

CONVERSION AND GENDER AMONG DIASPORIC PUNJABI WOMEN IN
SINGAPORE AND TEXAS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department
of Comparative Cultural Studies

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Raishym H. Bennett

May, 2016

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SINGAPORE AND TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

“Conversion” derives from the Latin verb *converto*—to turn back or around, to change, to translate, to turn in a particular direction, to direct, to devote” (Faubion 2001, pg 23)

Why are some Hindu and Sikh women converting to Christianity? This research seeks to understand the drastic choice towards change that Indian women are making. Conversion changes the entire social organization of ones’ life. As Indian-Christians, women are not bound by the ritual and tradition of Hinduism/Sikhism. Upon conversion Indian women relinquish certain elements of Hinduism/Sikhism. I believe women are converting to change their social order and improve their economic opportunities. Specifically, I will be looking at Punjabi-Indian-Americans living in the metropolitan city of Dallas, Texas at the United Christian Church, as well as Punjabi-Christians living in Singapore at the Parish of Christ Church. I will focus on women from Northern India-Punjab, currently living in the United States (U.S.), and how their lives have changed through religious conversion from Hinduism/Sikhism to Christianity (Pentecostal). The focus is upon the religious changes that have come after conversion. There is also a large population of Punjabi’s living in Singapore, and the Parish of Christ Church is known for the conversion of Hindus/Sikhs to Christianity. The relevance of Singapore in this research is to create a multi-sided ethnographic study on conversion in the lives of Punjabi’s in the U.S and those Punjabi’s living in Singapore. Through my research in Dallas and Singapore I will develop a method of multi-sited ethnography. Conversions do differ from one another across different dimensions; however, Punjabi’s in Singapore and Punjabi’s in Dallas, Texas are from the same social group—regionally and ethnically.

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Introduction

“Conversion to another religion implies a transformation of identity or orientation in behavioral and cognitive referents...this could include a conscious shift in one’s sense of grounding” (Tong 2007).

This is a study of religious conversion and gender among diasporic Punjabi Indian Women in Singapore and Dallas, Texas. This research is relevant because it gives voice to an under-studied population of people. Scant research is available on Northern Indian women living in America and Singapore. Even less information is available on the effects of conversion and how it transforms identity. Understanding the comparison and context of the three religions, and the effects conversion has on women living outside of their traditional, cultural, and social environment will shed light on issues and challenges of conversion in relation to gender and stratification. I want to find out what motivates a Hindu or a Sikh woman to convert, and why Christianity is more appealing than other religions. Additionally, “when immigrants change their residence, they are free from the original social bonds...conceivably immigrants pay lower costs when they decided to change religion and participate in a new religious organization that is different from their traditional faith” (Chao 2006).

Topic and Field Sites

This research seeks to resolve how women’s roles and gender constructs in society change through religious conversion in the context of the diasporic immigrant communities that they belong to. This research was conducted in two main field-sites: Dallas, Texas and the island nation of Singapore. When I conducted interviews in Dallas I typically drove from Houston to Dallas on a Friday night and stayed in Dallas with a friend or family member

through the weekend. Only one of my Dallas interviews took place in the participant's home. This particular participant later became my informant in Dallas. I will discuss her in detail later in the discussion. The rest of my interviews were at a variety of random locations: parks and coffee shops were most common.

My research subjects were all women. I specifically designed my research to focus on how religious conversion impacted women. One similarity these women shared was their Punjabi identity; however, they hailed from different socio-economic backgrounds. I believe that one important factor in conversion is the opportunity to enhance one's social-economic standing. I will discuss this throughout this paper and analyze the effects it had on my subjects.

In Singapore many of my interviews took place in a church after Sunday church services. One of the issues I encountered in Singapore was that my participants talked to each other prior to the interview. For example, if I conducted more than one interview a day, (on many days I conducted at least two), the participants decided prior to the interview if they were going to allow me to record the conversation or not and if the first participant said "no" generally the others said "no" as well. While this did not matter in terms of the content I obtained, it did make the interview much longer and more difficult because I had to transcribe the interview by hand and at times, the participants had to wait for me to complete my record keeping. Unlike the participants in Dallas, many of the participants in Singapore were housemaids and did not have a home to invite me back to. Therefore, our interviews took place at the church. In Singapore church is where people socialize with each other. It is not just a place for worship but also a place for church members to gather after the service and drink tea and eat lunch together. Every Sunday after church was over, the women of the

church cooked lunch for the members of the church in the church canteen. After lunch, they served chai. This was the routine that occurred every Sunday from 9am to roughly 6pm people spent their time ‘socializing’. They would discuss the trials from the previous week; many of the house-maids would ask the other women for advice about recipes and how to deal with certain situations with their employers. It was a time to share their concerns and receive emotional support from other church women.

While in Singapore I lived with my aunt and uncle who worked very long hours. My uncle was a member of the Parish of Christ Church (PCC) from childhood, but has since found a different church for him and his wife to attend. I typically only saw them at night and on the weekends. I was given spending money, a bus pass, city map, and a local cell phone upon my arrival and was left to fend for myself. The cost of living is high in Singapore in comparison to other developed countries. Although my aunt and uncle are very successful by American standards, (my uncle is a lawyer, and his wife the owner of a restaurant) they lived in a manner that is modest by American standards. I lived in Singapore for three months in my aunt and uncle’s computer room. I slept on a cot and kept my clothes in my suitcase. I would often get invited to spend the weekend with participants who rented or owned their own homes. I spent a considerable amount of time with a young lady whom I will call Rebecca and her husband. Both are church members. I spent the last half of my trip living with Rebecca and her husband. Rebecca helped me organize all of my interviews upon my arrival to Singapore—she would often pick me up and take me to church, prayer meetings, and other social functions. Rebecca is a convert from Sikhism; her husband is a Christian by birth. Rebecca’s marriage to her husband is her second marriage. She was married to Sikh man previously and the relationship ended in divorce. Additionally, Rebecca’s husband is the

grandson of one of the church's founders. Rebecca holds a very prominent position in the church due to her marriage. She often leads the choir, and on occasion I witnessed her leading the church in prayer despite her status as a woman and lack of official pastoral training. Female leadership in the church is controlled, women are allowed to facilitate prayer or lead the choir however even these roles come with the status of being related to one of the male church leaders. Women are not allowed to preach in the church. This role is specifically held for men.

