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Religious conversion and cultural trauma

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Abstract

Using the lens of cultural trauma, this paper aims to understand the emotional impacts associated with opposition to religious conversion. Following a theoretical discussion of the concept of cultural trauma, the paper analyses comments from eight in-depth interviews of converts to Christianity who have been Christians for at least five years and reside in Bangalore, India, several of whom were minors at the time of conversion. The findings reveal that religious converts face distress and trauma within interpersonal relationships with parents, relatives, friends, and community, which are impacted by their decision to convert. While the four relations seem to experience cultural trauma, the religious convert experiences cultural guilt.

Keywords

Cultural trauma, dharma, trauma, religious conversion.

1. Introduction

Religious conversion has taken centre stage in many discussions in India. Laws enacted in various states have made proselytizing illegal and punishable by law. In Karnataka, the law requires a "payment of a compensation of Rs. 5 lakh (on court orders) to victims of conversion by the persons attempting the conversion, and double punishment for repeat offences" (Parashar 2021).

In *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo (1993:21-22) emphasizes the importance of studying the context in which conversion takes place, to fully grasp the impact that both the micro context ("the more immediate world of a person's family, friends, ethnic group, religious community and neighbourhood") and the macro context ("political systems, religious organization, relevant ecological considerations, transnational corporations, and economic systems") have on conversion. He defines religious conversion as "a process of religious change that takes

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place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations" (Rambo 1993:5).

The opposition to religious conversion in India can be understood within the *dharmic* framework that shapes the culture and society (John 2017:175-187). The concept of *dharma* is difficult to define, but broadly it entails duties, rules, customs, religion, and appropriate behaviours that are considered morally right. The social and political context also presents a scenario in which religious conversions, especially from the majority to a minority religion, are frowned upon. Kim (2003) describes the tension between the Hindu and Christian communities as stemming from the different meanings that conversion carries for them. Some of these differences pertain to how volition of converts features in the process of conversion, the continuity of religious practices and rituals after conversion, and the structural changes in the socio-economic fabric of the land that conversion entails.

Kim sees the conflict as arising from how conversion affects the socio-cultural makeup of India, pointing out four impacts. The first is the communal nature of conversion, which "encourages different legal systems for different communities" and "separate electoral systems" (2003:4) within the country. Second, conversion disturbs the economically arranged caste system that Indians follow. Third, it clashes with the Hindutva agenda of "making India a Hindu nation" (2003:5). Fourth, Hindus view conversion primarily in "sociological and political terms while Christians view it in theological terms" (2003:5). Hindus also view the presence of Christianity in India through the lens of historical memory of the colonial era and find conversion to be a socio-political ploy (Kim 2003:4-5).

With the rise of religious nationalism in recent years, the opposition to religious conversions is primarily rooted in how conversion tends to dismantle a nationalist view that affects one's legal, economic, ideological and political-sociological identities. Since religious conversions shake these identities, they are seen as a threat to national unity and safety. To better understand how these identities are impacted at the national, social and personal levels, I have used cultural trauma theory to explore the significance of culture for the nation and the community/family, and how this informs the cultural responses to religious converts.

For this purpose, I undertook a phenomenological study that documented the trauma religious converts faced during and after their conversion experience. Using the trauma lens reveals the psychological and physiological impact of religious conversion on the convert and on those close to them. This perspective has not been applied to the phenomenon of conversion. Although studies of religious conversion have explored the conversion event itself, its political impacts, and religious persecution, none have investigated the trauma impact of the conversion journey. This study seeks to fill that gap.

Three in-depth interviews for each participant were conducted using the open-ended interview method. The interview questions revolved around the experiences the interviewees faced that caused them distress or trauma. The interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This method enables the researcher to focus on a particular phenomenon – in this case, religious conversion. It creates space for a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith and Osborn, 2003) where the researcher is 'making sense of the participant who is making sense of *x*' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009:37). Further, this research is idiographic, ensuring that each participant is given a voice before a general statement about the phenomenon is formulated.

