations for and practice of social work changed.

Yes. Now, I am still involved in social work. [...] The way I think about and do social work now is different to how I thought about and did it before.

Because of the teaching about good deeds and serving others from the Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission School, this became very important to Gaveshan.

At the Ramakrishna School, the maharaj teaching was that when we do good work, we will receive salvation. How can I do good work? I need to get involved in social work.

Although breaking with the Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission, Gaveshan was still a Hindu wanting to do social work. Because of this, he ended up helping a Catholic Mission in Barui-pur. During this time, he converted to Christianity.

Before, I did social work because of the teaching from the Ramakrishna Mission School. Now, my social work is only for Jesus. How can I reach out to the Hindu people with the Gospel of Jesus? How can I reach out to unreached people? This is why I am doing social work now. [...] One example is that we are giving Samaritan verse, but my thought and our thought is how we can change their faith. In this way, I am also still doing social work for Gods kingdom.

#### **5.3.4 New Alliance and New Dependence**

I asked Gaveshan whether he has had any social improvements after converting. I have already mentioned what Gaveshan lost when changing his faith. He says he coped in the midst of this, because of the help he received from God. Before, he depended on his father for material needs, and prayed to Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess, for money and property. When all this was taken away, his dependence changed.

In my life before, I always depended on my parents. What they had, only belonged to my parents. My father was the head of my house. If I needed anything, I had to go to him and ask him to please give me what I needed. Now, Jesus is the head, and he is giving me what I need. When I accepted Jesus, my parents kicked me out of our home. Because I changed my faith, my parents did not accept me. That time, there were many things I needed to live. These needs, God gave to me so I could live in a good way.

Yes. I told you that God changed me 100%. Things I never thought I would get, I received, because of Jesus. Also the things I wanted and needed, God fulfilled and provided for me.

Gaveshan claims God provides for him everyday and gives some examples of this.

Two examples are that I needed a fridge, but I never thought I would buy it. Still, God gave this to me. I also needed a good bed to sleep in, so I prayed to God, and God gave this to me too. All things, both what I knew I needed and what I did not know I needed, God gave me. God has never made me go hungry without food in my house. I always have food to eat and God is still providing for my needs in my everyday life. Before, my life was not like this.



## **The Story of the Fruitful Land**

Gaveshan exemplified this through a story of a time God showed himself being a provider for him to depend on, resulting in an unexpected change of his social status.

Some time after disinheriting Gaveshan, his parents had a change of mind and wanted to at least give him something. Gaveshan's community relied on agriculture. His parents inherited away good lands to his siblings. Gaveshan, however, was left with a land known in the area to be unfruitful and uncultivable for farming. Still, he was grateful to receive it. Before the coming harvest, he prayed to the God of the Bible:

God, you gave me this land, and I am sowing these things. You know how much fruit I will harvest from it.

Gaveshan sowed and worked with his land as normal. When it was harvest time, he harvested more than his siblings and neighbors got from their good lands. After converting, Gaveshan was rejected by his community. People had not wanted to speak with him and no one wanted to help harvesting his crops. Therefore, Gaveshan had friends from his Theology College come and help. When the people in his area saw how much he harvested, they said amongst themselves:

Wow. Who is this man?

A rumor was set out in the area of Gaveshan becoming a Christian and attending the Theology College because of a bribe from other Christians. Those thinking this, all knew how uncultivable Gaveshan's land was. When seeing his harvest, Gaveshan claims they thought:

Maybe Gaveshan's God is a true God, because the land is not good for farming, and still he got more and better crops than us. This was a big and changing thing for me. They thought: Maybe Gaveshan's Jesus is best. Before, my neighbors did not want to talk with me. Now, my whole community talks with me. Hallelujah!

Gaveshan claims having experienced social improvement materially – as a gift from God, his provider, and socially – after what he views as Gods *divine intervention*<sup>27</sup> and supernatural experience in his everyday life.

### **5.3.5 Supernatural Experiences as a Hindu**

I asked Gaveshan whether he experienced anything supernatural or knew of others having supernatural experiences as Hindus. At first, he said he never had any. Then two incidents came to mind, which he described as false, supernatural experiences or scams regarded by the general Hindu population of the area as Hindu-Supernatural incidents.

#### **The Story of the Green Coconut**

In 2011, a Hindu man claimed having received something from a Hindu god that he put into the green coconuts. When people purchased and drank these green coconuts with the secret, God-given ingredient, they would be healed from their sicknesses. Many people wanted to get healed, so everyday, people flocked to get hold of these green coconuts. In the market, a green coconut could be purchased for one or two rupees per piece. Because of this incident, the price went up to 200 rupees per piece. There was never any news of anyone actually getting healed through drinking the green coconut with the secret ingredient.

#### **The Story of the Healing Pond**

The second story Gaveshan told was of a rumor going around all of West-Bengal of a Hindu god visiting a pond in the area. Those who bathed in the pond would be healed from their sicknesses. Again, people started to pilgrimage to the pond to bath. Because so many people went there in such a short period of time, Gaveshan explained, their dry clothes soaked up so much water that only mud was left in the pond. Because people still wanted to get healed, they continued bathing in the mud. I asked if he knew of anyone having been healed from this. Gaveshan claimed no one got healed, but that many people got sick because of the bacteria in the mud.

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<sup>27</sup> I will return to and explain my use of this concept in my discussion in chapter 6.5.3

### **5.3.6 Supernatural Experiences as a Christian**

I continued asking about supernatural experiences as a Christian. He had already mentioned the Story of the fruitful Land<sup>28</sup>. In addition to this, he mentioned two incidents he regards as supernatural experiences from Jesus.

#### **Prayer for Child that Stops Crying**

The first incident was from an evening he walked from his Theology College to a Ministry House. When passing by a house close to his home, he heard a child crying. Later, when going to sleep, the child was still crying very much. Suddenly, his landlord came knocking at his door, asking Gaveshan to come and pray for the child. Gaveshan and his wife, agreed to come. When arriving, they saw three doctors sitting around the child. They had been there for three hours without managing to stop the child from crying. Gaveshan tells:

My wife and I went there and we cried out to God and we prayed to God for him. After praying for about five minutes, the boy stopped crying. After that, he felt safe. Hallelujah! This was a supernatural experience.

#### **Survived Against the Odds**

The second incident was from 1999 when Gaveshan was very sick with water in his lungs. He was in the hospital in need of surgery. Three other people were there with the same condition.

When the doctor lay me down at the surgery bed, he told me: After the operation, I will tell you one thing. When my operation was over, I was complete. When I came out from the operation, I was a normal, healthy man. Nothing had harmed me. I was in prayer and my wife is always praying for me. The doctor told me: There were two persons with you, you know? Yes, yes, I know. The doctor told me: The two other persons died. Hallelujah! God helped me. One thing I received. It is only because of Jesus Christ that I am still here. Hallelujah!

### **5.3.7 Caste System**

Gaveshan came from a high caste. As a Hindu, he liked the caste system, because it made him feel superior to other lower caste people and gave him privileges.

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<sup>28</sup> See p:82-83 for the story.

In our community, I was from the higher cast. Because of this, my way of thinking was always that I was better than others.

After converting, Gaveshan's view on the caste system changed. From being fond of the caste system, he has now rejected it. He believes all people are equal in the eyes of the God of the Bible.

In this community have no cast system. In our God, all are same.

Now, he views the caste system as a disease of cancer in India, believing the caste system paralyzes people from helping others since a person from one caste only is allowed helping those from the same caste.

The cast system is making our mental thought going down. An example of this is: I have to do some good things in this area, but in the eyes of the caste system, I can not do it if the ones that need help are from a lower caste than me. [...] In this way, the caste system is making us be like paralyzed men. [...] In the caste system, they are always thinking: If I need to do something for the community, I can only do work for my own caste and not for any other castes.

#### **5.4 Summary – What does Jesus Mean to You?**

To Gaveshan, the conversion meant a 180 degree change in his life. From eagerly following Hinduism and even studying it, he is now a Christian, an evangelist and preacher in his local community to reach more people with the Christian Gospel.

I believe that I live in the Gospel. Now I want to live with Gospel and I want to preach the Gospel.

Finally, I asked what Jesus means to him. Gaveshan used one descriptive word:

Jesus is my Savior – my only Savior!

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

As presented in the theory overview, there have been written much on social aspects of conversion in the literature. According to Kim, there is a lack of emphasis and focus on individuals' religious reasons for converting. I will start off by discussing how the conversions have affected my interviewees' lives. With this I will be able to shed light on and discuss the issue of social or religious motivations behind their choices to convert. I will then proceed by discussing the religious aspects for conversion in my material. With my findings, I will see whether I agree or disagree with Kim's opinion of the importance of these for a conversion and to what extent these are important in comparison with other social reasons. Can the social and religious aspects be separated? In that case, what are the differences? What are the main religious aspects of my informants' choices to convert? Is it possible to detect a conversion pattern?

### **6.2 Changes in Life**

After converting, my interviewees experienced several changes and transformations in their lives – both in what was important to them, their character and their worldview.

#### **6.2.1 Changed Worldview**

A common denominator for all four interviewees was their change of worldview. As Hindus, they had a pluralistic belief in several deities, a belief in karma and reincarnation. Some even believed in heaven before converting, but knew nothing about how/what it was like and lacked assurance to go there. According to karma, their actions determined the outcome and success of their future and afterlife. They had to be and do good enough to receive good things. Common for them when converting, was their change from this pluralism to monotheism – they rejected their belief in all the Hindu gods in preference of Jesus as the only God and Savior. They also had a change in adapting to a linear worldview – being born and dying only one time. With this new worldview, all four claimed having gotten salvation assurance to go to heaven when they die – not because of something they had done, but because Jesus had died for them. Both Ishayu and Kanti, however, seemed somewhat dubious regarding this out of fear of not being or having lived a good enough life or of falling back in old religious patterns and practices, being punished because of it. This might imply traces of remains from their previous belief in karma.