The access I had to Punjabi converts in Singapore was vastly different than my experience in Dallas. To my surprise people were much more receptive of my presence in Singapore than in Dallas. They were respectful about of role as an information gatherer. I found that Dallas participants appeared to be more fearful than Singapore participants about my information gathering. My Dallas subjects were more reserved, and despite my efforts to ensure confidentiality they maintained a very suspicious demeanor. There was fear that talking to me would put their families in India in danger. My pool of subjects was therefore less in Dallas than Singapore. Furthermore, because I was not a member of the church who attended services regularly, I was unable to thoroughly gain the trust of the women of United Christian Church (UCC). I attended church functions as often as possible generally every-time I went to Dallas, I would attend service or a prayer meeting. Hannah a friend of the Pastor and his wife was my saving grace in Dallas. She was respected and trusted in the church and she essentially vouched for me, which allowed me to obtain a few more interviews.

The commonality of 'Punjabi Identity' is unitary. However, there are regional and cultural differences that must be considered. The Punjabis in Dallas are more Americanized

and have adopted some of the reserved qualities some Americans are known to possess. I attribute this to the need for privacy. Additionally, the pastor in Dallas gave me a list of woman whom he thought would be interested in talking to me and essentially left me on my own. He took a hands off approach to my need to find participants. He did not facilitate introductions or meetings with potential participants. This played a huge part in the lack of cooperation from the participants. In the eyes of the participants, the pastor did not give his seal of approval. The regional and cultural difference benefited me in Singapore. People were much more welcoming and willing to share. My relationship with Rebecca and her status in the church also granted me trust that I would not have had otherwise. Hannah and Rebecca were similar in the authority and trustworthiness of the congregation. It is difficult to compare the two as they were both helpful in their own right.

Demographics

While I did not get to interview as many women as I hoped for, my pool of subjects was broad. My initial goal was to interview 20 women—10 in Singapore and 10 in Dallas, Texas. I actually interviewed 13 women—4 in Dallas, Texas and 9 in Singapore. I had a few women who were professionals and averaged between 3,000-4,000 (2,000-3,000 USD) a month in income; about 4 women total. I also had women who were housemaids and had very limited financial freedom. They worked 7 days a week with one Sunday a month off for church. They cooked, cleaned and tended to the children in wealthy individuals' homes. They were not able to take off after working an 7 day shift, as most of them lived with the families they were house keeping for. I also had women who were stay at home mothers. However, many of the housemaids were unmarried or their husbands were constructions workers or worked in other menial jobs. I was able to obtain a very diverse pool of subjects in both

Dallas and Singapore. The age range of women I interview was also broad there was a vast range in socio-economics. My youngest subject was in her early 20's while the oldest was in her 60's.

The ethnic groups represented in Singapore are Malays, Chinese and Indians. Majority of the Indian population in Singapore is Hindu; only 12.1 percent of the Indian population is Christian. The official languages of Singapore are English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. Singapore has a highly developed trade economy and is considered a global financial hub therefore the banking sector is a huge employer as well as biotechnology followed by energy and infrastructure sectors. The service sector constitutes for 75 percent of the nation's GDP which is third highest in the world.

In Dallas, Texas the ethnic make up is majority white. The Asian population consists of 5.9 percent, 50 percent of that 5.9 percentage, are Indian. Dallas is home to 21 of the Fortune 500 companies. It is home to American Airlines, Exxon Mobil and Dr. Pepper to name a few. Evangelical Protestants and Catholics are the prominent religions in Dallas.

Review of Relevant Theoretical and Ethnographic Literature

Conversion has historically been used as means to obtain a better lifestyle. "Religious conversion is characterized as a sudden or gradual process by which the self is radically transformed for the better" (Zinnbauer 1998). Indian women who convert from Sikhism and Hinduism to Christianity are no exception. Conversion allows for the convert to change their social status from caste containment. Although the rigidity of the caste system is lessened by immigration, there are lingering elements (Pearson 1999). In the book Hindu Diaspora, Pearson dicusses how second- generation immigrants do not want to be confined by caste, and choose to marry outside their caste. Through Pearson's assertions about caste, it can be

implied that neither immigration nor conversion completely eradicates the structure of Hinduism in the lives of Indian-Americans. They remain conscious of caste, in some cases perpetuating caste endogamy and in others resisting it.

Additionally, Christianity sets different standards for women inside and outside of the home. One early study on conversion (and why people do it) is theorist Max Weber, who specifically looked at Christian converts in India. Weber, (2010) believed that the caste system in India is what drives women to convert; he said 'moving up the social ladder' is one of the main factors in Hindu conversion to Christianity (Giddens 2010). The Hindu religion is based on a caste system. You live and die in the caste you were born into, unless you marry outside of your caste, which brings about issues of dowry. Dowry is paid to the groom's family and the money is intended to help supplement the groom's family income. Problems arise when women from lower castes marry into higher caste. The dowry price is based on which caste you are marrying into. The groom's family sets the price. Therefore, one of the appeals of Christianity to Hindus is the possibility of having a better life on earth and after death. Low-caste Hindus cannot reach 'paradise and obtain divinity' like Christians (Giddens 2010). The promise of salvation without caste-based discrimination is appealing to women who come from religions/societies where they are considered unequal to their male counterparts (Kosambi 1992).

Kent Eliza, like Weber, also looked at conversion in India (Eliza 2004). It should be noted that according to the Indian Census, approximately three percent of the population is Christian in India. This is a very small percentage when you consider the huge population of India. It also sheds light on the difficulty associated with being a Christian minority in a predominantly Hindu country. Lancy Lobo discusses the general feelings of animosity and

anger some Hindus living in India have toward Christian converts. Lobo says “India is a country for Hindus” (Lobo 2002). Nonetheless Eliza’s book titled *Converting Women* specifically deals with Indian women. Eliza, much like Weber, believes that women convert to change their social order, to escape the caste system, and marriage dowry (Eliza 2004). Although Eliza and Weber are both dealing with women living in India, their implications for conversion are relevant because they suggest a basis for why women convert from Hinduism to Christianity. Nonetheless, the focus of this research is on Christian converts living in the U.S. and Singapore.

