

Transformation of Identity: Socioeconomic Consequences of Religious Conversion Among Tribes in Telangana

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Abstract

This study examines religious conversion among tribal communities in Telangana, India, with a focus on its motivations and impacts on socio-cultural and economic aspects. Tribal communities in India adopt the dominant cultural practices of the region, including its religion. Consequently, tribal communities can be found to practice diverse religions depending on their geographical and cultural context. In Telangana, tribal communities predominantly follow Hinduism, celebrating Hindu festivals and worshipping Hindu deities. However, some tribal groups, such as the Lambadi and Chenchu communities, have undergone religious conversion into Sikhism and Christianity, respectively. This study seeks to understand the factors driving these conversions and their influence on the daily lives and socioeconomic conditions of these communities. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The findings reveal that religious conversion among the Lambadi and Chenchu communities has contributed to notable positive changes in their social and economic well-being.

Keywords: Tribes, Religion, Conversion, Cultural Identity, Banjara, Chenchu, Sikhism, Christianity, Telangana

1. Introduction

Religion is a complex and multidimensional human phenomenon that involves beliefs, practices, rituals, and other sacred elements. It contains a belief in a supernatural power, such as God or deities, and may also include structured institutions, groups of followers, and holy texts or scriptures that guide its believers. In his book *'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life'* (1995), Emile Durkheim defines religion as a "Unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, which refer to symbols, objects, ideas, or rituals set apart and considered holy". Religion often serves as a unifying force within communities, encouraging cohesion. It offers a standard set of beliefs and values that combine individuals. This perception of belonging and shared purpose can maintain social cohesion and promote a sense of identity among believers. Religion forms institutions, such as churches, temples, or mosques, where followers gather. It also provides sacred texts that assist as the respected foundation of spiritual and religious knowledge. The impact of religion is not limited to the spiritual realm, and it can also influence the various aspects of human life, such as social relations, traditional practices, and even social and economic behaviour. Max Weber's work, *"The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism"* (1905), discusses how religious beliefs contributed to capitalism's rise, particularly Protestantism. The world's major religions include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and many others. These religions have crores of followers and believers and substantial historical and cultural impressions in the countries or regions where they are practised. In India, religion is exceptionally diverse, with Hinduism being the most widespread and dominant faith. Nevertheless, other religions can also be found in the country.

However, religious conversion is also a common phenomenon. Most countries have given their population the freedom to convert their religion. It is a process where people change their religious beliefs, embracing a new religious personality or abandoning spiritual beliefs altogether. Religion adaptation can be a personal and transformative experience, which may substantially impact the social and cultural aspects of the individuals. Paloutzian et al. (1999) highlight how religious conversion affects personality change. They suggest that the conversion led to positive changes among individuals who converted from one religion to another. These changes may include changes in attitudes, values, and behaviours. This conversion has a long history in India, dating from ancient times. The emergence of new religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths,

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influenced each other and led to levels of conversion and adaptation. Jenkins (2019) sheds light on the mass religious conversion in India. According to the study, the transformation to Christianity was more common among South Indians during the 1700s. The study also highlights the conversion to Buddhism in 1956, when Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his followers rejected Hinduism and adopted Buddhism. The conversion of religion comes under the Freedom of Religion Article 25 (“*All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion*”) of the Indian constitution, where any individual or group can leave or choose another religion.