### **6.2.2 Change of Character**

When converting, all four had a major change of character according to their testimonies. Anushri used to be desperate and sad because of how her life had turned out in some ways and depressed and suicidal because of it. She now claims being filled with joy, optimism and hope for the future and inner peace, faith and confidence in Jesus as her helper and Savior. Ishayu lived for many years as a Hindu before converting. He asserts having had a bad mind-set and behavior in his previous Hindu life – especially referring to adultery against his wife by having sexual relations with other woman, but also how he acted due to his high social status and caste and how he was occupied being rich and showing off his wealth and success. As a Christian, however, Ishayu believes he is forgiven for things from the past and views himself a good person because of his faith in Jesus. After conversion, Ishayu had a change of character and shift in what was important to him. He claims having become more humble, peaceful, prefer a quieter lifestyle than before and have no need for bragging to look good in the eyes of others. Now, the inner life and relation with Jesus counts the most. As a Hindu, he claims having been unforgiving and angry with people acting wrongly. He has now started to love and create good relationships with people and pray for his enemies. When still a Hindu, Kanti had lots of grudges and anger towards people who did her wrong. She would normally scold them and let them know how bad their actions were. After her conversion, when wanting to do like she usually did, no bad words came out of her mouth. Her conversion changed her, similar to Ishayu, in that she started to love people. Forgiveness became of major importance. By attending the church, she not only realized she was forgiven herself, but learned how to forgive others as well. Still, some aspects of her character remained unchanged – e.g. her view on the importance of giving and being generous. The values remained the same. It was rather her motivations for doing so that changed. Now, Kanti gives and helps people because Jesus teaches her to do so and because she believes it is good for her life to give. Gaveshan alleges his life and character changed one hundred percent after his conversion – one of these characteristics being him becoming patient in situations he used to lack this.

### **6.2.3 Caste**

Both Anushri and Kanti came from very low castes, whilst Ishayu and Gaveshan had a high social status and high caste background. After converting, all four agree on disliking the caste system. Their thoughts on why they think like this vary to some degree. The conversion theo-

ry mentions caste mobility as a motivation for conversion in earlier times amongst Dalits.<sup>29</sup> None of my informant's mentions being Dalit. Regardless, I believe the argument in the quote below of conversion as an escape should be addressed.

For Dalits, religious conversion especially in the 19th century was often perceived as one of the ways of escaping from caste oppression (Robinson and Kujur 2010:5).

And further that:

A large number of people belonging to lower castes [...] become converts to these religions to escape the rigour and humiliation of the Hindu caste system (From the Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report (1955), Michael in Robinson and Kujur 2010:62).

As a Christian, Anushri claimed to be considered outside the caste system after baptizing. This, she has yet to go through with. The fact she still, as a Christian, considered herself part of her families low caste, and had not yet baptized, might imply her conversion not primarily being a search for social uplift or attempt to escape her social position and status. She omits to mention caste oppression as a problem to her. To me, this indicates it might not have been the case or noteworthy enough for her to mention. It also argues against her having caste mobility and liberation from this as motivation for converting. Although Kanti came from a very low caste, she had eagerly practiced the caste system as a Hindu. She would not interact with people from lower castes.<sup>30</sup> When still a Hindu, giving birth to her son, she became anemic and underwent a blood transfer. Not knowing who her blood donor had been, she stopped practicing the caste system. Without this persons blood, she could have died. Although her view on the caste system changed before her conversion, her new faith added some reasons to her rejection of it. Now, she not only dislikes it, but believes there is no cast system anymore. Since Kanti came from a low caste and believed she would come out of the caste system when converting, it might point towards her doing it for social reasons – as in the argument above. That she had already rejected the caste system before her conversion indicates otherwise. Ishayu and Gaveshan had high social positions and castes as Hindus and were both wealthy. Their castes were in the top sheet. They liked practicing the cast system, since it made them feel

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<sup>29</sup> Dalits are a very low caste group in India (Robinson and Kujur 2010).

<sup>30</sup> In the literature these are often referred to as *untouchables* and *adivasis* and are regarded as being on the bottom of the social hierarchy (Robinson and Kujur 2010 and Robinson and Clarke 2003).

superior to other lower cast people and gave them privileges. Prior to converting, they had both been afraid of losing their caste because of the consequences this would lead to. When converting, their view on the caste system changed. It seems they do not care about losing their caste anymore. Both Ishayu and Gaveshan strongly criticize the caste system as preventing transversal relations with people from other castes than ones own and as a disease of cancer paralyzing people from helping others. In this way, the caste system created fear, distance, inequality and limitations between people. Their new stance is all people being equal in the eyes of the Christian God and that the cast system therefore must be rejected. Kim argues by saying:

The notions of conversion as 'social uplift', 'caste mobility' or 'social protest' are evidently influenced by the understanding of conversion as primarily a social phenomenon (Kim 2003:193).

If 'caste mobility' or 'social uplift' were not Anushri and Kanti's main concerns and reasons behind their conversion, do this indicate them having religious reasons for converting instead, and these being more prominent and important? Could they have searched for an improved social status and at the same time been convinced of Christianity being the truth? How can the conversion of Ishayu and Gaveshan be explained out of this when they rather than receiving benefits, lost their high position and social status when changing their faiths?

Based on this, I will argue the religious reasons behind their conversions may seem to have been more important and decisive factors for their final choices to go through with converting and remain Christians.

#### **6.2.4 Change of Religious Practice and Involvement**

It did not seem Ishayu had a personal relation or involvement with Hindu gods before, but rather him practicing pujas and sacrifices because everyone else were doing it and because he had the economy and resources to arrange these. When receiving Jesus, his whole religious practice changed. Ishayu stopped doing pujas. Instead, he dedicated himself to a daily, personal relationship with Jesus, praying three times a day. There was no longer need for sacrificing the annual goat to Kali, because of his new belief in Jesus atoning death for him once and for all. As opposed to before, Ishayu now got a very personal involvement in Christianity. He says he was chosen by Jesus and had eagerly followed him ever since. According to Isha-



yu, his good health, high age, joy and strength were results of him being a true believer. The impact he claimed Christianity had on him was evident to me from the moment we first met – both from his charisma and through scripture quotes and stories he shared, but also by him explaining his practical involvement in the local church. Kanti was one of my interviewees practicing Hinduism most actively before converting. She performed different pujas and Hindu festivities, followed different Hindu rules and practices, fasted, prayed and sacrificed to Lokenath and the Hindu gods. When converting, her religious practice changed. She and her family stopped doing pujas and praying to Lokenath or any Hindu gods. Her previous religious practice was exchanged with attending church, prayer meetings, Bible studies and Christian fellowship. She rejected her former belief in favor of her new faith in Jesus as the only living God. Gaveshan's motivation for worshiping as a Hindu was fear of punishment out of his belief in karma. When becoming a Christian, he claims the fear disappeared, that he was filled with peace and joy and is worshiping out of love for Jesus. Karma had up till Gaveshan's conversion, been the driving factor for his actions. It was karma and the teachings on this from the Narendrapur Ramakrishna School that first motivated him to get involved in social work. When converting, Gaveshan's motivations for and practice of social work changed. His main focus became doing social work for the Kingdom of God – to reach unreached people with the Christian Gospel so more people could convert. A similarity in his life as a Hindu and as a Christian was his spiritual openness and search, and his eagerness in his religious practice. As a Hindu, he arranged pujas and went to a Hindu Mission School. When becoming a Christian, he eagerly followed Jesus. He wanted to live by the Gospel by attending a Christian Theology College and become an evangelist and preacher. Gaveshan wanted to understand things and not just blindly accept them. When he made up his mind for something, he fully went through with it. Although his belief and religious practice changed, his eagerness remained constant after converting.

### **6.2.5 Hardships**

In spite of changing religion, Anushri did not experience much resistance other than her father disapproving her attending the Church. Rather, he wanted Anushri to remain a Hindu and continue praying to Krishna. When converting, Gaveshan was rejected by his family, frozen out and excluded from his community and lost his relation to the woman he wanted to marry, were left without money, property, material things and a social network. Ishayu was not found of Christians, prior to his conversion. He got furious with his daughter when she converted

and had no Christian involvement or religious quest up to the point of what he describes as encountering Jesus. After becoming a Christian, he experienced this situation being turned upside down. He was scolded and nicknamed by neighbors, witnessed his Christian friend and pastor being hit with bamboo sticks while in church and given a hard time by one of his sons for becoming a follower of Jesus. There were also scaremongering and rumors being set out about Christians and Christianity to prevent people from converting. Kanti's father received a tough time from his relatives when his mother died, because of his new faith. Kanti, on the other hand, was mostly treated the same as before her conversion except for people setting out false rumors and accusations about them having ulterior motives for converting and were bribed to do so – something Kanti was strongly offended by and denies. This correlates with the literature, saying many riots against Christians were justified by claiming:

[...] b) that 'conversion activities' are funded primarily by foreigners (that is, Europeans and Americans) and c) that these foreign funds are used directly (for example through bribes) and indirectly (for example, through the provision of social services) to lure naïve and impoverished Hindus to Christianity (Bauman in Robinson and Kujur 2010:278-279).

Referring to converts as naïve and impoverished is, in my opinion, not a very good or accurate description. It reveals an understanding not taking the converts conviction, existential search and personal choice seriously.

### **6.2.6 Culture**

Both Anushri and Kanti kept aspects of their culture although converting, but distanced themselves from their previous Hindu religious affiliation with it. Symbols that prior to their conversion were viewed as Hindu' Spiritual, were now looked upon as cultural.

### **6.3 Social and Religious Aspects of Conversions in General**

Religious reasons for conversion, in my opinion, are the reasons affecting the *inner being*, a quest for truth and meaning in life and a longing for something larger than oneself that can intervene in the persons' everyday life and show sovereignty. With the term *inner being*, I refer to:

a profound, invisible part of a person that affects ones thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values and actions. It has to do with what stirs in a persons heart and through this impacts ones life.

When a person has an inner conviction of truth, they act on it no matter the consequences – good or bad.

When writing about social reasons for conversion, the focus of authors I have read is often on the persons quest for an escape from their past in order to achieve something better – an improved social status, material benefits, better economy, freedom from hardships and oppression, equality, justice etc.<sup>31</sup>

Their Christian identity seems to represent their symbolic and religious re-formulation of a break from their past, their attempt to assume greater equality, freedom and justice, and to seek a new worldview under an alternative socio-religious system. Opting for this system is a 'repossession' of personal and social capabilities and a 'calculated cultural move' towards attaining desired aims (Kalapura referring to Khare 1984:30, in Robinson and Kujur 2010:84-85).

I can understand this having been an emphasized focus in many cases because these aspects are more visible and easier observed. I still believe by overemphasizing these aspects, we are overlooking and missing out on some important factors when it comes to reasons for conversion. To overrate the persons social, economical and political struggles as reasons behind a conversion and refer to the choice to convert as 'calculated cultural moves' results, in my opinion, in a shallow understanding and explanation of the reasons for conversion that do not take the converts choices seriously enough. That is not to say these factors do not happen or are not important, but rather them being second to other more prominent and important aspects in many cases – with this I am referring to a persons faith and spiritual and religious reasons behind a conversion.

The theory mentions and acknowledges other reasons for conversion than the social ones. Still, they fail to see the importance of these aspects by only mentioning them and not giving a sufficiently handling of these.