Many Christian missionaries thought Hinduism was responsible for the negative aspects of Indian culture, and the only corrective response was the Christian gospel. The Hindu way of life stood for caste and exclusion, while Christianity ideally represented inclusiveness, brotherhood, and family. However, Christianity also came with a set of rules and regulations; there was a stripping of Hindu identity. The altering of the Hindu identity was not solely religious; there were elements of Hindu culture that were lost. The New Christian doctrine in India, for example forced ‘new converts’ to take on Christian names, leaving their Hindu caste appellation behind. Men were required to shave, and women to remove their caste mark. Idolatry was forbidden as well as any performance of Hindu rituals, sacrifices, or celebrations. The church’s rules were strict, and any deviation from these rules resulted in the inability to be baptized, excommunication, or loss of a month’s wages (Harper 2000).

Evangelizing was very much a part of the colonizers’ efforts to transform the ‘native savage to a noble’, so to speak. “Missionaries were engaged in the destruction, corruption of indigenous culture and social organization...whether natives wanted it or not, missionaries

were determined to make Christianity part of their culture” (Whitehouse 2006). One important example of research on evangelizing efforts around the world is the work of Jean and John Comaroff. The Comaroffs’ studied the Tswana people of South Africa. The missionaries initially appealed to the Tswana people because they had trading goods: utensils, weapons, military aide, and medicine. “As a result, the Europeans became a prized source and before long Chiefs were competing for them” (Comaroff 2008). The European missionaries used this ‘power’ to their advantage, they recognized that the conversion of the Chief was key to the rest of the tribe, and challenged the Tswana’s traditional beliefs and practices through the use of Christian-idioms (Comaroff 2008). The need to evangelize the “native” was therefore based on the premise of “heathenness” and “savagery”. However, the issues that generally arose from conversion in these circumstances involved not simply leaving one faith for another, but it involved the mixing of the two—traditional beliefs and new Christian values. One important question in conversion is the extent to which converts maintain traditional beliefs. I will explore this issue later in the discussion.

As a result, the Church—monolithic in definition; realized the difficulty in forcing a society to give up its entire belief system. For example, in relation to Hinduism in India, the Church ‘condoned’ elements of Hinduism. The Church ‘condoned’ certain elements of Hinduism because without doing so the appeal of Christianity would have dwindled. People were not interested in converting if it meant a complete negation of their traditional lifestyle; being Indian and being Hindu are directly related. Therefore, for example, the Hindu festival of Diwali was substituted and renamed the Festival of Lights, where families lit oils lamps, and distributed them throughout the village. Therefore Indian converts modified Christianity. This concept of modification was present with my converts as well. Another example is the

encouragement of ‘thrift’ to avoid debt; dowry was no longer an issue because it was against the Christian missionaries’ doctrine to marry outside of your religion (Harper 2000). Indian Christian convert’s identity is a complex terrain; there is a constant mixing of religious identities, socio-cultural identities and boundaries. This is particularly relevant for Christian Indians living in Hindu societies (Dempsey 2002), but is also true for those living in diasporic communities. Mixing of religious identities took place in both Singapore and Dallas. In Dallas there is more American influence, in Singapore there is more Asian Influence.

This research explores this identity in the U.S and Singapore context and how new converts co-exist within the Hindu and Sikh communities in the U.S. and Singapore. Despite religious conversion, there are some aspects of Hindu and Sikh culture that are not lost, such as language, food, music, and traditions during celebrations like *mehndi* (henna) on the bride’s and bridal party’s hands during a wedding. My research explores the extent of these modifications and their relevance in the lives of converts living in the U.S. and Singapore. It is not simply leaving one faith for another. Faubion describes “conversion as personal and communal, private and public...passive and active...conversion is an event and a process, leaving the convert both devastated and transformed (Faubion 2001, pg 24).

Zinnabauer and Pargament studied religious conversion and have formulated theories as to why people convert (Zinnbauer 1998). Their main assertion is that “the old self and way of life are seen as inadequate, and the only solution is to seek a radical change...existence itself has become the problem and a fundamental change is called for” (Zinnbauer 1998). This idea of getting rid of the “old self” that may have been plagued by the difficulties of patriarchy and dominance is very relevant in the lives of Hindu women who convert.

Conversion allows them to break the mold, so to speak. The object of conversion is to change, and transformation of one's life for the better. Another assertion of Zinnabauer and Pargament that is particularly relevant to Hindu women is that "converts tended to have problematic relationships with their fathers"(Zinnbauer 1998). Given the strongly patriarchal societies Hindu women live in, the ability to change social order and status is very influential in one's choice to convert. This appears true for Sikh women.

Although very little work has been done on Indian-American-Christians, specifically in the context of women converting from Hinduism and Sikhism to Christianity, there is research on immigrant-women who convert from their traditional religion to Christianity in the U.S. Enlightening here are the studies of Khmer, Hmong, and Taiwanese female immigrants who converted to Christianity in the U.S.

In the article "Taiwanese Immigrant Women and Religious Conversion", author Carolyn Chen explores the reasons behind conversion. "A woman serves her father, then her husband, and then her son...before becoming Christian, others told me who I was as a woman, I was never my own person" (Chen 2005). This idea of being able to break the molds of traditional cultural expectation of women through conversion is very similar to Eliza, and Weber's theories on why women convert; to change their social order. A woman becomes free from the cultural restrictions placed on her because they no longer apply. "Religious salvation is often at odds with traditional familial obligations" (Giddens 2010).

Because Christianity is officially, viewed as a "gender-less religion", the appeal is greater to women, and the end result is that women are afforded greater opportunities outside the home. Women use religion to "resituate themselves" within the context of the female American identity (Chen 2005). My research explores how far these theories apply or do

not, and how immigrant Indian Women use Christianity to “resituate themselves” and the ways they negotiate this in context of their lives; for example, the household, family, work, and education.

The article about the Khmer refugees written by Smith-Hefner offers some important insights. Most importantly, that conversion does not mean complete negation of one’s culture. Religion and culture are intertwined. Many converts acknowledge the pressures to assimilate and counter-balance it by attending churches that are predominantly composed of whatever ethnic orientation they belong to. Additionally there are still cultural elements that linger, for example, a service may be held in the traditional language (Smith-Hefner 1994).