1.1. Tribal Context

India is home to diverse and numerous tribal communities with distinctive religious and cultural practices that differ from the mainstream cultural system. These tribes have unique traditions, beliefs, rituals, and connections with supernatural forces. As a result, various concepts have emerged to describe their religious practices, including animism, animalism, totemism, naturalism, etc. (Mibang & Chaudhuri, 2004). Ghurye (1959) argues that many tribal communities in India practice animism, a belief system that has characteristics of belief in natural elements, animals, and spirits. In his later work, he states tribes as ‘Backward Hindus’ (Ghurye, 1980). However, there is also a religious conversation among tribal communities, where most of the tribes adopted mainstream religions where they are leaving. Chaube (1999) says that in 1921, the tribal had two religious options: to include them under any religion for census enrolment, Hinduism and Christianity. He also discusses how tribes in Indian states, especially in north-eastern states, converted to Christianity. A study by Robinson and Kujur (2010) focuses on the religious conversion of various tribal communities in central India and their impact on socio-cultural and economic aspects. The religious conversion among the tribes leads to the loss of their distinctive traditional and cultural practices. Therefore, the present study focused on the tribal communities, particularly Lambadi and Chenchu in Telangana, who have undergone recent religious conversion.

1.2. Tribes and Religion (Lambadi and Chenchu)

Lambadi/Banjara: The Banjaras also Known as Lamanis, Vanjaris, Lambadis, Lambars, Sugali, and Sukalirs. These tribes are found throughout the country with different names (Enthoven, 1922). The community is under different categories in different states, and they are included under VJNT in Maharashtra, SCs in Karnataka, and STs in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (Bokil, 2002). The total population of Banjaras in the country is 5.6 million, comprising around 7% of India’s population. They are relatively isolated and live in remote forest areas, away from mainstream society (Lal, 2016). According to the 2011 Census, Lambadis are the largest tribe in the state of Telangana. The Lambadi tribe, according to Mr Francis, as cited in Thurston et al. (1909), speaks a language rooted in local vernaculars, slang, and expressions borrowed from various regions or neighbourhoods where the community has travelled. Mr. Cumberlege, also cited in Thurston et al. (1909), observed that the Banjaras are divided into four main groups: Charans, Mathurias, Labhanas, and Dharis, each further subdivided into clans. The community holds the belief that they are Rajputs, descended from Mota and Mola, who were caretakers of Sri Krishna’s cows.

The Lambadis maintain distinct cultural practices that distinguish them from other tribal communities. Their cultural distinctiveness can be seen in various aspects -**Attire:** Lambadi women wear a unique attire, including a ‘Katchli’ (blouse), which is decorated with mirrors, a long full skirt known as ‘Ghaghra’, and a ‘Tukri’ (scarf) to cover their head and face. Additionally, they adorn themselves with a variety of ornaments. **Language:** They speak ‘Banjara Boli’ or ‘Gor Boli’, also known as the ‘Lambadi’ language. **Festivals:** They celebrate festivals like ‘Teej’ and ‘Seetla’; these festivals play an essential role in maintaining their cultural inheritance. The traditional deities of the community include ‘Sevalal’, ‘Merama’, ‘Tulja Bhavani’, ‘Sitla Bhavani’, and others. **Food Habits:** The Lambadis also has unique food habits. They commonly consume ‘roti’ made of Jowar flour and eat millets like Jowar and Bajra. Additionally, they have another unique dish called ‘Salo’, which involves cooking meat in the blood of a goat or sheep.

A Study by Minz and Delo 2010, “Banjaras claim themselves as Hindus”. Similarly, Xavier (2012) found that the cultural practices among the Lambadis are gradually changing. The majority of them celebrate the Hindu festivals and worship Hindu deities. Some studies found that, from their origin, the Banjaras are connected with the Hindu religion as they are said to be descended from the Mota and Mola as aforementioned. It is argued that Marwaris, Mathura Banjaras, and Labhanas are descended from Mota and the Charan Banjaras, who found the majority in the Hyderabad region were from Mola (Hassan, 1920). However, according to Radhakrishna (2007) the Banjaras adopted the different religions of the region they have settled, such as Hindu, Christianity, Sikh and Islam. He found that the Banjara living in Delhi were converted to Sikhism, known as ‘Labana Sikhs’. A study by Singh (2014) explores that the Banjara Sikhs had travelled with Sikh Gurus during their trade, as Banjaras engaged in salt and other grain trades, which resulted in the conversion of Banjaras to Sikhism.