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<sup>31</sup> Some social researchers: Vibha Joshi, Rowena Robinson, Joseph Marianus Kujur, Jose Kalapura etc.

The testimonies that the author quotes of those who joined the missions show that people had multiple reasons – healing of chronic diseases, freedom from drinking and other vices, the knowledge that Jesus had died to save them from their sins – to believe in the new religion (Robinson and Kujur referring to Lobo in Robinson and Kujur 2010:19).

To convert is something that runs deep. It is a very drastic choice affecting a person in all areas of life – especially the inner being. With this understanding of conversion, one may question whether a person who does not have an inner conviction of why he or she converts, really is converted? Is it more correct to view this an outward, superficial conversion rather than a true conversion out of a personal conviction? If the social reasons for conversion is as important as they seem in the literature, why does some people still choose to convert when the opposite of social improvement is the reality they will face when converting? Why do people choose to convert when they will face hardships and struggles out of their choice and not first and foremost an improved standard of living? In the cases where the convert do experience social improvement after conversion, my question is: Is the social improvement the main reason and motivation that leads to the conversion, or should this rather be viewed as consequences out of the choice and not the underlying cause?

## **6.4 Social or Religious Aspects of Conversion in My Material**

I will now proceed by discussing whether my informants reasons for conversion should be regarded as social or religious.

### **6.4.1 Financial Social Lift**

Ishayu and Anushri's financial situations remained unchanged after their conversion. Anushri's family was as poor as before. Since she was still in school, Anushri was not able to work. That meant her mothers small fruit store at the train station platform provided the only family income for food and living expenses. Ishayu was still as rich as prior to converting. He believed, however, he could have been even richer had he converted at an earlier age. Then he, according to himself, would have spent his money differently and wiser. Kanti, on the other hand, did experience a social uplift after converting. Her family was poor prior to this. After becoming Christians, her parents built a bigger and nicer house, and Kanti bought a land where she would build a house in the future. Additionally, Kanti's husband used to work as an

employee in another person's bicycle repair store – not having enough surplus to provide for his parents and siblings. After their conversion, he now has his own store with employees working for him and a better income and profit so he can provide for all of his family. This too might indicate a social reason for conversion in that they had a social and material lift.

The rhetoric of fraudulent conversion or conversion through allurements involves several assumptions. The first assumption is that conversion to Christianity brings with it economic benefits. It cannot be denied that many, perhaps even a majority of Indian converts to Christianity in the last two centuries have experienced some material benefit from their movement into the Christian community. [...] the vast majority of India's Christians today find such obvious allurements to the faith repulsive and illegitimate (Bauman in Robinson and Kujur 2010:282).

Kanti strongly contradicted the accusations of them having received this and their lives improving as some kind of bribe from Christians to change their faith. She believed the social and financial lift was a combination of blessings from Jesus and hard work from her father and husband. That she strongly denies the accusations against them, indicates their conversion not being a result of social reasons – like gaining a financial social lift. Rather, the social lift seems like a consequence after their choice to convert. In addition to this, the social lift was not given to them from other Christians or other people. Gaveshan, however, had a reversed change in his financial situation in that he was disinherited by his parents and kicked out of home. As a Hindu, Gaveshan depended on Lakshmi and his Father to meet and provide for his needs. What he used to have financially belonged to his father. This support was now withdrawn. With his change of religious alliance, also came a change of dependence. Gaveshan now depended on Jesus to meet and take care of his needs – both financially and socially.

#### **6.4.2 Social Lift through Social Status**

As a Hindu from a high cast and with an uncle and a grandfather who were maharajes, Gaveshan had a high social status in the community, and role models who were living out the Hindu faith to the full. This spiritual lifestyle attracted Gaveshan. Already being high on the social ladder, his conversion did not come as a solution to struggles or an escape to achieve social betterment. In my opinion, this excludes the emphasis on Gaveshan converting out of social factors as argued for in much of the theory presented. Another, important argument for

this, that might exclude many emphasized social reasons for conversion, is the fact he chose to convert although this meant he would lose his position in society and many of the things he had valued in life like good economy, property, money, wealth and status. His conversion did not lead to social improvement, but rather the opposite. When converting, Gaveshans social position in the community was turned upside down. He came from a family of regarded people with respectable occupations. When converting, he was rejected by his family and frozen out and excluded from his community – accused, like Kanti, of converting out of a bribe.<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult psychologically, for example, to break with one's family, particularly with one's parents, and doing so in India often incurs a kind of debilitating social ostracism (Bauman in Robinson and Kujur 2010:283).

In spite of this, Gaveshan experienced a second change and a social lift after his conversion because of what he refers to as a *supernatural experience*<sup>33</sup> (the story of the fruitful land) that made people start including him back in the community. Although he did not get back his previous social status, he was not an outcast anymore after this. Anushri was accepted into a new Christian family as she calls it – as opposed to her bad relations with her in-laws. This might be viewed a social aspect in that she received something she was lacking and longing for and a new social belonging with the possibility of getting help and an improvement in life through these new relations.

### **6.4.3 Spiritual Hunger**

From childhood, Gaveshan had a spiritual search and hunger, wish and longing to receive salvation and good things in life through Hinduism. His attraction to Hindu spirituality led him to, at times, be the main person to arrange different pujas. He looked up to the monks and Hindus wearing orange uniforms to show a life of dedication to Hinduism. This might be a social aspect in that Gaveshan wanted to be viewed as spiritual to be even more highly regarded by the community. It can also be a religious aspect since he out of this admiration later chose attending the Ramakrishna Hindu Mission School to immerse in Hinduism. I would argue the spiritual search and hunger Gaveshan had from childhood – although directed towards Hinduism at the time – was the beginning of his existential search for truth. This search

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<sup>32</sup> See quote above under the headline: Hardships (6.2.5).

<sup>33</sup> This will be explained in 6.5.3

went on for years with plenty of important factors. It is noteworthy and interesting that Gaveshan, out of all the Hindu gods, preferred worshipping Lakshmi. He explains Lakshmi being the goddess with authority to give money and property. Lakshmi:

... is the goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. [...] Her four hands represent the four ends of human life: dharma or righteousness, "kama" or desires, "artha" or wealth, and "moksha" or liberation from the cycle of birth and death.<sup>34</sup>

On one hand, this might imply material things, property and money being important to Gaveshan and that he, in spite of a high social status, still wanted for several things. If this was the case, it is all the more interesting that he changed his faith even when this meant him losing inheritance, family support, property, safe and solid finances and being ostracized from his society. Still, he chose to convert and hold on to his new faith when facing these hardships. On the other hand, it can indicate him wanting to grow and prosper spiritually. Salvation and wanting to receive good things for the future was important to him.

#### **6.4.4 An Escape from Deprivation?**

The fact that Anushri came from a deprived background and struggled with lots of problems in her life could be viewed as an explanation to why she was open to adopting a new belief system and why she searched for changes and an escape from the life she was living. Downs writes about conversion among hill tribes of the North East in his article "Christian Conversion Movements in North East India" stating: "Large-scale conversion movements take place when people face a crisis" (Downs in Robinson and Clarke 2003:386). In my case, I do not focus on conversion movements, but rather on individuals. Still, Anushri's story can, in a way, be understood and explained through this statement in that she was facing major crisis. According to Downs' explanation, her conversion could have resulted from this. Downs has historical and political situations in mind as well as earthquakes and other large-scale crisis that turns peoples lives upside down. In Anushri's case, she had marriage problems leading to her being abandoned by her husband to raise their three months young son by herself. In addition, her life consisted of serious conflicts with her family-in-law. These bad situations escalated to the point she tried killing herself – something clearly indicating and underlining her desperation and wish to escape her life situation. Gaveshan too experienced a large crisis in

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<sup>34</sup> <http://hinduism.about.com/od/hindugoddesses/p/lakshmi.htm> , (31.12.15)

his life after converting. I would disagree with Downs statement in Gaveshan's case, however, since his crisis was an outcome of his choice and not something leading up to it, whereas Anushri's crisis were prior to her conversion.

#### **6.4.5 Prosperity?**

When first considering converting to Christianity, Anushri had thought:

If I go to Christianity, maybe I will be more fruitful. [...] My life will be good and I will be a good girl (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:32).

What she meant by this is up for discussion. On one hand, fruitfulness and prosperity can be viewed as synonyms. In light of this, Anushri might have wanted to convert in order to prosper and it might indicate her looking to receive something beneficial as a result from converting. Having this in mind, the statement could implicate Anushri having social reasons for converting. The social anthropologist Vibha Joshi says in the beginning of her book: *A Matter of Belief*: “[...] for many people, conversion to a particular religion may seem the only route to a better life” (Joshi 2012:1). The sociologist Rowena Robinson, in her article ‘Sixteenth Century Conversion to Christianity in Goa’ from the book: *Religious Conversion in India*, writes about Hindus wanting to convert because the Portuguese used “a system of privileges to attract adherents to the faith” (Robinson in Robinson and Clarke 2003:303). This view is written out of the current political situation in Goa at a time where Hindus were caught in between Christian and Muslim occupiers and had to figure out how to deal with the new political situation. Robinson refers to different researchers to shed light on the issue. A view she criticizes as not taking the social and political situation of the time seriously by emphasizing the conversions having been “completely voluntary in character”, is the view held by Heras (1935) and D’Costa (1965). They, contrary to Robinson, meant the overemphasizing on social and political aspects behind the conversions reduced the converts to passive and helpless ‘victims’. Contrary to this, they held the view conversion first and foremost is a conscious faith commitment from the converts’ perspectives – not just a result of allurements and force (Robinson in Robinson and Clarke 2003:303).



Heras (1935) and Anthony D'Costa (1965) argue that the conversions arose out of true commitment to the faith, not out of force or out of a desire to gain material benefits (Robinson in Robinson and Clarke 2003:303).

Kim too agrees with this in his statement:

Christians from North-east India were particularly strong in insisting that their conversion [...] was the outcome of their search for the truth and salvation. They were attracted to the Christian faith and they made a conscious decision to convert to it; for them it was a faith commitment more than anything else (Kim 2003:194).