There is balance between being an Indian-Christian and maintaining one’s Indian “ethos” (Thangaraj 2006). Although conversion allows for women to experience greater autonomy, one should not forget ‘where they are from’. The need for new-converts/immigrants to maintain cultural ethnicity within a foreign country is paired with feelings of marginality, and discrimination from predominantly Euro-American congregations. Thus the impetus to form Indian-Christian churches that catered to their Indian-ness as well as their Christian identity (Kurien 2012). Women converts feel that conversion allows them to get their foothold in American society. However, culture is also maintained by remaining in one’s ethnic group identification (Kurien 2012). My research also explores this sense of “home” culture, amongst U.S and Singaporean Punjabi women and to what extent do they modify or discard customs and the relation they have to my research.

Introduction to Research

This research examines the social status of women in terms of religion and culture. Women in traditional Hindu Indian societies are often widely viewed as second tier. This means they are subordinate to men in many aspects of life. For example, in traditional Hindu societies in India, the practice of giving dowry for women to be married places tremendous financial obligations on the woman's family, and has caused infanticide and abortions of girl babies; moreover, some unmarried girls often commit suicide to rid their parents of financial obligations (Saxena 2007).

Sikhism is not much different from Hinduism in terms of how woman are viewed. However, I will illustrate that the status of women in the Punjabi household is not religiously related at all, but rather intrinsic to the culture, I will discuss this more in my analysis. More so, as my research progressed, I found it difficult to hold to the generalization of patriarchy and found that this concept must be taken on a case-by-case basis. The concept of patriarchy is taught, learned and more importantly an ideology that a man must choose to prescribe to. While in Singapore, I found that the concept of male dominance varied from household to household, I will discuss this more in my analysis section.

Tong Chee Kiong (2007, pg 83) states that religious affiliations in Singapore are closely tied to ethnicity. Tong notes that there is a close inter-relationship between identity, culture, and religion. In Singapore for most, religion and ethnicity were essentially synonymous; therefore, religious conversion among individuals in these communities is often viewed as abandonment of their cultures (Tong, 2007, pg 81). Tong also notes that Christians in Singapore tend to be younger and more educated. In Singapore, I did find my participants to be younger than expected, however, the phrase "more educated" varies because the majority of my participants were housemaids, while others were much more

prominent members of society. Dallas presented a different situation. The majority of my participants were young and either pursuing a degree or had recently graduated from college.

Being a Punjabi is closely linked with the belief in Sikhism. Such a view is commonly held by most Punjabi Sikhs as witnessed in my interviews that I conducted as part of my fieldwork. In the context of Singapore, the Sikh religion is an integral aspect of one's identity. There is a prevalent stereotype of associating a Punjabi with one who believes in Sikhism. However, this is problematic as historically, there is a great deal of diversity within the Punjabi ethnicity and therefore, one can be a Punjabi by ethnicity and at the same time be a Muslim, Hindu, Christian or Sikh. Many of my participants expressed the great deal of shame bestowed upon them by the Punjabi Sikh communities because on the correlation between being Punjabi and being Sikh.

This research explores how women's roles in society change through religious conversion in the context of the diasporic immigrant communities. There were differences in methodology amongst my Singaporean participants and my Dallas participants. I will discuss these differences and reasons for them in the methods section.

Many Indian societies operate under a system of patriarchy. In this research, the term patriarchy is understood as "the subordination and oppression of women...the dominion of senior males over juniors (male or female), patriarchy is the governing of the family by an older male" (Uberoi 2003). This type of patriarchy is prevalent in the dominant social values and structures of the home. This thesis will examine gender imbalances, relations between men and women, and its implications for Northern Indian women living in the U.S. and Singapore. In my research I will consider the question, "How are women who convert to Christianity treated in the Hindu and Sikh communities they once belonged to?" I focus on

the present lives of new converts now living outside India, analyzing how the past has impacted them; for better or worse.

This thesis will determine to what extent and how religious conversion affects patriarchy for women of Northern Indian descent living in the U.S. and Singapore and how conversion changes their attitudes on issues, such as, marriage, gender roles, and education.

The conversion of Indian women to Christianity is on the rise. The shift to Christianity has been witnessed amongst Sikhs especially within the walls of the Punjabi Christian Church in Singapore. However this is not entirely true for Punjabis living in Dallas, Texas. The number of women I was able to interview in Singapore versus Dallas was almost three times as much. The converts in Dallas were not as open and willing to speak to me. I found that a lot of the women had moved to the U.S. alone generally to study, and in some cases to marry, but there was an overwhelming fear for their families in India. Some thought talking to me would put their families in danger back in India. I tried to assuage their fears by reassuring them confidentiality and explaining the interview process in detail to no avail at times. As a result, my pool of participants is less in Dallas.

It should be noted in recent years that the Prime Minister in India, Narendra Modi has made the consumption of beef illegal regardless of religious affiliations. Modi is trying to pass a law that would make India an Anti-Conversion country (Seervai 2015). There are currently five states in India that have anti-conversion laws, the law is said to make forced conversion illegal but allow voluntary conversion (Seervai 2015). There are also laws in places in states like Gujarat that force the potential convert to seek permission from the magistrate prior to converting (Seervai 2015). I was told a story about a woman's Christian nephew who married a Hindu girl in India. Before they could marry she had to advertise in

the local newspaper stating why she was converting and if anyone in the town refused she could not convert or marry the Christian man. On the surface it appears that Modi's goal is to make all of India Hindu, as the anti-conversion laws only pertain to leaving the Hindu religion not joining it.

This thesis explores why Sikhs and Hindu Women of Punjabi background convert to Christianity despite the strong association of a Punjabi identity with Sikhism and Hinduism. Secondly it analyzes how conversion to Christianity alters or shapes a convert's attachment to an ethnically given Punjabi identity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis will show that even though Sikhism and Hinduism beliefs form an important aspect of one's identity of being a Punjabi in Singapore and Dallas, Texas, the conversion of these women to Christianity does not mean an abandonment of their cultures. Moreover through the interviews and fieldwork conducted, I found that, despite being a minority group, these converts who were previously Sikhs and Hindus have retained their Punjabi cultural practices and re-integrated them into a Christian setting.