Chenchu: The Chenchus in Nalla Mala Hills are one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in Telangana. Their livelihood is often connected to the forest, and their traditional lifestyle heavily depends on it. Chenchus still engages in Hunting and Gathering along with agriculture. They speak Telugu, celebrate their traditional festivals and Hindu festivals, and worship deities like Lord Shiva, Lakshmi-Narasimha Swamy, Ontiveerudu, etc. It is important to note that the village we studied has witnessed a significant Christian conversion. A study by Ivanov(2014) and Battiniand Alexey (2011)explores the religious and cultural practices among the Chenchu tribes. Shameer (2014)found that the Chenchu tribes are adopting mainstream cultural practices and festivals and gradually giving up their traditional festivals.

2.Objectives of the Study

The present study focuses on the religious conversion of the tribal communities in Telangana, the Lambadis/Banjaras who converted to Sikhism and the Chenchus converted to Christianity. The study's main objective is to discover the reasons behind their conversion and how this conversion influences the socioeconomic changes in the communities.

3. Methodology

This study is based on primary data collected from four tribal villages/hamlets, focusing on comparing sociocultural practices between converted and non-converted villages for each tribal community. The converted villages were selected purposively due to their religious conversion, while the non-converted villages were chosen randomly for comparison in the study. The selected villages are presented in the table below

Tribe	Converted village	Non-converted village
Lambadi	Gacchu Bai Thanda, Hyderabad	Mangya Thanda, Mahabubabad Dist.
Chenchu	Mallapur Penta, Nagarkarnool Dist.	Mannanur, Nagarkarnool Dist.

The study profoundly relies on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of 20 interviews and 4 FGDs were conducted in converted villages, while 2 FGDs were conducted in non-converted villages, one in each village. The data has been analysed using a thematic approach, as the study emphasizes understanding the sociocultural practices and transformations within these communities.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Religion and Social Change Framework to examine how religious conversion affects shifts in community practices, values, and attitudes, influencing socioeconomic behaviour and opportunities among tribal communities in Telangana. The framework suggests that Conversion can lead to changes in marriage rituals, food habits, and work ethics, impacting economic opportunities and social integration. By comparing converted and non-converted communities, the framework explores how religious changes shape identity, social standing, and societal integration, emphasizing the connection between religion, culture, and economics.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1.1 Conversion to Sikhism

As mentioned above, the Lambadis are the most populous tribe of Telangana, holding distinct sociocultural practices and traditionally identifying as Hindu. However, religious conversion has also occurred among them, as some convert to Christianity. Notably, the Lambadis in Gcchu Bai Thanda have predominantly converted to Sikhism.

According to the 'Pradhan' (the Head) of the Gurudwara, his ancestors visited the 'Sach Khand Sri Hazur Sahib' Gurudwara in Nanded every year. A few years later, his grandfather left a bull in the name of God (Guru Gobind Singh), and he promised God he would build Gurudwara in their tribal village (Thanda). However, as time passed, the bull passed, and the generations changed. However, the tradition of visiting the Nanded Gurudwara continued. The grandson, the present Pradhan, took the initiative to build a Gurudwara, using his funds on the spot where the bull was buried in 2001. During that time, people in their village used to mock him, questioning his beliefs in this God, as they had many other deities to worship. However, he mentioned that after one or two years of building the Gurudwara, people gradually started coming to the Gurudwara and offering prayers. Witnessing this continuing change in the community, they constructed a larger Gurudwara in the village. They began collecting contributions from the other Gurudwaras to finance this project and built a sizable Gurudwara. As a result, in the present day, nearly 500 people have fully converted to Sikhism in the village. A similar study was also found in the Bihar state, where the Dalit migrants converted to Sikhism after their

prolonged stay in Punjab (The Hindu, Oct 7, 2023). However, the converted Dalits claim that due to discrimination in their native place, they transformed their religion to Sikhism as they believe that Sikhism would not encourage these caste-based discriminations like in Hinduism.