When it comes to Anushri and her conversion, it is important to note she did not find herself in the political situation of Goa in the sixteenth century and there being no indications of people trying to convert her by allurements or force. Rather, she lives in a Hindu majority culture and society and is from a family encouraging her to practice Hinduism to get help in her struggles. What she believed was in it for her when converting, is a different question, however. The meaning of her statement: "more fruitful" is hard to ascertain other than her underlining a wish to be a good girl and get a good life. That Anushri did not convert at the time might imply her having other reasons and motivations than social ones for going through with it later on. If she was out to gain material or social benefits, why did she not go through with converting immediately? A different interpretation is that Anushri with this might have alluded to getting her life back on track. This way, the fruitfulness would refer to her character and life quality when it came to solutions to her problems and inner wellbeing more than outer aspects. She might not have experienced getting the help she needed from Hinduism and might therefore have considered Christianity as a new option. Another point indicating her being in search of social betterment could be that she, after her husband left, looked to Christianity for stability in her life and to provide for her as the person/god she searched for help and assistance from. This way, Christianity might seem a quick fix to her problems and a way to fill a void in her life.

Having these social reasons in mind, Anushri seems to fit the description many sociologists have focused on concerning people searching for a way out of their previous life situations and problems to achieve a better life. They therefore seize the opportunity adapting to Christianity as a means to achieve this new freedom, new life and prosperity.

#### **6.4.6 Beginning of a Religious Quest**

Anushri's search for someone to help her and for her to be dependent on had started when she was young – before getting married and before facing all her big marital and relational problems. This reason, however, could be both social and religious. In light of the rest of the interview, however, it seems to me, she is not referring primarily to social uplift, material things or to achieve some kind of outer freedom or prosperity. Rather, it seems a spiritual and religious understanding of this aspect is better suited. It can be viewed as a religious aspect in that she has a search for someone outside of herself to interfere and watch over her and help in situations where she feels helpless. That this search began before her big problems strengthens the argument of this being the beginning of a religious quest rather than a search for an escape. This way, it can, in my opinion, be viewed as an existential search for something more in life than what she already knew about and this search increasing when she found herself in tough situations later on. It can be argued her wish to escape the bad situation she was experiencing and using Christianity as a means to achieve this was a 'calculated social move' as written in the quote above. To me, this is not very likely, since the freedom she experienced from receiving Jesus was not given to her from other people or in a form of social uplift and material benefits, but rather as an inner freedom from guilt and loneliness. An argument strengthening this as being a religious aspect is the fact the bad situation did not fully change or disappear after her conversion – she continued having struggles. The difference was rather that she now experienced Jesus active and interfering in her life and gave him credit for it. Having this in mind, I believe this very much is a spiritual and religious reason eventually leading to her conversion.

When reviewing the interview with Ishayu, he did not really mention that many social reasons for conversion. Outwards, his life seemed to be going very well – both financially, materially and socially. He had an affair with a woman in the village, which might indicate he was looking to fill a void in his life, but that also can be explained with him feeling he could do whatever he wanted out of his high status and that he was lusting for physical relations. Some of his focuses in his former religious practice, might have had ulterior motives like showing off his wealth and keeping up his high social status. He also claims many of the Hindu religious things he did was done because everyone else in his generation were doing it. His religious practice did not seem too personal to me, but rather a cultural act the majority of the people of the village did.

I agree several of these social reasons probably have been the case for many throughout history, but not as the only factors in the process. I disagree with the underestimation and lack of focus on the importance of religious aspects for a person to convert. In the following (6.5), I shall therefore, based on my material, discuss what the religious reasons are and the importance of these for conversion – by presenting the religious aspects of my interviewees' conversion stories.

## **6.5 Religious Aspects of Conversions**

In the above, I have discussed whether the different factors leading to the conversions have been social or religious. What follows is now a discussion on religious reasons for conversion amongst my selection of individuals in West-Bengal, India. This will be my contribution to the field by giving a handling and investigation of Kim's assertion that there has been a lack of focus on the religious aspects of individuals' conversions in India. With my findings, I will conclude with whether I agree or disagree with Kim and in that case, to what extent I find these religious aspects important.

### **6.5.1 The Content of the Christian Gospel**

A noteworthy aspect for the conversions that recurs in the interviews is the importance of the content of the Christian Gospel. Two main factors are salient here. To begin with, I will look into their realization of being sinners in a Christian understanding, second, I will look into what Jesus redemption and forgiveness meant for their lives and through these get a greater understanding of the content of the Christian Gospel as a significant religious reason for their conversion to Christianity.

#### **Realization of Being a Sinner**

Both Anushri and Gaveshan got handed a tract with an explanation of the Gospel and was introduced to the concept of sin. Ishayu and Kanti, however, were first introduced to this concept in Church. Anushri read the tract and did not act on it at the time being. Later in life, however, the concept of people being sinners because of the wrong things they do reappeared in her mind. Still being a Hindu, the understanding and linking of sin up to karma was adjacent for Anushri when first hearing about it. Prior to receiving Jesus, Anushri was burdened

with sins and guilt because of the situation she found herself in and was reminded of what she had earlier read in the tract. Over time, this convinced her of wrongs and sinfulness in her life, which she blamed herself for.

Because I have sinned and I did something wrong, and because of my situation, my life is like this. My husband is gone and I am suffering lots of things, because of my sin. (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:39).

This might, on one hand, have been a Hindu religious aspect in that she believed she got what she deserved in life – that her life situation and life quality reflected her actions – or she might, on the other hand, already have grasped a fundamental understanding of Christianity's view on humans' sinful nature. If this was Anushri beginning to acknowledge sin in her life, I would argue it has to do with inner convictions and belief, but might also be her effort to try and make sense of why the different bad things happened to her.

Gaveshan says about his first meeting with the Christian Gospel:

They were preaching, and I stood there listening. When they finished, I received a tract from them where it was written: [...] I have the authority to save you (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:73).

The sentence about Jesus having authority to save, especially stood out to Gaveshan. Very interesting was what Gaveshan told me, when I interviewed him, about the Hindu understanding of the concept of right and wrong and of sin. As a Christian, he has become an evangelist and preacher. Sharing the Gospel is what he does for a living. According to the interviews I did during my fieldwork, it seemed many Hindus are aware of their sins. Gaveshan, however, disagreed by saying:

In Hinduism, they are never thinking about how much wrong work they have done or how big a sinner they are (From transcription of the interview with Gaveshan).

Further, he explained:

In the Hindu community, many people depend on the Ramakrishna Mission. When I attended the Ramakrishna Mission [...] One teaching they have is that if you feel something is a sin, then it is a sin. Because of this teaching, people do not know if they are doing something wrong or not. If a person is doing something wrong, but he does not feel that it is sin, then it is not a sin. Another thing they taught was that if I do something wrong, I go to the temple to worship, and I give something to other people. Then I go and take a bath in the Ganga River and go to the temple to atone for my sins. Many Hindu people are thinking this is the way their sins will be forgiven (From transcription of the interview with Gaveshan).

This, I will argue, makes it even more interesting and relevant to hear my interviewees new take on the concept of sin after hearing the Christian Gospel. I would say this argues for the content of the Christian Gospel and realization of sin being a very relevant religious aspect for conversion in – and in a way, new to – the Hindu context.

Although Anushri – and Kanti too – were still Hindus when first hearing the concept of sin in a Christian understanding, it seemed they were already aware of something not being right in their lives. I would argue this might have been a start of an inner existential quest. Kanti says about her life prior to converting:

I think I did many things wrong, but I did not know how my sins would be forgiven (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:58).

Nevertheless, after being introduced to the concept of sin in a Christian understanding, they both began acknowledging wrongs in their lives.

Ishayu too, talks about a realization of sins and of right and wrong in his life. His understanding of this, however, did not begin with him having an inner existential search for answers until he claimed he got his *divine encounter*<sup>35</sup> with Jesus. As a Christian, however, Ishayu says in the interview:

One song is there: My things, my sin – all carried Jesus. [...] My thoughts, my mind, lots of thinking were there. All my thoughts, like bad or good, and my sin Jesus took away. I

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<sup>35</sup> I will explain the term in the following. (6.5.3)

did many things wrong, but Jesus took away all my sin. All people have sin. Many unrighteous things are past (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, pp:55).

This leads me to the next important aspect of the content of the Gospel for my interviewees' conversions:

### **Jesus Redemption and Forgiveness**

It was not just the realization of sin in their lives my interviewees highlighted as important for their choices to convert. It was also the part of the Christian Gospel about Jesus dying on the cross in order to forgive their sins.

Back to my interview with Gaveshan, he explained how he approaches people with the Gospel when evangelizing. His emphasis is on them getting an understanding of their need for Jesus in their lives through an awareness of sin.

When I am preaching the Gospel in the Hindu community, I always try to explain how big a sinner they are. [...] Then, I ask them this question: You have done this much wrong and this much sin. How will your sins be forgiven? [...] In Hinduism, I always give them one example with a story of a man named Rotnakoldishu. [...] After this story, I ask the people listening the same question: Who will take your sin? Then, I explain who Jesus is and why and how our sins will be forgiven. [...] If you believe in and love Jesus, your sins will be forgiven. [...] In this way, people are slowly changing to Jesus in the community (From transcription of the interview with Gaveshan).

As Christians, all of my interviewees have realized Jesus has taken away their sins and forgiven them. Their former belief in karma was now replaced with the doctrines of Christianity about Jesus atonement for their sins and grace. Anushri's belief in these new doctrines came after an ongoing quest from her side and after being explained the Christian Gospel – first through the tract, then through watching a Jesus movie which awakened her search for truth with the question of who had died for her and removed her sins. When pondering on this question, the focus shifted from the sin in itself to who could *remove* her sins and make things right.

That time I tried to find out who died for our sin, but I could not find any god who died for our sin. [...] But when I am in the Christian family, I understand that Jesus took my sin and I am free and I receive. When I am follower of Jesus Christ in the Christian family, I receive salvation in my life (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:33 and 39).

Kanti too, as a Hindu, claims she did not know how she would be forgiven. In light of this, it is understandable the content of the Gospel was revolutionary to her. Again, this can be viewed as a quest for inner freedom and help with inner problems as more prominent than a search for social deliverance. Her whole life, Kanti expected someone was keeping an eye on her and watching her actions – referring to some kind of higher being. She was, however, uncertain of who this higher being was. This indicates Kanti, similar to Anushri, may have had an ongoing existential quest for truth from a young age. Her spiritual openness and curiosity were part of opening her to the idea of changing her faith, which ultimately led to her conversion.

As a relational person, most of her prayers were concerned with her family and their well-being. Although she came from a low caste, I did not get the impression she was lacking things in life or searching for an escape of some kind. Rather, it seemed she was doing well. Her spiritual openness might be an explanation to why she agreed attending a church service to hear a message about Jesus although she was not a Christian at the time. For Kanti to hear Jesus had died for her to remove her sin and forgive her for everything, was of major importance for her choice to convert.

There, I received one thing: Forgiveness. [...] From the message in church, I received forgiveness, and I also learned how to forgive others. [...] From church I received the message and after I heard this, I changed my life. [...] If anyone can forgive my sins, it is Jesus (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:58 and 68).