As an anthropological study, the method employed was to collect conversion narratives, conduct interviews, and participant observation. The purpose was to understand the converts through their descriptions of their everyday religious and social lives. Two important and recurring issues were identified and discussed at length during the interviews I conducted with women who have converted to Christianity. Firstly, respondents recounted their personal journeys behind their conversion and the issues they faced during and after the act of conversion. Secondly, there was a constant attempt to assert their Punjabi identity and to emphasize the retention of cultural practices associated with being a Punjabi even after

conversion to Christianity. Hence, being a “Punjabi” continues to be a core feature of their identity. They in fact proudly call themselves “Punjabi Christians”.

This thesis therefore will fill the gap in the literature by drawing on these two central themes that surfaced during my fieldwork as points of departure. The conversion narratives I collected will be used as the main source to account for and understand the conversion process for Sikhs and Hindus who have converted to Christianity. It must be noted that a change in religion is not seen as a complete change in identity. Therefore a change in religious orientation for the women converts did not mean parallel changes in cultural systems, but rather, a hybridization of belief systems and ritual behavior. With this in mind, this thesis delves into the negotiation and construction of ethnicity, in particular the Punjabi ethnicity among converts. It hopes to understand how the Punjabi Christian community negotiates what it means to be a Punjabi Christian. The emphasis is placed on ethnicity because Indians have a geographical identity. For example, when you ask someone if they are Indian they will generally reply with “no, I am Punjabi or no, I am Gujarati”. Where you are from in India speaks volumes to who you are ethnically, as cultural customs vary from state to state.

1.1 The religious and Political history of Punjab

As with colonialism in many other parts of the world, British colonialism brought western ideals and sought to change the cultural structure of India while exploiting its natural resources.

Relevant to this thesis is how India, and Punjabis in particular, handled these changes. The 1920s in India were a decade of religious conflict and change. Historically, there had been tension between Hindus, Muslims, and Christians and other sects, but the most sustained conflict was between Muslims and Hindus. In the 20th Century, this tension played a major role in the partition of India and Pakistan. During this time Hindus dominated the Eastern part of India, and Muslims dominated the Western part, which is now Pakistan.

In the 20th Century many Muslims belonged to the upper class, but as democratic thinking grew among the poorer Hindu classes, the Muslims began to worry that their way of life would be jeopardized. The British Raj was also working to develop autonomy in the country with the help of its Hindu party members. It was during this time that the desire to gain independence from Britain began to grow. Beginning in the 1930s, Gandhi's goal was to unify Hindus and Muslims and get rid of the British Raj. Many Muslims did not agree with the unification, and instead wanted India and Pakistan to be separate (Jalal 1988). The Muslims in India wanted to establish a Muslim state called Pakistan.

India was granted its independence, in 1947 but not without violence. There were riots, and many people were massacred. In 1947, a decision in favor of the partition was made and the two separate parties faced the difficult task of dividing the land in Punjab and determining the borders of the two countries. The Muslims occupied two main regions in the North on opposite sides of the country. These two predominantly Muslim regions were

separated by a majority-Hindu section. In addition, throughout most of Northern India members of the two religions were mixed together with populations of Sikhs, Christians and other minority faiths. It should be noted that during this time the Sikhs campaigned for a nation of their own, but their appeal was denied (Szczepanski 2015).

The land in Punjab was fertile and rich with resources. After the partition of India, neither Hindus nor Muslims wanted to relinquish the land and hatred and tensions ran high. The region of Punjab found itself in the middle of efforts by both Pakistani Muslims and Indian Hindus to keep the region. However, the border was drawn right down the middle of the province, between Lahore and Amritsar. On both sides, people scrambled to get on the "right" side of the border, or were driven from their homes by their angry neighbors from opposing religions. At least 10 million people fled North or South, depending upon their religion, and more than 500,000 people were killed of all religions. (Szczepanski 2015). Shortly after the partition Gandhi was killed by a Hindu radical because of his support of the unification of the two religious groups. This historical context sets the tone for the religious tensions that have been prevalent in Punjab for many years. It is a truncated version of the actual atrocities that took place. This topic alone can produce lengthy discussion in its own right about the division of Punjab and how this affected the Punjabis. As the researcher my goal of discussing this history of Punjab is to provide a context that explains reasons some converts were in fear of retaliation. There is strong association with being Punjabi and being Hindu. This very notion of belonging to a certain part of India with certain tradition, values and culture are very intrinsic to Punjabis. Hence there is a need to disassociate with individuals who betrayed this trust of being Punjabi and Hindu. While in Singapore in my host's homes, I often heard "never trust a Muslim or never trust a Pakistani". The remnants

of what happened during the Partition of 1947 are engraved into the souls of the people of Punjab and are being passed down through the generations.

1.2 Missionaries in India

During the 19th Century several Christian missionaries evangelized parts of the Indian subcontinent. Although success was greater in the Southern part of India, the rural North experienced evangelization as well. There are two views among scholars about the early origins of Christianity in India. According to one, the foundation of the Christian church in India was laid by Saint Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus. The other view would ascribe the arrival of Christianity in India to the enterprise of Christian merchants and missionaries belonging to the East Syrian and Persian churches. But it has been widely believed that India was St. Thomas' sphere of work (Tisserant 1957).

One prevalent belief I encountered throughout my research was the general consensus that Christianity was associated with the poor, and lower class individuals. This stems from missionaries proselytizing the poor. One historical example of this that affected my subjects was "The famine that never was". During 1918 and 1919 Pope John Paul II declared that the evangelization of Asia was the church's top priority (Harnetty 2010).

During this time Hindu fundamentalists accused missionaries of preying on the most vulnerable members of Indian society and buying their souls with education, medical aid, and economic assistance (Harnetty 2010). The term "the famine that never was" was used to describe how missionaries used material things to entice poor Indians to convert to Christianity. This "evangelization" has had lasting effects on India, and was a sore subject for most of my subjects.

During this time conversion was equated with colonialism and the missionaries were accused of “enslaving” the country once again (Harnetty 2010).