4.1.2 Conversion to Christianity

The Penta (Chenchu hamlet) is in a deep forest in the Nalla Mala region and is predominantly populated by Christians. The village consists of nearly 45 households. Among them, 90% of the households converted to Christianity over time. The village has a Church, basically a Hut constructed by the villagers and the head of the village, who took the initiative to convert the villagers to Christianity, is the pastor (Priest) of the Church.

4.2. Motivation behind Conversion

Lambadi: The Granthi Singh, also called Babaji or Pujari in Gurudwara, narrated their motivation to convert to Sikhism. In his words, there were ten Guru of Sikhism, namely Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amardas Sahib, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Har Gobind Ji, Guru Har Rai, Guru Har Krishna, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh. The ninth guru, 'Guru Tegh Bahadur,' was beheaded by Aurangzeb in a religious war; following this, the Sikhs sought the help of Lakhi Shah Banjara, a prominent and wealthy trader in that era. He courageously retrieved the body of Guru Tegh Bahadur and cremated it in his own house. Learning of the great sacrifices of the Guru, all the Banjaras in the village were deeply motivated and converted to Sikhism. Consequently, the Banjaras in Gacchu Bai Thanda believe they are descendants of the Lakhi Shah Banjara and converted to Sikhism. It has been observed that some respondents learned about Lakhi Shah Banjara after their conversion. In the other studied village of Lambadi, 100% of the respondents were unaware of the Lakhi Shah Banjara. They all practice their traditions along with the Hindu festivals. Another respondent named Sukhwinder Singh from Gacchu Bai Thanda expressed that their conversion to Sikhism did not happen a few years ago (i.e. in 2001/2002). They have been praying and visiting Gurudwaras since their childhood. However, they were not formally converted to Sikhism during that time. Belief is another crucial reason for conversion. Those who have already converted appear to have positive changes in their daily routine. This belief among the converted individuals has influenced others to convert to the religion. As a respondent states, *"My name is Lovepreet Singh, and I chose to embrace Sikhism six years ago. This decision was entirely my own and not influenced by anyone else. Having visited the Gurudwara for several years prior, I eventually sought to become fully immersed in the faith by undergoing the 'Amrit Chakna' ceremony. Since then, I have noticed a marked improvement in my well-being, having abandoned negative habits such as alcohol consumption and making daily visits to the Gurudwara for prayer. I have seen many others who have undergone a similar transformation and experienced positive changes in their lives."*

Chenchu: The Chenchus, who live in the forest, engage in foraging activities, including gathering Mahua flowers, which are traditionally used to produce liquor. Alcohol consumption has been a regular part of their lives, particularly during festivals, resulting in widespread alcohol addiction within the community. In response to this issue, the hamlet head, known, initiated efforts to convert the villagers to Christianity. However, Christian missionaries may also have influenced this process, even though the community does not openly reveal such details.

4.3. Consequences of Religious Conversion

The conversion to a new religion is expected to take along many changes or consequences for its adherents (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Similarly, the transformation to other religions among these tribal groups has brought about substantial changes in their cultural practices, including their food habits. A noticeable change is observed in their daily religious practices. For instance, Lambadi Sikhs wake up at 5 O'clock each morning to attend the Gurudwara for prayer. Similarly, at 6 p.m., they gather again for evening prayers. The other cultural changes may include the following

Festivals: The influence of the conversion encompasses their traditional festivals. At the moment, the whole village has refrained from celebrating festivals that were once essential to Lambadi culture. According to an interview with elder women, Lambadi festivals like 'Teej' and 'Sitla' have stopped being celebrated for more than 25 years. It has been observed that most people, especially the younger generations, are no longer familiar with the Lambadi festivals. For instance, when asked about the "Teej festival", a 16-year-old boy expressed ultimately newness, stating that he had never heard about that festival.