We have already heard Ishayu confessing his belief in Jesus forgiveness and redemption for him in the quote above. Gaveshan, first realized his own sinfulness and understood Jesus being his Savior through conversations with a pastor.

The pastor told me directly: For you Jesus sacrificed his son. When he said directly to me: For you! That Jesus sacrificed himself and was crucified, that was so hard and touching

like electricity to my heart. That time, my thoughts instantly changed. I began thinking that I am a sinful man and a sinner. Yes. [...] Slowly, I started to believe in Jesus (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:74).

Out of this new revelation, my interviewees no longer condemn themselves for their sins, but have gotten an inner freedom and peace and a new look at life and eternity. The fact that all four refer to the Content of the Gospel independent of one another, I would argue strengthens the importance and prominence of this aspect for conversion over other reasons – particularly many of the social ones. Based on the above, my material thus argues for and shows the content of the Gospel as one of the main decisive religious factors for my interviewees' conversions to Christianity.

### **6.5.2 Answers to Questions about Jesus and Christianity**

The second aspect for conversion I want to highlight is that of my interviewees receiving answers to their questions about Jesus and Christianity

- a. by attending church
- b. from other Christians
- c. by their reading of the Bible.

In spite of having revelations of being sinners and being forgiven by Jesus' redemption on the cross, all of my interviewees were left with many questions about Jesus and Christianity. Some of them sought out a Church to get answers, whilst others were invited to a Church by friends or relatives. In Church, they all had conversations with Christians and got new fellowships and they all received a Bible to read for themselves what it said.

Anushri had sought out a Church in Bandel. She had questions about how to pray to Jesus, how she could receive prayer answers from Jesus and how she could get baptized.

Before, I was thinking: If I learn more and if I receive something – I tried to be a follower of Jesus, but no one could help me to do this things. [...] There was one question: How do I pray to Jesus and how can I receive prayer answers from Jesus? (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:34).



This last question might indicate her being in a desperate situation in need of help of some kind. Interesting here is why she began looking for this help from Jesus and Christianity as opposed to other religions and life philosophies – the former being a minority religion in the area. Some might argue that since she was deprived, vulnerable and suffered from many things, she was easier to 'recruit' and persuade to change her faith. According to her story, however, Anushri's conversion did not result from being persuaded, but rather from an inner quest for truth and answers to her questions. I would therefore argue this being a religious aspect of her conversion.

It was Anushri's visit to the Bandel Church that revived her existential quest ultimately leading to her becoming a Christian. At one point, she wanted to give Christianity a try. When moving back to her parents house, there was no church in the area. Anushri therefore felt prevented going through with the conversion in lack of a Church to visit and Christians to answer her questions, teach her more about Jesus, Christianity and how to convert. A few years later, a Church started in the village and Anushri was invited by her two younger sisters. In Church, she heard about Jesus and was given a Bible.

From the church, I heard many stories from the Bible, and I believe that without Jesus, I cannot reach God and I cannot reach heaven. [...] From the Bible reading, because I got the New Testament, and by reading the New Testament I knew Christianity is the best thing. I have to follow Jesus (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:35).

By that Bible reading and by this prayer, I understood this: If I ask anything to Jesus, Jesus will give me everything. By this way, I am a follower of Jesus Christ. (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:35).

Kanti, on the other hand, did not search for a Church. Rather, she was invited by her husband's friend to come and hear a message. Kanti's openness and curiosity towards this new belief changed her way of living her life, how she interacted with others and her mindset in many areas. She does not say much about what happened in Church other than her learning about forgiveness and the message changing her life.

My husband has a friend [...]. He came to our house and asked if we wanted to come to their church and listen to something (From transcription of the interview with Kanti). One

time, we went to their church. That time, I felt something change in our life, and slowly, we gave our hearts to Jesus. [...] it changed my life (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:58).

I learned from the Bible – I am not much of a reader, so I read it slowly – but in the Bible, I know that if I forgive people, God will forgive me. (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:58).

Gaveshan too was invited to come to a Church service by some people doing street evangelism and was told he would get answers by coming there. Especially two questions were of major importance to Gaveshan in his religious quest. When writing about conversion, many sociologists have focused on Dalit Christians wanting to escape the hardships of the cast system. Gaveshan, however, were in the top sheet of the cast system. Similar to Gaveshan, the pastor of the Church came from a high social background. Gaveshan's question to the pastor was why he had chosen to convert when this meant he would lose his good position? When the pastor explained Jesus had drawn him close and that he believed Jesus was doing the same with Gaveshan, it did something with Gaveshan's mindset. Further, Gaveshan wondered how he, who had believed in several gods his whole life, could understand Jesus being the only Savior? He was explained the Christian Gospel again and heard Jesus had died on the cross – with the pastor directly emphasizing the words: FOR YOU! These personal words struck a chord in Gaveshan and gave him a realization of being a sinner in need of a Savior. He says he immediately experienced something changing on the inside. The spiritual quest Gaveshan had and all his questions had been met with answers that to him made sense and seemed so right and truthful. To Gaveshan, Jesus was drawing on his heart and was doing things in his life.

The coming Sunday, I went to the Sunday service and I had many questions. I asked all the questions to him and he gave me answers. The answers he gave were so right for me (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:73).

Then, I asked: Please give me something to read. He gave me a New Testament (From transcription of the interview with Gaveshan). In the New Testament, I found out who is my Savior. In this way, I made the decision: If anyone is my Savior, it is Jesus. I changed

my faith and I started to believe in Jesus and I became a follower of Jesus Christ (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:74).

In Ishayu's case, however, he sought out the local Church himself after, what he refers to as, his encounter with Jesus. This was not enough to make him convert. Changes had definitely begun, but he was still left with questions as to what this was all about. To know more about Jesus, he sought help in Church and got the knowledge and answers he needed in order to make his final choice.

Dipok showed me how to come close with Jesus [...] (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:44).

In Church, all my informants got answers to their questions, heard messages in the Sunday services explaining stories and words from the Bible and received a Bible in order to read for themselves. According to this, getting answers to questions and explanations in their existential quest was of major importance to all four of them. They had not only heard the Gospel, but also gotten a better understanding of it through these answers. Thus, I would argue this being a religious aspect that builds on the previous aspect and that ultimately were of great significance for my interviewees change of religion.

### **6.5.3 Divine Interventions**

The third aspect I find very relevant for my interviewees' path towards conversion to Christianity and their lives as Christians, according to their stories, are that of divine interventions. I am fully aware this is not a concept widely or frequently used in academic literature since it differs from an enlightenment way of thinking and doing research that contradicts the logical and rational, scientific way of reasoning we are used to in the western part of the world. Still, I would argue, this being an important theological and religious reason for conversion that should not be overlooked and that can help get a better understanding of why people convert. I already mentioned this concept when talking about Christianity's "shift" from the West to *the South*<sup>36</sup> in the introduction to my thesis. People from the South are known for being much more open to spiritual gifts, healings and, what I will describe in the following, as *divine in-*

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<sup>36</sup> With the Southern part of the world, I refer to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Australia and New Zealand are not included in this term.

*terventions* than many from the West. Although we are not used to operate with this kind of concept in our part of the world, it does not mean it does not occur and that it is irrelevant. I also touched the subject in the theory overview when referring to Hiebert's theory of "the excluded middle". Hiebert believes a holistic theology and understanding of the Asian scene and reality should include the belief in divine interventions, healings, spirits etc. In his article "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle", he says:

On the middle level, a holistic theology includes a theology of God in human history: in the affairs of nations, of peoples and of individuals. This must include a theology of divine guidance, provision and healing; of ancestors, spirits and invisible powers of this world; and of suffering, misfortune and death (Hiebert 1982:46).

In order to translate the concept of divine interventions into operational terms, and show the importance of this as a religious aspect for conversion for my informants, I will argue for the use of this as an academic expression of relevance for my findings. The understanding of this concept has to do with ontology - a person's perception of reality. Can we actually say something about what is real, or do we have to say an incident only can be understood as a person's perception of the incident and the incident in itself being irrelevant or impossible to actually know anything about?

Ontology are concerned with:

[...] the question of whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors. These positions are frequently referred to respectively as objectivism and constructionism (Bryman 2012:32).

Constructionism is an ontological position saying it is not possible to ascertain what is real other than a persons' perception of this reality. In my case, that means I cannot say whether my interviewee has had a divine intervention or not, but only this being his or her experience of it. Objectivism, in contrast to constructionism, is an ontological position, saying it is possible to have direct access to reality and what has actually happened – meaning it is possible to say whether a divine intervention has found place or not. A middle stance between these two

ontological positions is critical realism. Critical realism takes the stance that it is possible to say something about reality as long as one keeps in mind this being interpreted subjectively by the people experiencing this reality in order to approach it critically. In my case, it means it is possible to say whether a divine intervention has happened or not, but that one should be aware when discussing that one interprets these happenings through ones own ‘lenses’.

I find a constructionist approach not the most relevant for my argumentation when wanting to understand something about divine interventions as religious reasons for conversion, since it can only give information about the interviewees experience of this and not about the divine intervention in itself. The humans are in focus – not the events in themselves independent of the people experiencing them. Nor is an objectivistic understanding adequate, in my opinion, because it does not take the interviewees experience and understandings of the divine interventions seriously enough. This leaves me with the third understanding of critical realism. I would argue for a use of the term *divine interventions* in light of critical realism, since it allows one to actually ascertain – in a critical way – whether something has happened or not and simultaneously say something about both the interviewees experience and understanding of it and also ones own perception.

In light of a critical realistic position, I would thus argue for the academic relevance of the concept *divine interventions* when I proceed discussing the importance of these as religious aspects for my interviewees’ conversions and how it has affected their lives. Though I, in light of this, may be able to say something about whether a divine intervention has taken place or not and the persons experience of this, what I cannot ‘prove’ or ascertain is who is behind these interventions other than my subjective opinion as a Christian and theologian and my informants opinions as Christian converts of this being the God of the Bible and Jesus. Thus, this stance could not be said to be impervious either.

Andersen in his thesis: “*From Victim to Victor*”. *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Brazil – An Empirical Study of Reasons for Growth* is one of the few researchers I have come across operating with the term Divine Encounters<sup>37</sup>. According to him:

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<sup>37</sup> There are also people like John Wimber and Kevin Springer who talks about power encounters and power/divine healings.

... this term signify a religious experience of something awe inspiring and divine, a “presence of God” that makes it hard for the participant to remain neutral (Andersen 2012:132).