While this particular theme did not resurface during my interviews, the belief that Christianity is associated with a lower status did. In an attempt to further understand this belief I delved further into India’s history with Christianity. This particular incident is relative to my research because many of my subjects were born in the 50’s or later thus their parents lived in India during this evangelization when many people formed a negative view of Christianity. This negative aspect of evangelization was passed down through the generations. Hindus and Muslims alike resented the presence of Christians in India. Nonetheless the missionaries kept proselytizing in a way which Indian officials deemed predatory (Harnetty 2010). They preyed on the poor and desperate: promising them a better life through Christianity. These types of stories of the missionaries taking advantage of the poor and uneducated in India and other parts of the world reoccur through literature. These stories echo the sentiment that it was much easier to convert those of a lower status than those who come from wealth. The poorer populations have a longing for upward social mobility, power and money, which, was promised through salvation. The freedoms of Christianity opened a world of possibilities for individuals for whom becoming wealthy let alone moving out of a particular caste were impossible. My converts, too, expressed this notion that being a Christian essentially meant you could do whatever you wanted with your life as long as it was in accordance with Christian ideals, which were much more appealing than Hindu or Sikh values.

Missionaries in India became very powerful. They were imbued with the western ‘imperial sentiments’ and the sense of cultural superiority. Evangelicals in England believed

that it was not any inborn weakness that made Hindus “degenerate”, but the nature of their religion. For the Evangelicals, India was in darkness and would need the light present in the Western world-Christianity. Claudius Buchanan, another spokesman of the Evangelicals who had been a missionary in India, said:

“The missionaries asserted that since God laid upon Britain the solemn duty of evangelizing India, the Government should not hesitate to throw its weight into the struggle. They demanded above all open Government patronage of Christian education and vigorous warfare upon the abuses associated with Hindu religion” (T.C 1987).

Evangelicals and other missionary groups attempted to change the policy of the British government to make social and legal reforms in India. Instead, they were granted the opportunity to promote English literature and science and the ability to utilize money for education. The study of Indian literature was viewed to have little intrinsic value and it was in the British opinion that these works inculcate the more serious errors of the culture. The customs, traditions and religious beliefs of the subject people were considered by the missionary educators and their societies in England as a sign of depravity and futility. The remedy was the introduction of English education (Neill 1940).

Alexander Duff, Scottish missionary and leading educator whose ideas can be considered representative of the majority of missionaries in the Nineteenth Century, thought the Hindu philosophical discourse contained lofty terms in its religious vocabulary. In his opinion what they conveyed were only vain, foolish, and wicked conceptions. His task was to demolish everything that he believed was associated with idolatry and superstition. As a result, the encounter between Indian culture and Christianity was far from positive. The missionaries and civil servants were so prejudiced that they did not see any good in the

culture, but instead sought to change it through radical measures. There was a general conscious that Indian culture was primitive and needed to be civilized in order to accept Christianity. The missionaries were unwilling to understand the complexities and variants of the Indian culture. The missionaries' efforts were similar to other colonial powers and for that reason there was resistance. The local colonized peoples' were unresponsive to the 'civilizing' efforts, and thus formed negative views of Christians that would last generations.

1.3 Sikhs

This section will provide a brief overview of Sikhism. Prior to this research I had very little interaction with anyone from the Sikh faith, but during my months in Singapore I spent a lot of time in Sikh temples with my subjects. I want to begin by saying the Sikhs consider themselves to be an independent religion. Although many make the assertion that Sikhism is a combination of Hinduism and Islam, it is not. They are different and have a variety of ideals. Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world, there are approximately 27 million Sikhs worldwide (Singh 2014). Sikhism is centered around its founder and prophet Guru Nanak (Lopez 2002). It is important to note that Guru Nanak was a Hindu prior to conversion. There is an underlying belief that he wanted to combine Hinduism and Sikhism but modern Sikhs protest this assumption.

The word 'Guru' means enlightener. In Sikhism the word Guru is associated with the line of authority. There are 10 Gurus in the Sikh religion. The first was Guru Nanak¹ who was born in 1469 CE (Lopez 2002). When he passed away, his successor was Guru Gobind

¹ Guru Nanak Dev, often known as the founder of the Sikh religion, is the first of the 10 gurus of Sikhs

Singh. In Asian cultures your last name is associated with your religion. The last name Singh² has strong associations with being Sikh.

The tenth Guru asked all Sikhs to abandon their last names — which identified one's caste — and asked them all to take on a collective last name reserved for royal families to signify the inherent equality and nobility of every individual: Kaur³ for women and Singh for men.

The concept of caste within the Sikh faith is complex. It is believed that Guru Gobind Singh did away with caste inequality while others believe that he implied equality of all castes. Meaning that each caste had their respective role but no caste was treated better than another. All of the ten Sikh Gurus were born into the Khatri caste. This caste consists of traders and merchants; they played an important role in trans regional trade during the Mughal Empire. Gurus are not chosen by people but by God. The Sikhs believe God sends Gurus to the world to carry out his will. It should be noted none of my Sikh converts discussed issues of caste.

In line with caste equality the Gurus established the institution of *langar*, a free meal provided at the *gurdwara* (temple) that is open to one and all (Hawkins 2004). There was contention about converting to Christianity and maintaining the last name Kaur or Singh that arose during my interviews with the converts. Many of the Sikh converts did not change their name after marriage because despite their new religion they felt connected to their Sikh name—it was apart of their identity.

Sikhism centers on oneness and love, and both serve as foundations of the religion. There is belief in the collectivity of all humanity regardless of gender, caste, class, and

² Singh literally means “lion”. This is the name assumed by all male Sikhs. Most Sikhs continue to put their caste or clan names after the common surname of ‘Singh’.

³ Kaur literally means “Princess”. This is the name assumed by all Sikh females.

profession (Singh 2014). As an American woman in a Sikh temple I questioned this when I saw how women are treated differently from men. I did not witness any sort of ‘equality’. Men and woman sit on different sides of the temple-they do not mingle. The boundaries of where men and women can sit are very strict. Women do not hold any positions of authority within the temple. A woman is not allowed to enter the temple during her menses because she is considered unclean. I will delve more into this complexity in my discussion both from my vantage point and from my subjects’.