Some themes emerging from the study highlight the challenging shifts in interpersonal relationships resulting from conversion. This paper explores the struggles religious converts face as they find themselves at crossroads with their culture.

2. Cultural trauma

Cultural trauma is a new research paradigm (Woods, 2019) proposed by Ron Eyerman. Since the theory is still in its nascent stages, it remains open to further research on what this term could mean and how it could be applied. Smelser (2004:38) defines cultural trauma as "referring to an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole."[2] He illustrates this with reference to the Protestant Reformation in England in the 16th century, when King Henry VIII broke ties with the Roman Catholic Church and declared that it had no authority over him. The new movement was a "fundamental threat" to the "integrity and dominance of the Catholic cultural worldview" (Smelser 2004:38). Further, Smelser says that for an event to be considered a cultural trauma, it must be "represented as obliterating, damaging, or rendering problematic something sacred – usually a value or outlook felt to be essential for the integrity of the affected society" (2004:36). He refines his definition as "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions" (Smelser 2004:44).

Eyerman specifies that there is a difference in how trauma is processed psychologically and culturally. A psychological trauma is an emotional wound faced by an individual, whereas "cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and

2 A difference has been made between cultural trauma and collective trauma. Cultural trauma affects a portion of society whereas collective trauma is a "horrific event" that affects society as a whole (Brantley 2022).

meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (Eyerman, 2001:2). In a culture, trauma is relived through the igniting of collective memory by re-narrating events that form the core of the collective identity (Eyerman 2001:1). For this to happen, a process must be carried out by "agents," also called "carrier groups" by Max Weber, who are part of the "collectivity." This group consists of "meaning makers" who are "situated in particular places in the social structure, and [they] have particular discursive talents for articulating their claims." They use "symbolic representations" of things that have happened in the past, present, and future to awaken in society a sense of action and responsibility. This process requires a speaker or a carrier group; an audience, which is the public, which is "putatively homogenous but sociologically fragmented" (Eyerman 2001:12); and a situation, which is historic and cultural.

In comparing cultural trauma to psychological trauma, Smelser uses the psychodynamic lens as proposed by Freud (avoiding "reductionism" and "uncritical analogizing") and argues that just like psychological trauma, cultural trauma too has methods by which it is manifested, particularly in the areas of "affect, cognition, and memory" (Smelser 2004:32). For an event to be considered a cultural trauma, it must be "remembered or made to be remembered." This memory, as mentioned earlier, must be something that affects the "integrity" of the society and "must be associated with a strong negative affect, usually disgust, shame, or guilt." (Smelser 2004:36) Whereas psychological trauma is primarily "intrapsychic," Smelser argues that cultural traumas are "mainly those of social agents and contending groups" (Smelser 2004:38-39). There is also a link between the cultural and the personal, in that the culture gives an individual a personal identity and a threat to culture is also a threat to people's identity. Hence, negative affect becomes "the medium that links the two (cultural and personal) levels" (Smelser 2004:41).

In short, as Alexander (2004:12) argues, cultural trauma involves agents (who are also carriers), an audience, and an event that is cultural and historical. Furthermore, this event (as re-narrated by the agents) creates "negative affect" of shame, permanent and threatening to the culture. In the process of working out this cultural trauma, the social group consists of agents who are divided about the trauma, some wanting to address it and some wanting to avoid it (leading to an "ambivalence" towards it), and hence they are always engaged in a "compulsive" behaviour of examining and re-examining the trauma. Consequently, "cultural traumas can never be solved and never go away" (Smelser 2004:54). This dynamic points to the indelibility of cultural trauma and the inability of the people involved to solve it.