Likewise, the Chenchus have abandoned their historic cultural practices, including festivals and the worship of traditional deities. Instead of their previous customs, Chenchu community adherents now attend church every Sunday and are involved in prayers as part of their Christian belief. Formerly, they celebrated various Hindu festivals, including the popular Bouramma Jatara, which was considered particularly important among the Chenchus.

Attire: As mentioned above, the Lambadi community has a unique traditional attire; however, this traditional attire has shifted to Sikh attire. The women in the village wear sarees, while men maintain five important religious aspects. This follows the Kesh (unshorn hair), Kara (steel bracelet), Kanga (comb), Kirpan (knife) and a Kachera (undergarment). These are considered a symbol of spiritual discipline and show their faith and commitment to religious practices. All the interviewed respondents are wearing traditional Sikh attire. However, according to the 'Pradhan' of the Gurudwara, more than 500 people in the village, including women and children, have completely adopted the Sikh attire. In contrast, the Chenchus did not experience any significant change in their attire following their conversion. They continue to wear simple, functional clothing that aligns with their forest-based lifestyle.

Food: The food habits of the village have also been transmuted. Now, they prefer 'Jhatka meat' (where an animal is killed with one stroke). 82% of the respondents stated that they do not prefer non-veg food from other religious peoples, as they believe it does not adhere to the one-stroke slaughter practice. Additionally, 46% of respondents stated that they have entirely given up non-vegetarian food and alcohol consumption. Among the Chenchus, while alcohol consumption has substantially reduced, their food habits have largely remained unchanged, continuing their traditional dietary practices.

Language: The language is also changing, with an increasing preference among Lambadi Sikhs to learn Punjabi. This linguistic change is motivated by the wish to read and understand 'Guru Grant Sahib', the holy book of Sikhism. They believe this language learning strengthens their spiritual and cultural connection to Sikhism. All the respondents (100%) mentioned that they sent their children to Gurudwara to learn the Punjabi language.

Changes in Name: It has been observed that the villagers go through a name change after their conversion to Sikhism. Most (85%) interviewed individuals changed their names after undergoing the 'Amrit' ritual (A ritual where an individual formally converts to Sikhism). For instance, a person whose initial name was Bheema Nike changed his name to Lakwinder Singh, while a woman named Kavitha changed her name to Uttam Kaur. These are a few instances. However, many individuals have changed their names, especially the children and the younger generations. This name-changing ceremony happens mainly at the time of 'Amrit dharior' or 'Amrit Chakna', where the individual takes Amrit (nectar), the pujari or granthi reads the 'Guru Granth Sahib' and changes a particular individual's name

This practice of name-changing is also witnessed among the Chenchus, where the majority of individuals have changed their names after taking 'Baptism.' (Formal process of conversion to Christianity, where individuals are immersed in water in the presence of a priest or father as a symbol of their new faith). This change in name marks their spiritual transformation and commitment to their new religious identity. It is essential to highlight that these names were altered as part of the religious ceremony and are not officially changed in legal documents or identity cards like Aadhaar cards.

The Practice of Marriage: Historically, the Lambadi community observed traditional marriage practices for around three months. Over the past few decades, there has been a transition towards embracing the mainstream Hindu marriage system. The marriage practice in the studied village appears distinct from the other Lambadis. The respondents stated that in the village, they practice 'Group Marriage' (individuals who are ready to marry in that year do so collectively in a single ceremony) at the Gurudwara. The bride must convert to Sikhism before or after marriage by taking 'Amrit'. The Gurudwara leaders and Granthi play essential roles in performing the marriage rituals. 68% of the respondents expressed that they would prefer the Sikh marriage system for their children. Among the interviewed respondents, 62% mentioned that the other villagers were cautious when considering giving their daughter in marriage to the groom of this village. The negative perception of the village has been created as villagers have developed a habit of consuming alcohol and engaging in other harmful behaviours. However, after conversion to Sikhism, a remarkable transformation occurred within the community. This transformation led to the erosion of the wrong impressions of the village.