He further divides this term into subgroups like “power encounters, religious experiences, healings and miracles, being indwelt by spiritual power and answers to prayers” (Andersen 2012:99). I agree with him in his focus on the importance of divine encounters and its subgroups. Still, my definition of a divine encounter is slightly narrower than his definition. I believe a divine encounter can occur in spite of the person having an existential search for something or being aware of needing or lacking anything. It is a happening where God or the higher being is the initiator who seeks out the person who then becomes the recipient, like Ishayu explains. What Andersen calls a divine encounter, however, I would prefer calling a divine intervention. According to my material, divine interventions comprise both divine encounters<sup>38</sup>, divine healing<sup>39</sup>, prayer answers<sup>40</sup>, supernatural experiences<sup>41</sup> and visions and dreams<sup>42</sup>.

The way I see it:

Divine Interventions are when a higher being/deity actively interferes in a persons’ life through a concrete revelation, incident, answer and presence or vision/dream and makes a lasting change that cannot easily be explained away by rationality or logic or that at least stirs a persons’ *inner being*<sup>43</sup> and worldview.

### **Divine Interventions in My Material**

Back to my material, I would argue all four have experienced divine interventions in different ways – both prior to and following their conversions. When asking my informants about spiritual and supernatural incidents and prayer answers in their lives as Hindus, they all had one story to refer to, but besides this, could not tell me of many. As Christians, however, I was

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<sup>38</sup> A direct encounter with God or a higher being where he reveals himself and shows his presence. E.g. from the Bible: Moses and the burning bush, Paul on his way to Damascus and Ishayu in my material.

<sup>39</sup> Healing resulting from the divinity’s intervention and action in a specific situation that cannot easily be explained by logic or rationality.

<sup>40</sup> When a person has requested something concrete in prayer to a divinity and experiences it changing or happening.

<sup>41</sup> Similar to divine healing, it is beyond human comprehension and understanding and cannot easily be understood rationally or be explained away by logic, but only testified to by those experiencing it.

<sup>42</sup> Pictures with hidden messages one gets while awake or while sleeping, saying something about God, his character, ones life, ones relation to God, Gods will etc.

<sup>43</sup> See definition in 6.3.

told of several incidents and stories where they claim having received dreams, visions, supernatural experiences, divine encounters and seen healings in the name of Jesus.

For Anushri, the many prayer answers she received from Jesus were of major importance. She prayed before her suicide attempt and was saved from the river, she got to return to her parents' house when praying for this and she credits Jesus with answering all her prayers when asking for something – contrary to her former experience when praying to Krishna. One of the major prayer answers she emphasizes is one that, according to Anushri, was final and decisive for her choice to convert. Anushri was left by her husband and had prayed for him to return. After a period of three and a half years, when it seemed very unlikely this would happen, he suddenly reappeared. Although he did not stay for long, this to Anushri meant Jesus had heard and answered her prayers and that he was with her and helped her always. She had found the helper and caretaker she had been searching for her whole life.

By the things here, I prayed to Jesus and Jesus gave me an answer and my husband came back. It was a very deep thing for my life. (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:37).

In other words, the existential search Anushri had for someone to depend on and to take care of her and help her was found by these prayer answers showing Jesus fitting this description. These prayer answers – although very real and life changing to Anushri, might for some be explained by chance or coincidence. Still, I would argue this says something important about Anushri and these divine interventions being of major importance to her. Another divine intervention leading to Anushri's conversion and change of worldview was her experience of seeing Jesus when closing her eyes to pray to her former Hindu gods. Out of a critical realistic approach, I would argue this actually can be said to have happened, but whether it was Jesus she saw is beyond my reach to ascertain here other than this being her subjective experience and my understanding of this since it had not happened before and since it led to her believing in Jesus as the only God as opposed to her former belief in multiple gods.

But when I again tried to pray to Krishna, no answer was there. [...] Now, I have the experience that if I try to call on any other gods and I close my eyes, I see the picture of Jesus in front of me, so I can pray there. I cannot pray to other gods. I only pray to Jesus (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:34-35).

Kanti had been an active Hindu by doing many sacrifices to the Hindu gods, celebrating pujas, fasting etc. throughout her whole childhood and beginning of her adult life. Even before converting, she was open to spiritual interaction. She especially prayed to Lokenath, believing whatever she prayed for would be granted her when doing this. I get the understanding Kanti wished to receive something spiritual in form of guidance, blessings and interferences. Her previous longing to receive something from Lokenath, was in Christianity, answered by Jesus whom she claims gave her many prayer answers, supernatural experiences, dreams, visions and healings in the time after her conversion. This we see in the following quotes:

That time, I saw lots of dreams about Jesus (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:58).

[...] But many of those I have prayed for healing for have been healed (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:61).

When my father in law was alive, he got tuberculosis. [...] But when I prayed for him, God healed him. For a long time he was alive and healthy. When he became old, he died (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:61).

Kanti was very certain about her experiencing divine interventions – seeing visions and dreams and witnessing Jesus healing. There were especially two incidents she brought up – one being Jesus showing her a vision of a cross on the wall after her asking him to reveal himself to her.

In my prayer time, I saw a cross show up on the wall. From the middle of the cross, light was coming. [...] That time, when I saw the cross, I started crying from my eyes, but my heart also cried (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:59).

Although Kanti not always understands the meaning of the different divine interventions, she claims it has happened and witnesses to what she has seen.

[...] What I saw that time, I do not know what it means for me. I do not know that things, *but I saw it* (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:59 – italics added).



The second divine intervention, was one time she got a dream. When waking up, she felt it was more to the dream than what she had understood and went to ask the pastor about it. In Church, she saw a book with the exact same picture as the one from her dream.

There is a Bible book in the church where I saw a picture. It was the same picture that I had seen in my dream (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:60).

For Kanti, these divine interventions happened in the time after her conversion. To her, the importance of these were them showing Jesus as living, relevant for and active in her daily life. Thus, the divine interventions became religious reasons for her in that they confirmed and strengthened the decision she had taken to convert and her new faith.

Unlike Anushri, Ishayu's conversion did not begin with a personal inner quest for a higher being or someone outside of himself. Ishayu was satisfied the way things were. According to his story, it was Jesus who sought him out first. Having this encounter in mind, I will take a closer look at Ishayu's religious experience of divine interventions.

At an age of seventy-eight, Ishayu was very sick, lying in his room with very high fever. Simultaneously, his daughter was in another room of the house, praying and interceding to Jesus on his behalf. Out of this intercession, Ishayu got his divine encounter.

I did not know that she was doing this, but at the same time as she prayed, something happened with my fever and I saw Jesus standing in front of me with his arms out to each side. [...] In front of me, I saw the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:44).

To me, what Ishayu experienced can clearly be described as a divine encounter when Jesus revealed himself without any pre effort or quest on Ishayu's part. It might seem the purpose was to draw Ishayu close and begin an existential search in him, since he claims having actually seen Jesus physically standing in the room, and that he disappeared shortly after. The divine encounter came as a surprise to Ishayu. Some might explain this as fevered imagination or illusions because of his bad condition or high age. Nevertheless, it touched and awakened something deep inside of him that had not previously been there. Out of this divine encounter came two decisive factors.

a] The start of his inner, existential thought process and quest for Jesus, truth and salvation. In contrast to Anushri who had a spiritual quest from she was young, Ishayu's Spiritual quest began when he was an old man, resulting from this divine encounter. It first began with Jesus and proceeded with Ishayu's search afterwards.

That time, I felt that if there is a Savior in my life, for me, maybe it is Jesus. I have to know more about Jesus (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:44).

b] The supernatural aspect of divine healing when his fever disappeared momentarily with no rational explanation.

I had high fever before I saw Jesus, and after Jesus was gone, the fever went down (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:44).

This goes to show there were immediate, tangible and lasting 'evidences' of this encounter – divine healing. On one hand, Ishayu was very ill, lying all by himself in his room. He could have had an illusion or made up some kind of story without anyone being able to argue with him since they were not there. My question to this, however, is how one then would explain the absence of his high fever in minutes after this encounter, and why he would have made up a story of seeing Jesus when he did not know much about him and had given his daughter a very hard time when she converted. Based on my material and discussion, I will argue the best explanation for this encounter is to view it as a divine intervention and a religious reason where Jesus interfered in Ishayu's life – like the daughter was praying for, seeking out Ishayu in order for him to become a Christian.

Conforming with his life before and after his conversion was Ishayu's belief in spirituality and healing. He had a spiritual dream about healing as a Hindu, but without any outcome of this.

Before, I did not have any supernatural experiences, but after I met Jesus, I have a miracle that happened to me (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:50).

As a Christian, however, he claims having seen Jesus in person and actually being healed on several occasions and in this way experienced Jesus as regularly interfering and acting in his life. He brought up one incident where he claims having been healed after hurting his arm, falling from a haystack two meters up in the air at an age of ninety.

When I tried to make this tall pile of rice, I fell from high up on the top and all the way down. That time, I felt Jesus was saving me. When I fell down, my hand was bent in a painful position. I fell down and something happened. I got a little bit pain in here, but I did not go to the hospital or get any medical help [...] but Jesus saved me. I used the oil and put it here and prayed – all the pain disappeared (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:50).

When I felt pain here, I just prayed to God and it went away. Yes. When I prayed to God, Jesus: Please help me, it stopped hurting. When I pray for any pain, it stops. The pain was very hard. It was like someone was biting my bone, but when I prayed to God, Jesus, Jesus healed me (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:51).

In light of what Hiebert says about the excluded middle and the spiritual aspects of divine interventions in human everyday lives, I believe these incidents were important religious aspects to Ishayu, since something immediately happened as a result of prayer that cannot easily be explained away with social reasons or rationality and that left a lasting change in his life. Although I believe this was a big part of Ishayu's way to conversion, I do not see it as the primary, decisive reason for his final choice to convert. Rather, I see it as a supernatural incident, but also a divine encounter and divine healing that marked a shift in his life and began a process towards a major, inner change that might not have taken place had it not been for this. I would categorize one of the outcomes of Ishayu's encounter as a divine healing.

Similar to this, we hear in the interview with Gaveshan, that his pastor claimed Jesus was drawing him to come close and convert – believing the reason for all his questions and his quest for truth was Jesus calling on his life. Although Gaveshan, unlike Ishayu, did not physically see Jesus with his eyes, he had a deep inner conviction of Jesus being the only true God that eventually led him to defy challenges and difficulties resulting from him changing his faith. He might not have seen Jesus physically, but he “saw” Jesus daily, active and interfering supernaturally in his life by providing for him. A divine intervention with a lasting change

for Gaveshan's life was 'the story of the fruitful land'.<sup>44</sup> Gaveshan cultivated a land known not to yield much crop. When sowing, he prayed to God, and later harvested more than his neighbors who owned good lands.