Religious conversion often involves changing practices, such as rituals, customs, and belief systems, including faith in a different deity and the values that accompany that belief system. This necessitates a discontinuity from one's previous way

of life. Rituals and religious practices are usually performed as communities and families; hence, if one member of the group ceases to engage in them, it creates a division or disharmony, which hurts families and communities and their sense of unity. These features form the elements of cultural trauma. However, this paper's focus is on how the expression of this cultural trauma by families and communities affects the individual convert. In this sense, the individual faces a double trauma – one's own experience of the culture as a part of the community and what one experiences from the family and community on account of conversion.

3. Religious conversion through the lens of cultural trauma

Having delineated what cultural trauma is, I will turn to explicating how religious conversion leads to cultural trauma. For religious conversion to cause cultural trauma, it must meet the three criteria outlined by Alexander (2004:12): (1) the *agents* at play are people within the society for whom changes brought about by conversion cause the most disruption; (2) the *audience* is the people in society and especially the families within which conversion occurs; and (3) the *historic event* can be either the British Raj in India or conversion itself. For an event to be considered traumatic, it has to affect the very identity of the society or even families.

The East India Company and British Raj and their rule over India have left indelible marks in the collective memory of Indians. Although only a few of those who actually experienced the struggle against the British are alive today, in recent years larger-than-life statues of freedom fighters have been erected as symbols of unity and national pride.[3] Although the British Raj has long since ended and the nation has been free from foreign rule for 75 years, the "white man's religion," Christianity and religious conversions continue to impact the nation and its beliefs.

Undoubtedly, the 'collective' or the 'agents' guard against the blotting out of the memories of these struggles from the minds of the people of the land. What aspects of the British Raj, one may wonder, would make it a 'trauma memory'? Although Christianity arrived on the Indian shores with the coming of the apostle Thomas in AD 52, only during the Raj did members of the lower castes convert in huge numbers. "As a result of these political and demographic changes, many advocates of Hinduism began to assert that the growth of Christianity represented a serious threat to the Hindu faith, and could even lead to its extinction, as U. N. Mukherji suggested in his 1909 tract, *Hindus: A Dying Race*" (Bauman 2015:177). Mukherji perceived both Christians and Muslims as belonging to a "foreign" religion "with foreign loyalties, as the primary threat" (Bauman 2015:177).

3 For example, a statue of Sardar Vallabhbai Patel located near Kevadia in Gujarat was inaugurated on 31 October 2018, and a statue of freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose was unveiled on 8 September 2022 at the India Gate.

Bauman details how many elite Hindus in the early 20th century, like Savarkar in 1923, began to view "Indian identity based on *Hindutva*, or Hindu-ness" (Bauman 2015:178). This identity, which began as a cultural marker, eventually came to include a "religious identity" as well. Bauman examines Dayananda Saraswati's (1999) "claim that the attempt to convert another person is itself an act of violence." This voice of displeasure against conversion continues to be articulated in the present through the writings of Ram Swarup, Sita Ram Goel, Arun Shourie, and Ashok Chowgule. These writings may have contributed to an increase in the number of violent acts against converts to Christianity over the past decades.

In his paper "Conversion is an Act of Violence," Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1999) does not link Christianity to the British Raj, but he contends that the act of "aggressive conversion" is itself an act of violence. He laments that the act of conversion has wiped out many cultures, like those of Greece and Mexico, and that "where there should be a sense of guilt and remorse [on the part of those who carry out these acts of conversion] there is achievement and pride." He further remarks, "Humanity cannot afford to lose any more of its existing living religious traditions and cultures" (Saraswati 1999). The growth of non-Indic religions becomes problematic for him, as he makes no distinction between the Hindu religion and culture. For Saraswati, the Indian culture is "intricately woven" with its religion and hence "conversion implies destruction of this entire culture"; Saraswati sees it as a form of "ethnocide." Bauman uses the term "cultural violence" to describe Saraswati's argument, which accuses the Christian missionaries "of attempting to destroy a particular culture" (Bauman 2015:185). Since conversion is viewed as an act of violence, retaliation in the form of physical violence is justified as it constitutes an attempt to protect and preserve the culture and religion of the people of the land.