The Sikhs use a scripture called Guru Granth Sahib. The book is composed of writings from a variety of other Gurus including Muslim Sufis and Hindu Bhaktas. The Guru Granth Sahib consists mostly of poetry style writings that are memorized and repeated to music. Memorizations of these scripts are important in Sikhism. The prayers are written in the Gurumukhi script, the sacred language of Gurbani used only for Sikh prayers. Every Sikh is expected to learn Gurumukhi and read, recite, or listen to the required daily prayers, which make up the Nitnem Banis. They are required to do this five times a day (Khalsa 2015). Both women and men are required to do this and practice begins during childhood. Many of my converts discussed their ‘annoyance’ with this requirement. A faithful Sikh should be able to repeat them privately and congregationally.

Another very important part of Sikhism is the physical identifiers. Sikhs believe in five articles of faith-- *kesh* (unshorn hair), *kanga* (small comb), *kara* (steel bracelet), *kirpan* (religious article resembling a knife), and *kachera* (soldier-shorts) — these things distinguish someone who has formally committed to the values of the faith by accepting initiation. The most visible aspect of the Sikh identity is the turban, which can be worn by men and women alike. The turban was historically worn by royalty in South Asia, and the Gurus adopted this

practice as a way of asserting the sovereignty and equality of all people. For a Sikh, wearing a turban asserts a public commitment to maintaining the values and ethics of the tradition, including service, compassion, and honesty (Singh 2014).

1.4 Hindus

This section will give a brief overview of Hinduism. Hinduism has no founder or date of origin. Hinduism, the world's oldest religion, has no beginning--it precedes recorded history. It has no human founder. It is a mystical religion, leading the devotee to personally experience the truth within, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness where man and God are one (Venkatesan 2000). Hinduism has four main denominations--*Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism* (Lopez 2002). Scholars describe modern Hinduism as the product of religious development in India that spans nearly four thousand years, making it the oldest surviving world religion (Kulkarni 1918). Hinduism is not homogenous. Followers believe in Vishnu or Shiva, whom they regard as the one true god. Or they believe in '*atman*'⁴, which is looking inward to the divine self. Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments, and personal devotionals create a communion with these devas and gods.

However, most believe in the Brahman (the priestly caste). It is very difficult not to overgeneralize about Hinduism because while one might believe in one god, all gods, or none at all, they are still Hindu (Hawkins 2004). There is no set structure or formula to follow in terms of spiritual practices (Doniger 2009). This lack of 'structure' came up during my interviews. One subject in particular said that she never felt fulfilled going to the Hindu temple. She talked about how it felt like there was something missing; she was just reciting

⁴ the spiritual life principle of the universe, especially when regarded as inherent in the real self of the individual

prayers that meant nothing to her. Some of my Sikh participants also expressed discontent with this sort of repetition. The Hindu belief system is grounded on doctrines of rebirth, life cycle, cause and effect-meaning one's actions determine the outcome in life. Hindus believe in Karma and being affected by poor choices later on in life. Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved and, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained. They believe not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny.

Central to Hinduism is the caste system, Hindus live and die in the same caste. In earlier times it was against the law to marry outside of your caste, although some did it at great risk. There was generally less objection for a woman to marry up rather than a man. I have discussed the issues associated with marrying outside of one's caste in detail previously. The caste system within Hinduism was introduced by Vedic society because it benefited the lawmakers at the time. The upper caste found it convenient to maintain and perpetuate their religious distinctions which allowed them both political and economic advantages. At the bottom of the caste system in Hinduism are untouchables (present day Dalit). The untouchables are a group of people who are considered unclean. The type of work they do renders them so, understandably in a culture that places emphasis on mental and physical purity.

However, the issues my research subjects raised and that continue to arise for the converts within this culture is that the Vedic society recognized inequalities between men based on birth and familiar lineage and proclaimed it to be the will of God (Venkatesan 2000). This created stereotypes and denied many people the ability to grow, change or simply pursue their dreams. Hinduism is broken up into the following castes ranked from highest to

lowest: Brahmins, the priestly caste, who are the intercessors between gods and humans; Kshatriyas, the warriors, their duty was to protect the people; Vaisyas, the peasant and merchant group who tended the cattle and labored on the farms, Shundras, whose only duty was to serve the other three classes in any capacity and lastly the Chandalas (Untouchables), butchers or hunters, so they had excessive contact with the dead or blood (Venkatesan 2000). At one point in time caste rules were enforced by the government, however, this is not entirely true for contemporary India. The communities people live in have now become the enforcer of caste prohibitions.

Those who switch their loyalties from one religion to another are viewed as despicable and loathsome. In some cases they are envied by others who suffer silently, this creates a very unsafe dynamic between convert and her home society, community, or town. One of my subjects told me how her rural community in India convinced her brother to kill her because she converted, luckily she was able to escape his rage and move to Dallas. I will discuss this in detail later. This brief synopsis by no means covers all the complexities of Hinduism. It does however give an overview of the major concerns and issues and how they affected my subjects.

1.5 Pentecostals

This section will give a brief overview of the Pentecostal religion and its relevance to my research. The participants of this research refer to themselves as Evangelicals. Evangelicals and Pentecostals have similar beliefs and in many ways the term is used interchangeably. Both faiths place emphases on the historical Christian faith. For example things such as the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, deity and virgin birth of Jesus Christ along with His death, burial and resurrection, ascension to heaven, and His return. They believe in

salvation by faith, the resurrection of the Christian's body, and the reality of Satan, angels, heaven and hell. This is relevant to my research because it situates the framework of thinking and acting of the converts. As I discuss later the converts, speak in tongues, believe in possession of the holy-spirit and use Satan as a reference point for the bad things that happen in their lives.

The difference between the Evangelicals and the Pentecostals is that some Evangelicals downplay or reject the ability to speak in tongues, seeing visions and miracle healings. During my time in both Singapore and Dallas I witnessed a combination of the two. In Singapore my experiences at the Parish of Christ Church (PCC) were more in line with Pentecostal practices however at the South Asian International Fellowship (SAIF) Church followed closely to the Evangelical practices and was less charismatic. Even the narratives from the individuals at SAIF were less charismatic in the accounts of conversion—they were not attacked by daemons or challenged by Satan. The process was more fluid and appeared easier. I will discuss the relevance of these implications and how they affected the participants later.