This confidence in Jesus divine interventions in his life through showing himself present and active by providing for his needs, repairing broken relations, answering prayers, healings etc., Gaveshan shows by mentioning several incidents like these. I would argue he had multiple divine interventions – maybe not similar to Ishayu, but rather an experience of Jesus being who he claims to be in the Bible and by experiencing a personal relationship with him, answering and interfering in his everyday life.

The importance here is what all these divine interventions ultimately led to for my informants. Ishayu did not know much about Jesus or Christianity, still he believed he understood who he saw and where to go to get answers to his questions. Anushri and Gaveshan experienced Jesus actively interfering in their lives as opposed to their experience of Krishna, and Lakshmi's absence before their conversion. Anushri also believed she understood it was Jesus she saw when closing her eyes to pray. Kanti had a longing to see Jesus and received several dreams and visions shortly after her conversion, having asked Jesus to reveal himself to her.

None of my interviewees used the expression *divine interventions*, but in light of the above, I would argue they all had different kinds of interventions from Jesus resulting in a changed direction of their lives, values, characters and beliefs. I would call these changes in their lives religious aspects and consequences of their conversion, but also 'evidences' of divine interventions that left a lasting impact on all four of them. This third religious aspect thus proves itself as being of major importance for my interviewees' path to conversion and lives as Christians afterwards since all of them have so much to say on this and highlights these events as important for their religious journey.

#### **6.5.4 Trust and Faith in Jesus**

The fourth and final religious aspect I will point out and discuss with relevance to my material is that of faith – or trust – in Jesus. I would argue this being a significant religious aspect, since without this fundamental trust and faith coming from hearing and understanding the Christian Gospel and experiencing divine interventions, my informants probably would not have converted. The three first religious aspects I have highlighted in my discussion are:

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<sup>44</sup> See chapter 5.4 to read the story.

1. The Content of the Christian Gospel
2. Answers to Their Questions About Jesus and Christianity
3. Divine Interventions

The fourth important religious aspect I will discuss is that of:

4. Trust and Faith in Jesus
  - a. Prior to converting
  - b. Following conversion as a confirmation of their choice

On one hand, I cannot exclude conversion resulting from either one of the three first aspect mentioned here independent of the others. Still, according to my informants, it seems neither one of the first three were sufficient enough for them to convert without the others and also that the fourth reason of faith in Jesus needed to be connected to it. Based on my material, it seems all three reasons in themselves are closely intertwined and complement each other by creating a curiosity and incipient trust in my informants' inner beings and an existential quest and process. Over time, this evolved into faith resulting in a change of religion. Out of this, I understand faith as significant and highly necessary in order for a person to go through with converting and thus the ultimate and final religious reason before a person makes ones choice. Additionally, the faith can be strengthened after conversion through e.g. experiences of divine interventions and revelations from the Bible etc.

My informants faith declarations from the interviews indicates their new trust and faith in Jesus, resulting in their conversion and being strengthened after converting by Jesus showing himself present and reliable in the their lives. For three out of my four informants, the trust and reliability in Jesus especially applies in their lives after converting. Through their experiences of Jesus, their faiths are strengthened and their choice to convert confirmed. Contrary to the former aspect of divine interventions, this aspect has to do – not with the incidents creating faith in themselves – but rather what these incidents did to my informants' *inner beings*<sup>45</sup>. Kim refers to Lipner emphasizing the importance of faith:

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<sup>45</sup> See 6.3, p:91 for definition on the term *inner being*.

Julius Lipner in his 'personal' essay, emphasizes the immense importance of faith, saying that its 'shaping, growth and meaning are both complex and profound', because 'faith is a living perspective, a *constructive interpretation* of the world' (Kim 2003:197).

This is viewed more a constructionist aspect with the emphasis on the persons' belief and experience rather than the critical realist approach I used when writing about divine interventions.

All my informants got several divine interventions prior to or/and following their conversions, confirming their decision and strengthening their faith in Jesus and his reliability in their lives. These are excerpts of some quotes confirming this:

Kanti:

If there is anything I need in my life now, I pray to Jesus [...] I do not know how it is fulfilled, but I believe Jesus is giving answers to everything everyday. [...] I believe Jesus did many things in my life [...] (Presentation of Kanti, chapter 4, p:63 and 64).

Gaveshan:

Because I changed my faith, my parents did not accept me. That time, there were many things I needed to live. These needs, God gave to me so I could live in a good way (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:80).

Ishayu:

I told Dipok: Jesus is always with me and I can pray to Jesus and he will give me an answer. These things were very interesting and they were touching my mind to change my life to Jesus (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:44).

Anushri:

Now I know God is with me and He will solve my problems (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:38).

These confessions points to them all having faith in and experiencing Jesus active and reliable in their lives. From believing in and being open to spiritual interferences as Hin-

due to actually testifying to experiencing them regularly, was a big change to all my informants – although their experience varied to some extent.

#### **a. Trust and Faith Prior to Converting**

For Anushri and Ishayu, however, things came in a slightly different order than for the others. They both experienced divine interventions prior to their conversion. This can thus be viewed – not just as faith-strengthening and confirming incidents, but as reasons for conversion. Anushri testifies to this in the interview by saying:

By that Bible reading and by this prayer, I understood this: If I ask anything to Jesus, Jesus will give me everything. By this way, I am a follower of Jesus Christ (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:35).

Based on her statement, it seems her choice to convert followed her experience of getting revelations through reading the Bible and experiencing Jesus answering her prayers. Through this, trust in Jesus was sowed in her heart. Ultimately, this evolved into faith, resulting in her belief in Jesus as the only Savior and a rejection of other deities. Ishayu's divine encounter began a process in him as well. This process evolved into faith resulting with his conversion after hearing the Christian Gospel and being explained more about Jesus and Christianity. The divine intervention seemed to have created a curiosity and an evolving trust in him, but was not in itself enough for him to convert. He was in need of something more. Without the divine encounter, however, he would probably not have been explained the Christian Gospel and gotten faith in Jesus. In this way, it can be argued his faith in Jesus resulted from the religious aspects mentioned in the above, but faith being the most decisive factor for his final decision.

Now, my main thing is faith. The Word of God is saying: Who believes in my Son, he will receive eternal life (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:48).

A major change for Anushri because of this new faith was her former experience of the Hindu gods as distant, unpredictable, unreliable and absent in her struggles in contrast to what she claims is her current experience of Jesus as her helper and Savior, always present, close, reliable, answering, faithful, secure and stable in her life and through her struggles. Here are some quotes of her testifying to her faith in Jesus:

If I ask anything to Jesus, Jesus will give me everything. By this way, I am a follower of Jesus Christ (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:35).

[...] now Jesus is giving answers to all of my prayers (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:38).

Now, if I have any problems or anything in my life, then I just pray to God. Pray to Jesus, and Jesus is giving an answer to me (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:38).

Anushri now claims Jesus always answers her prayers, indicating a change from before. Whether this is an actual change or her subjective view of a change in her life can be discussed. The fact she had a search for answers and help that stopped when she received Jesus as the Savior of her life can point to Anushri's needs actually being met by Jesus in difference from them being unsolved and unanswered before her conversion when her quest was still going on.

#### **b. Trust and Faith Following the Conversion**

Most important to Gaveshan in his life now, is his belief in a living, present, but invisible God as the only Savior as opposed to his former belief in visible, but as he indicates: empty deities.

Before, I believed in many visual gods, but there was nothing more. Now, I do not have a visual god, but he is a living God, and he gave me peace and joy in my heart (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:77).

As a Hindu he worshiped statues and images of Hindu gods but experienced them distant from his life. As a Christian, he cannot see God, but claims to experience Jesus as living and acting in his life on a daily basis and thus strengthening his faith. As a Hindu, Gaveshan depended on Lakshmi and his Father to meet and provide for his needs. When becoming a Christian, being rejected from his inheritance, kicked out of home and leaving behind his former belief in Lakshmi, Gaveshan was left on bare ground. Things previously of importance to him, like money, property and status, had been turned upside down. He now depended on Jesus to meet and take care of his needs, and mentions several things Jesus provided in order for him to live in a good way.



Because I changed my faith, my parents did not accept me. That time, there were many things I needed to live. These needs, God gave to me so I could live in a good way. [...] All things, both what I knew I needed and what I did not know I needed, God gave me. God has never made me go hungry without food in my house. I always have food to eat and God is still providing for my needs in my everyday life. Before, my life was not like this (Presentation of Gaveshan, chapter 5, p:80).

These quotes show Gaveshan's reliance and faith in Jesus presence in his life. Lakshmi or his father was no longer his provider. Jesus had filled this position. Similar to Gaveshan, Anushri also had a change of dependence. Before, Anushri wanted to be dependent on one man or god to take care of her. She hoped for this from her husband or Krishna. Still, she felt alone and helpless in her struggles. After her existential search for truth and this person or god, she received Jesus. When talking about her current life as a Christian, she says she has *woti* in Jesus. 'Woti' is a Bengali expression coming from the depths of the heart meaning to always trust someone. Referring to Jesus, Anushri says she now knows whom to depend on and who will take care of her and with this declares her faith in Jesus.

Now, I am thinking: Someone is special who will take care of me. [...] I do not need to depend on some idol god or someone, but I know whom the special man or god who will take care of me is. [...] From when I started being a follower of Jesus Christ, I have *woti*. It means to always trust someone. This is a Bengali expression. Always I trust you. Always I depend on you. This is from my heart. This is called *woti*. When I am a follower of Jesus Christ, I have not this dependence in other gods (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:37).

Because Anushri had many problems, one might argue she converted to escape them. What contradicts this, however, is the fact her problems did not fully disappear after her conversion. She kept having some problems even after changing her faith. The difference to Anushri was not primarily a change of the outer problems, but rather an inner change. When asking Anushri what Jesus meant to her, she answered:

I believe Jesus is my Helper and my Savior, and that He is always with me (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:40).

Repeatedly she expressed her faith in him being present and acting on her behalf, thus showing himself reliable and relevant to her life both prior to and following her conversion. Before, she felt alone in her problems. Now she has faith in Jesus and states:

Now I know God is with me and He will solve my problems (Presentation of Anushri, chapter 2, p:38).

Anushri could not know what would change in her life and what would remain constant when converting. The fact she continued to be a follower of Jesus although her problems did not fully disappear, indicates to me, she must have had deep religious convictions and reasons for her conversion and that something must have met and fulfilled her needs. If not, it would have been expected that she continued her religious journey to look for other options when not finding it in Christianity.