Similarly, among the Chenchus, who historically practised their traditional marriage customs where the groom ties a holy thread to the bride, the practice remains the same, but now it is performed in the presence of the church, reflecting their conversion to Christianity.

These cultural changes among these communities are not confined to these villages as they can be found in other non-conversion villages. Ramaswamy and Bhukya (2002) found that cultural changes, i.e., changes in attire and the practice of the dowry system, occurred in the Lambadi community. However, it is essential to mention that these changes observed in the converted Lambadis differ from those observed in the other Lambadi people. Vaditya (2019) also expressed that the Lambadi community is undergoing a cultural transition as it gradually adopts mainstream practices. However, among the Sikh Lambadis, the transformation has already occurred not toward mainstream culture but into Sikhism. Battini and Alexey (2011) discuss the religion of

Chenchus, their festivals, and cultural practices. However, these practices changed among the studied village as they converted to Christianity.

4.4. Influence on Socioeconomic Status

The study tried to bring out the impact of this conversion on the social, economic, and health aspects of the villagers. According to respondents, this conversion has brought about several prominent progresses in their lives and overall improvement of the village. The majority (80%) of the respondents from both communities expressed that, before their conversion, the habit of alcohol consumption and chewing tobacco was very prevalent among the majority of the villagers. Habits related to alcohol consumption and tobacco use frequently impede individuals' ability to work efficiently and maintain a stable livelihood. These habits not only affect health but also impose a considerable financial strain on families, as funds that could be used for essential needs are instead spent on these substances. Over time, this can create a cycle of financial instability and limit opportunities for improvement. Respondents from both communities mentioned the incidents of the deaths due to alcohol addiction. However, these harmful habits were transformed after conversion, leading to a positive behaviour shift.

The Lambadi respondents revealed during the focused group discussion that many individuals began concentrating more on their work and employment for earnings. It has been found that 38% of the respondents are self-employed, and most of them own tempos, auto rickshaws, and other vehicles. Meanwhile, 60% of the respondents settled on agriculture. Moreover, this conversion also influences the social status of the Lambadis. 52% of the respondents have stated that the non-tribal people previously referred to them as 'Lambadis', which might have carried negative connotations or stereotypes in the past, possibly perpetuating biases or discrimination against the community. However, now they call themselves 'Sardarji', a term of respect commonly used to address Sikh individuals; even the non-tribal people also call them 'Sardarji'. A respondent named Govind Singh from Gacchu Bai Thanda expresses, *"I take pride in the respect I receive from people in other communities, who now address me as Singh instead of Lambadi. In the past, before I converted to Sikhism, I was often referred to as 'Lambadi' at work, a term that made me feel belittled and discriminated against. Since my conversion, I have noticed a significant increase in respect, not only for myself but also for my entire village."* This can be seen as a positive change in how non-tribal people perceive Lambadis. This shift also gave the villagers a sense of empowerment as they gave up harmful habits and adopted a new way of life. They believe that this conversion had far-reaching positive effects on the individuals and the community, contributing to their overall well-being and development.

4.5. Interconnectivity Religion and Culture: The religious conversion among these tribes made a significant cultural transformation. In the case of the Lambadi community, adopting Sikhism resulted in profound shifts in cultural practices, attire, festivals, language, and even names. These changes reflect how religion can shape and redefine the cultural identity of a community. Moreover, the conversion to Christianity among the Chenchu tribe led to the abandoning of traditional practices and festivals in favour of Christian beliefs and customs. It is evident that religious conversion can be an element of cultural shifts within a community.

Culture and Socioeconomic Changes: The changes in cultural practices can directly impact socioeconomic status. For instance, in the Lambadi community, the transformation from traditional customs to Sikh practices led to a significant shift in the villagers' daily routines. The abandonment of harmful habits, such as alcohol consumption and tobacco use, allowed individuals to focus more on work and employment, thereby improving their economic prospects. These positive behavioural changes were integral to the community's overall well-being.