Despite the debatable nature of the inference that religious conversions are acts of violence against cultures, one may legitimately infer that religious conversion could qualify as a cause for cultural trauma. Alexander et al. (2004) point out that just as with psychological trauma, where an event is necessary to initiate a traumatic response that is in turn expressed through affect, cultural trauma exhibits a similar sequence. The narratives of several participants in this research included comments that Christianity was viewed as a "white-man's religion" on the subcontinent and thus bore the baggage of being linked to the British rule in India and the injured social psyche associated with its memory. Societies with injured cultural memories tend to push back against the past excesses with their own excesses, often engaging in exaggeration and villainizing the enemy within the social narrative, as illustrated in recent movies like *RRR* (2022).

4. Religious conversions, cultural trauma, and the individual

Rituals, customs, and traditions are pivotal in binding a culture together. The understanding that religion and culture are intertwined in India was evidenced in one participant's narration of the family and community response to their conversion. At the very core of the belief system that frames religio-cultural thinking are the principles of *karma* and *dharma*. Interwoven into this core are caste-identities that rigidly bind these two principles. Although both of these concepts are hard to define, at the popular level *karma* is the belief that deeds in this life carry consequences for the individual that occur in one's next birth. Similarly, *dharma* provides a list of duties that must be performed to result in good *karma*, which enables one to be born into nobility in the next life.

Religious conversion shakes these all-encompassing laws, which define for the community how one ought to live now to influence the next life. *Dharmic* rituals structure community life, giving people a sense that they are safe when these are performed dutifully, and a disruption in these activities leaves their collective future at stake. Understanding these processes enables one to comprehend the unrest that religious conversion can create in the minds of people and society. A *dharmic* worldview is palpable in the opposition expressed by families and communities toward their loved one being converted.

These responses do not leave new converts unaffected. Interview participants narrated the hostile ways in which families, relatives, and communities reacted to the news of their conversion. The opposition stemmed from certain beliefs and presuppositions. Some common themes that emerged were (1) the abandoning of ancestral faith, (2) conversion and the issue of volition, and (3) a shaming mechanism operating in the community.

Each of these themes has deeper religious and cultural underpinnings. As one of the participants (A2) reported, with conversion there are "too many unknowns" concerning the future. For A2, numerous factors were left hanging without a resolution. Given the impact of religious conversion on the community and social relationships, the specific outcome of each conversion experience remains unknown. This uncertainty about how it would affect the family, community, and the nation fills the families with apprehension and a fear of the unknown. Table 1 lists out these findings.

Below, I will discuss forms of opposition that participants mentioned in the interviews.

4.1. The abandoning of ancestral faith

Within the *dharmic* view, people are born into families and into a religion, which cannot be changed. Hence, a good practicing Hindu will follow all the rituals and