At the time of Ishayu's conversion, there was a Bible verse of major importance for his faith commitment to Christianity. This verse touched something deep inside of Ishayu's inner being and convinced him of Jesus always being there for and always answering him when he prayed to and turned to him.

When Dipok taught me the Bible stories and from the Word of God, there was particularly one Bible verse that touched my heart where Jesus is telling: Always, I am with you. From the last part of Matthew 28. [...] I told Dipok: Jesus is always with me and I can pray to Jesus and he will give me an answer. These things were very interesting and they were touching my mind to change my life to Jesus. [...] Now, my main thing is faith (Presentation of Ishayu, chapter 3, p:44 and 48).

As we have seen in the fourth and final religious aspect I have presented based on my material, my informants' experiences of Jesus presence have created trust and strengthened their faith in Jesus and thus been of major importance for their conversion and their lives as Christians afterwards. Faith is not something visible, but it does affect a person on a deep level in that one often decides ones life course and actions based on it. Out of their conversions, they claim having experienced Jesus being there for them and answering when they turn to him, and that he even has interfered and helped out in problems and situations without them turning to him first – like Gaveshan mentions Jesus even providing for things he did not know he needed and Ishayu being met by Jesus without having

an existential quest prior to this. Having the aspects of the above in mind, I would thus say my informants' faith in Jesus is a religious aspect of great significance, prominence and decisiveness for my interviewees' conversions and to preserve their faiths in the time following – especially since they all have lots of statements testifying to this, thus showing the importance of this as a religious aspect from my material. We have seen in 6.2 how this faith has affected their inner beings by the changes occurring in their lives when it comes to values, actions, beliefs etc. Through my informants' experiences of Jesus reliability, they evolved a deep faith in him, ultimately leading to their change of religion.

### **6.6 Religious Aspects in the Conversion Pattern Found**

As we have seen in my discussion in 6.5, the religious reasons for my informants' conversions have been of great significance. The four aspects I have highlighted are the importance of hearing and understanding the Christian Gospel, divine interventions and ultimately faith in Jesus. These aspects can be put together in a conversion pattern – thereby showing an overall synthesis of what I have found. According to my informants, all these reasons have been necessary for the conversion to take place – although they have happened in slightly different orders. As we have seen in the former, I have found the religious reasons are affecting the inner being and thus a person's belief, values and actions. By hearing the Christian Gospel, a religious quest and trust in Jesus began. This quest gave way to questions in need of answers to further develop. When getting these answers and simultaneously a better understanding of what being a Christian means, the journey towards conversion was strengthened. Throughout this journey, Jesus proved himself through divine interventions in their lives. Through these reasons and out of a religious quest, they have gotten faith in Jesus, ultimately resulting in their conversions. To gather these threads in an overall synthesis, I would thus sum up my findings by saying the religious reasons show themselves to be decisive and prominent when it comes to the final choice to convert, since they affect the persons inner being and since these reasons correspond in the different interviews I have presented.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### 7.1 My Contribution

With my masters thesis, I have contributed to the field of conversion theory by traveling to a foreign country and culture conducting fieldwork and interviewing multiple people of different ages, genders and backgrounds about a sensitive subject like conversion is in the Indian scene. Out of this fieldwork, I have presented and discussed my findings in relation to existing literature on the subject. By looking deeper into this literature, I have gotten myself an overview over the field and found researchers writing on the subject of conversion<sup>46</sup> – not all of them about conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, nor from majority to minority. I found the places mostly concentrated on and most sufficiently covered by the conversion literature in India, to be places where Christianity already has increased in numbers or become a majority. I also found the focus mostly being on social factors behind the conversions and of mass conversions. This being said, Sebastian C. H. Kim – contrary to others – claimed there has been an over emphasizing on the social aspects in a conversion process and out of this calls for a more sufficiently research of religious aspects of a conversion – also from the perspective of individuals. Kim thus argues for the importance of the religious reasons behind a person's choice to convert.

I found it interesting and about time to study a part of India where I have not found any other researchers covering conversion from Hinduism to Christianity yet – namely West Bengal with an emphasis on Kolkata where the majority are Hindus and neither the majority nor culture implies people converting to Christianity, but where this nevertheless do take place. The goal I set forth was a) to hear what my interviewees reasons for conversion were, b) discuss these in order to see if they were mostly social or religious and c) proceed by taking Kim up on his request for a more sufficiently research of the religious reasons. Doing this, I further looked into my material to see what the converts mentions as religious aspects of their conversion. Out of this, I could see whether there exist commonalities between these aspects in order to make sense of the religious reasons in a conversion pattern. Having this in mind, I highlighted four different religious reasons repeating itself in my material – namely: The content of the Christian Gospel, answers to their questions about Jesus and Christianity, divine interventions and trust and faith in Jesus. Finally, I will conclude with to what extent I find these religious reasons important.

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<sup>46</sup> See theory overview in chapter 1.

## 7.2 Summing Up My Findings

What I found by discussing whether my interviewees have converted out of social or religious reasons, were not an absolute answer. I found, in agreement with other authors, there being a possibility for multiple reasons for conversion which not necessarily contradicts each other. Nevertheless, I would say the majority of these discussions pointed towards it having to be more than just outer, social factors behind a drastic and life changing choice to convert. There might have been several reasons leading up to the conversion, but these reasons are, as I see it, not equally important for the final decision to change religion and worldview. I especially disagree with those simplifying a conversion process as a calculated move to escape ones reality and climb up the social ladder, like Kalapura when referring to Khare in the book *Margins of Faith* (Kalapura referring to Khare 1984:30, in Robinson and Kujur 2010:84-85) without giving the inner, spiritual and existential reasons more focus of importance.

When looking at the religious aspects of conversion in my material, there were especially four reasons standing out that constitute my findings of religious reasons in my thesis. The importance of the content of the Christian Gospel was firstly the converts realization of sins in their lives and their need for a Savior and secondly, their realization of who/what the solution to this need was – forgiveness when believing in Jesus. The second religious aspect was to be met with answers and information to their questions in their religious quest for truth. The third was their experience of Jesus showing himself alive and active in their lives through divine interventions. Fourth and finally, the aspect of their trust and faith in Jesus as important for their conversion was prominent. The Christian Gospel and answers to their questions, but also their experiencing Jesus as relevant, present and interfering started an inner trust that ultimately evolved into faith.

## 7.3 The Importance of Religious Reasons for Conversion

Answering my final question – to what extent religious reasons are important for my interviewees' conversions – I will first and foremost conclude with religious reasons being of major importance since all four interviews mentions and highlights them independent of one another. I will also conclude with these aspects being more important and prominent than the social aspects in that they say something about what takes place on a persons' inside and because it fills a void and answers an existential search the person is carrying.

As an answer to Kim's statement that the spiritual and religious conversions do take place and only can be understood by looking at the converts' own testimonies of these (Kim 2003:198), I will, based on my material, conclude by agreeing with him in that there should be a greater focus and emphasis on the individuals religious reasons for conversion. My thesis has shown what the religious reasons in my material are and to what extent they appear important and prominent. I have thus contributed to the field by answering Kim's inquiry for more focus on the individuals' religious aspects for conversion and how these have affected the person's life.

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### **Empirical interviews June/July 2013:**

Interview with Bakul conducted in her home in her village, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Anushri conducted in the local church, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Tavish conducted in the local church, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Ishayu conducted in the second floor of his mud.house in his village, West Midnapur, southwest part of West Bengal, June/July 2013.

Interview with Raju conducted in his apartment (an apartment complex he and his brothers had built) in his village, West Midnapur, southwest part of West Bengal, June/July 2013.

Interview with Onella conducted in the local church, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Kanti conducted in her parents' home in her village, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Gaveshan conducted on the rooftop of the local church, Kolkata, June/July 2013.



Interview with Itkila conducted in my rented apartment in Bakul Tala, Behala, Chowrasta, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Chaitan conducted in my rented apartment in Bakul Tala, Behala, Chowrasta, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Nandita conducted in the local church, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

Interview with Tejal conducted in the local church, Kolkata, June/July 2013.

**Attachments:**

- **Transcriptions and/or Content Focused Transcriptions (available on request)**
- **Interview Guide from My Fieldwork in India June/ July 2013:**  
(See p. 30 for an explanation of the interview guide).

1. Please, tell me about your religious life (as a Hindu) before you became a Christian.
  - a. Did you participate in any religious practice?
  - b. What were the most important things in your life before you became a Christian?
  - c. What gave your life meaning before you became a Christian?
  - d. Did you follow any specific god(s)? Who? Why?

Worldview, values, priorities, what gives life meaning

2. Please take some minutes and explain how you became a Christian...
  - a. What time did this take place?
  - b. Was there a special incident that led to this?
  - c. Was it a sudden conversion or was it a process that took some time?
3. Please tell me about your life after you became a Christian.
  - a. Have there been any changes in your life since you became a Christian?
  - b. If yes, what has changed? What do you think is the most important change in your life?
  - c. What are the most important things in your life now compared to before you became a Christian?
  - d. How would you describe yourself now compared to before?
  - e. Is it important to you to help other people that are struggling?
  - f. Social engagement – Before you became a Christian, did you take part in any social work? Did you think social work was important?
  - g. Have your approach to this changed in any way as a Christian?
4. What does being a Christian mean to you? / What does Jesus mean to you?

- a. Does the choice to become a Christian affect your daily life?
    - If yes, how?
5. Have you had any difficulties because of your decision to become a Christian?
  - a. If yes, tell me more about this...
6. Have becoming a Christian had any benefits or social improvements for you?
  - a. If yes, what?
7. Does the Hindu religion affect your life now? (Are you still holding on to some parts of the Hindu religion?)
  - a. If yes, how/what?
  - b. Do you still participate in any Hindu religious practice?
  - c. If no, why?
  - d. Do you still participate in any Hindu festivals or celebrations?
  - e. Do you regard some Hindu traditions/practices and celebrations as cultural and something as religious?
  - f. If yes, what?
8. Do you still believe in reincarnation?
  - a. If yes, what is your belief?
9. What in the Hindu belief, do you think is important for the Indian people?
  - a. Is it important for Hindus to help other people who are struggling socially?
10. Have you had any religious experiences of a supernatural kind before you became a Christian?
  - a. If yes, tell me more about this...
  - b. If no, do you believe in the supernatural?
  - c. Do you know anyone else that has had a supernatural experience?
11. Have you had any religious experiences of a supernatural kind as a Christian?
  - a. If yes, could you please tell me more about this?
  - b. Do you know anyone else that has had a supernatural experience?
12. Does the caste system mean anything to you?
  - a. Does your family belong to a caste?
  - b. In your opinion, how does the caste system affect the social situation in India?
13. What do you want to do for Gods kingdom?