Religion and Socioeconomic Changes: Religious conversion can bring noticeable socioeconomic improvements. In the case of the Lambadi community, the construction of a Gurudwara within the village, with financial assistance from other Gurudwaras, facilitated religious activities and community development. Providing food to the community further strengthened the economic stability of the converted village. Additionally, the religious conversion to Sikhism among the Lambadis improved their social status by adopting the term 'Sardarji,' signifying respect.

5. Cultural Preservation among Non-Conversion Villages

In contrast to the villages that have witnessed religious conversion, other Lambadi and Chenchu villages, even residing near the town, have consistently maintained their unique traditions and practices. While adapting to some extent to urban life, these villages continue celebrating their traditional festivals and preserving their cultural heritage. The inhabitants of these villages have demonstrated a strong commitment to safeguarding their age-old practices and rituals. Their ability to retain their cultural identity within the urban landscape provides a noteworthy example of the resilience of tribal traditions in the face of modernization. For instance, a Megha Naik from the Lambadi tribe Mangya Thanda states, *"Our traditions are who we are. Even though the town is nearby, we still celebrate our festivals like Teej and worship our deities the way our ancestors did. It's important for us to pass down these practices to our children so*

they know where they come from.” Another respondent, Anjaneyulu, who belongs to the Chenchu community from Mannanur village, says, “Living close to the town hasn’t made us forget our roots. We still honour our gods in the forest and follow the customs taught by our elders. These traditions are our identity, and we are proud to keep them alive despite the changes happening around us.” This serves as a compelling illustration of the diverse choices made by tribal communities, emphasizing the significance of respecting individual autonomy while also underscoring the importance of cultural preservation.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The village heads engaged in the initiative for religious conversion within these communities, resulting in the entire village eventually embracing the new faith. This transformation can be attributed to the positive changes observed among the converted individuals. Notably, respondents from the Lambadi community claimed lineage to Lakhi Shah Banjara. However, many had limited knowledge about this historical figure, with no concrete evidence to substantiate their claims. The conversion may have been influenced by the Lambadis’ migration to Nanded, where they came into contact with Gurudwaras, ultimately leading them to convert. Consequently, the Head of the Village took the initiative to construct a Gurudwara within the village, attracting an increasing number of visitors who came to offer prayers, eventually resulting in the entire village’s conversion. Another noteworthy factor contributing to the conversion may be the absence of temples in many Lambadi villages, although some have Sevalal temples. The establishment of a Gurudwara and the practice of providing food to the community every fifteen days not only drew residents from within the village but also from neighbouring villages. Furthermore, the financial assistance provided by other Gurudwaras played a crucial role in managing the Gurudwara within the village. In a similar nature, Chenchu village lacked a temple. However, the construction of a church and the congregation’s Sunday attendance motivated the local population to convert.

In conclusion, the process of religious conversion within tribal communities brings about a complex interplay of positive and negative impacts. As the Religion and Social Change framework proposes, the decision to embrace a new faith often arises from various factors, including socioeconomic opportunities, infrastructure development, and the influence of religious institutions. However, this transformation also necessitates relinquishing indigenous cultural practices and traditions, which are integral to the identity and heritage of these communities. The positive outcomes of conversion include potential improvements in socioeconomic status, community building, and resource access. These can contribute to the well-being and stability of individuals and communities. Infrastructure development, such as the construction of religious institutions, can also provide tangible benefits. Conversely, the negative consequences involve the erosion of unique cultural practices, the potential loss of indigenous identity, limited knowledge about the new faith, and the risk of social division within the community. These consequences highlight the delicate balance that must be struck when addressing religious conversion and respecting individual rights and choices while preserving cultural diversity and heritage.

It is crucial to approach this issue with sensitivity and respect for the autonomy of individuals in their religious choices. Initiatives should promote interfaith dialogue, cultural preservation, and understanding among communities. Ultimately, the goal should be to foster unity, tolerance, and mutual acceptance among diverse religious and cultural groups, recognizing that everyone has the right to their beliefs and practices.

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