Themes Portraying Cultural Trauma	Comments Heard From Parents/ Community	Participants Facing It	Participant's Verbal Response	Trauma Response (Cultural Guilt)
1. Abandoning of Ancestral Faith Fear of having to face the wrath of displeased gods in an embedded world Shame of not fulfilling *dharmic* duties	1. Do you want to leave what your dad and your ancestors have formed, this whole culture and religion that you just want to let go of everything?	A1 (father)	1. a) To see that I was going away from the faith that we believed together as a family. It was extreme.	Guilt
			b) I am not being a good son. What am I putting them through!	Identity of a son shaken. Shame leading to depression
	2. Why do these people go there (to church)? We have our own temples.	P (relatives)	We would hide and go to church	Fear
	3. Why are you not doing (the last rites for your father)? He's not doing, he's a Christian	B (from relatives)	How will I face this type of situation?	Anticipatory anxiety.
	4. She (mother) felt disappointed because the faith of her forefather was not going to be handed down.	D (mother)	I feel kind of helpless, I don't know, I kind of run out of ideas	Helplessness leading to frustration
2. Conversion and the Issue of Volition *Dharmic* beliefs state that our fate is decided and cannot be changed	1. Did they give you money to convert?	D (boss in the office)	This is who I am.	Irked/angry
	2. Someone has converted you.	S1 (parents)	This is really me	Invalidated, Anxiety, Depression
	3. Someone has done black magic over you	B (parents and friends)	This is an emotional critique	Angry, Withdrawal leading to isolation
	4. You have been brainwashed	S2 (mother and friends)	They are trying to put me in a box	Angry
3. Shaming Mechanism of the Community Urge to protect the community from cultural "ethnocide" failure of which causes shame	1.You have become Christian! What kind of people!	R (Neighbors)	I had to leave my hometown. They (his friends) where my whole world!	Anger, Upset, Isolation, Shame, Sorrow at the loss of his world.
	2. If you had been in our own community and following our religion, you would have been married by now.	S1 (relatives)	Guilt-tripping and shame inducing conversations	Anxiety, Fear, Guilt, Shame, Rejection. Falling sick a lot.

Table 1

customs prescribed by ancestors and will teach them to their children. Children show honour and respect to ancestors and parents by adhering to the values and religion passed on to them. A2's father said, "Do you want to leave what your dad and your ancestors have formed, this whole culture and religion that you just want to let go of everything?" The fact that the culture and religion is "everything" makes the act of conversion a form of abandonment of all the sacred wisdom, values, traditions, and customs passed on from generations. A2's father continued, "Society will say, 'How have you brought up this guy? Without values, that he is now seeking another religion?'" One can infer that the father mourned a failure in his *dharmic* duties, which society had assigned to him as a parent, and the shame this failure entailed. The sociological framework of being in a "shame culture" is evidenced here in this statement. In an honour-shame culture (Nida 1954:150) like India, keeping the rituals and customs of the land brings honour to the family, and shame results where they are not adhered. What is missing in this equation is the effects that this dyad has on an individual. When this shame is communicated to the family member who has converted and when this person is accused of being the cause of this shame, a sense of what I call *cultural guilt* seems to result. I define cultural guilt as the *consequent guilt evoked in an individual for abandoning sacred traditional values, beliefs, and customs of a given culture.*

Several variations of cultural guilt emerged in the participants. The first is the guilt associated with abandoning the family's faith, beliefs, and traditions. This refers to the abandonment of a common belief system, with its rituals and customs, that they performed together and that bound them as a family and community. As a key factor that helps distinguish the in-group from the out-group, participation in rituals and customs indicates commitment to the group, which ensures bonding and co-operation between the group members (Watsom-Jones and Legare 2016:42-46). For A2, hearing words of shame from the father was a "very emotional" experience. He further remarked, "To see that I was going away from the faith that we believed together as a family … was extreme." A2 bore the guilt of abandoning his community's belief for a more individualistic choice. In so doing, the convert underwent a process of alienation from the in-group and was left with the feeling of having betrayed the family, the community, and the culture. Within the communitarian culture, this implied the guilt of being a traitor.

Similarly, P endured comments from her relatives (especially her father's younger brother), who wondered, "Why do these people [P, her mother and sister] go there [to church]? We have our own temples." These comments made P, her mother and sister secretive during their visits to church, as they feared that they would be caught. Their conversion eventually led to P's father being behead-

ed by his brother in front of P and her family. This incident has led to severe PTSD in P, with symptoms of nightmares and panic years after the event.

Second, A2 also bore guilt about his role and identity in relation to his father and family. A2's remark, "I'm not being a good son. What am I putting them through?" reflects the guilt associated with his identity as a son. The shame that he had caused his father affected his sense of what kind of son he was, which made him "feel bad." The shame that the father had to face from the community because of his son "seeking another religion" upset A2. These emotions of guilt and shame are typical symptoms of depression and a deep sense of despair.

For B, this guilt was reinforced when he declined to perform the last rites of his father, as they went against his new beliefs. B remembers, "They [his uncles] were murmuring. A lot of murmuring. … 'He's not doing. Why are you not doing?'" And then, "He's not doing, he's a Christian." The fear that this was bound to happen led B to experience years of anxiety as he tried to prepare for this moment. He said that he was praying about this situation and wondered, "How can I face it?" B similarly wrestled with the idea that "I'm not a good son."

Third, cultural guilt entails a shirking of responsibility from carrying the legacy of beliefs and values on to coming generations. A2 reported, "I am the one who is supposed to carry that [culture] from now on to the next generation, what my parents left in terms of their values." A2 recognized that his decision would affect generations to come, and thus he experienced a form of tormenting guilt. As he was the link between past and future generations, his conversion had broken the chain that connected them. In this sense, his conversion had caused a rupture in belief systems and practices, which took a toll on family ties and community standing.

D also recounted this experience with his mother. He reported, "The only thing is that I could see that she was disappointed. … The faith of her forefathers was not going to be handed down, because both my brother and I had become Christians." This frustrated D, who made many attempts to convince his mother to accept his faith with little success. He said, "I feel kind of helpless because … I kind of run out of ideas."

4.2. Conversion and the issue of volition

The belief that a person born into a particular religion or community is bound to the dharma of that group also restricts social thinking about conversion. Viewing the present life as a consequence of the karmic law operating in one's life affects how one understands individual choice or volition. Consequently, converts feel misunderstood when they attempt to explain their choice to convert, as they are often made to believe that they are not fully in their senses. Among the comments made to participants in my study were "Did they give you money [to convert]?"

(D); "Someone has converted you" (S1); "Someone has done black magic over you" (B); and "You have been brainwashed" (S2). All these comments tend to shift the agency of conversion to external forces rather than the individual's choice. This caused a dissonance between what converts believe about their own experience of the choice they made and the beliefs articulated by the family, claiming that they were coerced to believe in a different religion.

Two responses to these allegations emerged in the study. First, there was a psychological response of withdrawal and isolation. B perceived these remarks as an "emotional critique," feeling that people around him were trying to find fault with his decision. B's response was one of "silence," "bearing it," and then "leaving all my friends," leading to isolation. He further observed that he went to church alone, signifying a leaving behind of previous places of worship, which were symbolic of a faith once held, and now seeking a different place of worship where his friends would not join.

A second response to these allegations was the noticeable traumatic effects of invalidation, or the non-acceptance of the narration of events or emotions when expressed (Peter-Hagene and Ullman 2014:1418-1437). Linehan (1993:42) explains, "Invalidating environments [created by caregivers] contribute to the development of emotion dysregulation; they also fail to teach [the person] how to label and regulate arousal, how to tolerate emotional distress, and when to trust her own emotional responses as reflections of valid interpretations of events." In the case of religious conversion, the invalidation would be the non-acceptance of the convert's claim to have changed faiths without any coercion.

S1 felt this non-acceptance of the conversion experience as she continued to struggle to make her parents understand that she had made the choice to convert, being in her right mind and fully aware of the consequences of her choice. She remarked, "How much ever I tell them that it was not somebody else, it was me … they don't get it." This invalidation compelled S1 to state her experiences repeatedly, but with the same results. The emotional impact of invalidation could be either an internalizing of symptoms, which lead to anxiety and depression, or an externalizing of symptoms, which are shown though acts of aggression and violent behaviour. S1 exhibited symptoms of anxiety for having to repeat her explanation to her parents over and over again. "But for them [her parents], it's like if you are an Indian, you have to be a Hindu. Period." This repeated invalidation or non-acceptance of her experience made S1 realize that her parents would probably never "get it" and that this could be a long struggle.

D responded with anger to his boss's comment that "D has now lost his roots." He said, "This was a time when I was growing in the faith myself. So I would feel irked and irritated. Because he would have this way of subtly putting down Chris-

tianity and Christians." He added, "I was a bit irked because he wasn't fully understanding that it's my own choice and it is my identity that he was invalidating."

4.3. Shaming mechanism of the community

Religious converts face shaming from the community to prevent cultural disintegration and "ethnocide" (Saraswati 1999) from occurring. R had to face an angry neighbour shouting at him, "You became Christians! What kind of people!" in front of all his friends. Additionally, the tactic of isolation was used to evoke in the individual so much remorse as to pressure him to return to the religion of the land.

The impact of shaming and isolating is both psychological and physical. First, both R and S1 felt guilt for hurting the community. R went through a range of emotions, wanting to cry and at the same time wanting to attack the man who criticized him. He felt scared and alone, which was the effect of being isolated. R remarked that he felt guilty "as if I did something wrong to the community." He felt a sense of having committed a grave crime that endangered the community.

While shaming is used with the intent of ensuring that no rupture occurs in the community, the effect on the individual is a deep cultural guilt, as illustrated by R's comment that it was "as if I had done something wrong to the community." The individual feels this guilt inflicted by the community on account of a "crime" committed against it, which leaves the convert feeling alone and isolated. The consequence of this shaming is further isolation and loss, as R had to leave his town and move elsewhere. R said, "I lost my friends and everything. I was upset because these fellows [his friends] were my world!"

The second effect of shame is guilt over the sense of having hurt loved ones, as in the case of S1 with her parents. The larger community had taken upon itself the task of shaming S1 in public, with the goal of making her reverse her decision and return to the religion of their community and family, asking her repeatedly, "What made you change?" For S1, this was seen as "guilt-tripping and shame-inducing conversations," which were personally devastating for her. The internalizing of these shaming instances had bodily effects, as she reported that she was "falling sick a lot." Relationally, she found that she "couldn't trust people" anymore, which is a sign of traumatic impact.

Guilt is said to have both "affective and evaluative or interpretive components" (Kubany and Watson 2003:53). The families tend to display deep emotions on account of feeling betrayed by their children. The haunting question, "Why did you do this? Why, Why, Why?" as B recalled, is a painful echo that does not stop resounding and does not have any answers that satisfy or heal the hurt. In guilt, this interpretive component is about the self, that the person should have done something different. In religious converts, although the guilt was present

due to having hurt their loved ones through their actions, their convictions about their new faith did not allow them to go back to their old faith in order to alleviate the hurt. These unpleasant effects have no restitutory action available that could set the wrong right. This could explain why guilt became internalized, causing feelings of anger and bodily symptoms, in S1. As S1 remarked, "When you are put on the spot, it gives you that shaky feeling, because it all depends on the environment that I am in. So sometimes it would make me so angry. So I festered anger a lot in myself. I couldn't trust people. And with all this, I did fall sick a lot." S1 remembers crying within the confines of her own room after such encounters. Her responses included anger mixed with emotions of helplessness.

5. Conclusion

The instances described here provide just a glimpse into how religious conversion affects the individual. The *agents* within a society see religious conversion as a disintegration of their culture, values, and religion, which for them signifies the dying of a race. Cultural identity and a sense of unity and in-groupism fuel the battle to keep the culture from dying. The *audience* is the communities and families who see themselves as the custodians of the culture. The historical *event* here is the British Raj and the subsequent religious conversions. Caught in this triangle of cultural trauma is the individual, who both causes the perceived disruption and is also in the middle of the trauma of cross-pressures, experiencing guilt, anger, isolation, a loss of a world, loss of friendships, and anxiety.

The effects of cultural responses on religious converts have not been studied previously. Understanding these effects provides insight into the phenomenological world of converts and allows us to appreciate their unique position. Although converts may appear to disrupt the cultural milieu of their societies, this is not their primary intent. Recognizing this can inform state policy decisions and enhance inter-religious dialogues.

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