2.1 Punjabi Christians

It's imperative that I situate the phenomenon of conversion of Sikhs and Hindus to Christianity before I begin analyzing my interviews and collected data. These converts use a self-referential term, "Punjabi Christians" to label and identify themselves. "Punjabi Christians" then denotes a category of individuals who are ethnically, regionally and linguistically Punjabi with a Christian religious affiliation. I will discuss this personal significance in detail throughout the paper. However, the term "Punjabi Christian" is used as a means to express a communal identity. A large segment of the Punjabi Christian community in both Dallas and Singapore are first or second-generation Christian converts. These converts come from varied religious backgrounds. Most were previously Hindus or Sikhs. The Punjabi culture is rich with history-- the Punjab state lies in the northern part of India, sharing a border with Pakistan. Punjabi culture was historically influenced by British invaders, as well as its Pakistani neighbors, thus resulting in an amalgamation of factors having as strong effect on Punjabis from different religious backgrounds.

Punjabi identity is ethnic and linguistic. This study is about people with the same ethnic identity but religious diversity. There are etic units of ethnicity like membership, history, tradition, land, and language. To be Punjabi one must have ancestral origins to the geographical region. Punjabis also share commonalities in dress, kinship patterns, and cultural concepts.

Due to limitations of space, time and resources, in this thesis I focus only on Sikh and Hindu women who have embraced Christianity. The Punjabi Christians are a minority within a minority group in Singapore and Dallas. The cultural markers of being Punjabi are often conflated with religious associations of being Sikh. The heritage and cultural traditions of

Punjabis are often seen as being unique to Sikhs. This then has many implications for those who convert but want to retain their Punjabi identity.

2.2 Punjabi Churches in Singapore

Currently, there are three Punjabi Churches in Singapore. The “Parish of Christ Church” (PCC from here onward) and the “South Asian International Fellowship Church” (SAIF from here onward). The SAIF was founded by a former member of the Khush Khabri church which is the third Punjabi Christian Church in Singapore. I did not do any research at the Khush Khabri church it is relevant to this research because it was the second Punjabi Church in Singapore and the Pastor at SAIF left Khush Khabri to start his own church.

PCC is where I spent the majority of my time because the women from this church were most willing to participate in the interview process. Most of the converts at PCC are from a Sikh background. At SAIF I encountered more converts from a Hindu background; Punjabi converts founded both churches. The PCC is the older of the two churches in Singapore. PCC is one of the oldest churches in Singapore and the Punjabi congregation has been a part of PCC since 1941. PCC is currently home to two different Indian congregations. There is Malayalam language service held every Sunday at 6am at PCC. The Punjabi service begins at 8am.

The Punjabi congregation at PCC has been part of the Church since the founding of the church, which dates back to pre-war days in 1941. The PCC sits in a gated parking lot that it shares with another church and a school. The PCC building has floor to ceiling windows around the entire building except for the front door, which is solid wood. Above the door on top of the building is a huge white cross. You can enter the building from all 4 sides and members do. The windows let in a lot of natural sunlight. The lighting in the building is

minimal. I recall on Sunday where it was storming and the sun was behind a cloud, which left the inside of the church dim. I was constantly stepping over shoes or gently sliding them out of the way to get into the church. At PCC you must remove your shoes before entering. The inside of the PCC is bare, there are no decorations but it does not feel empty because of the floor to ceilings windows that surround the building. There are pews for the patrons, pulpit for the pastor and sections to the right and left of the pulpit for the different instruments and their players, and the choir.

The congregation at PCC once had about 200 members, but this dwindled progressively due to members geographically relocating for the purposes of work. Many of the elderly members have died. While I was in Singapore the daily attendance at PCC Sunday Worship was approximately 30. However, Rebecca told me that during religious holidays like Christmas and Easter all the members come to worship and attendance can exceed 200 people. I also spent a lot of time in the church office looking through photos and records and the church photograph for PCC in 2013 had 250 people in it. Therefore, while membership is relatively high, their attendance rate is low. I believe this can be attributed to many things. One important factor is that most of the members who attend the church are from the working class; most of them work on Sundays. Thus, they are unable to attend church on Sundays and usually have to get special permission for Christian holidays to attend church. Growing the church population is based on biological reproduction and cost of living. Because Singapore is very expensive to live in, there is a need for the two income family. Both husband and wife have to work to make ends meet. The younger generation have coined a term “DINS” (double income no sex) (Gannon 2010). The younger generation

is not reproducing simply because they work too much, and in their own words are ‘too tired to have sex’ after working long hours.

The congregation at PCC is predominantly of Punjabi ethnic background with small numbers of Hindi and Urdu speaking believers who also understand Punjabi. PCC is the only church where the mother tongue, Punjabi, is mainly used for the worship. However the current Pastor at PCC is Malayalam and in fact does not speak Punjabi. His preaching’s are a combination of English and speaking in tongues; he therefore relies on members to translate in Punjabi when it’s necessary. The musical worship in Punjabi is a way of maintaining the culture (culture without language is lost).

The church does a good job at preserving the culture through language and through food. After every service the elderly women of the church cook a traditional Indian meal in the church canteen and all the members eat. They make chicken curry, chapatti, lentils, Punjabi desserts, and they drink chai. It is also important to note that PCC emphasizes modesty for women. Women are required to cover their head and remove their shoes prior to entering the sanctuary, as mentioned men do not have to cover their head but they too must remove their shoes. The importance of head covering is biblical; a woman’s hair is considered her crowning glory and it is not for the world to see (KJV, 1 Corinthians 11:6). However, most women do not follow this ‘rule’ outside of the sanctuary in their day-to-day lives.

The importance of a Punjabi identity is reinforced through the singing of *zaboors* (Punjabi songs for worship), the use of instruments such as the *dhol* (drums), *waja* (harmonium), as well as in the language of communication, which is Punjabi. The usual theme in the *zaboors* is praise and thankfulness most of the songs are taken from the bible.

Main Khush Hoya Jadon Mainu Akan Lage, Keh Aoa Yahowah Da Ghar Chaleya was taken from Psalm 122 the translation is—I was glad when they said unto me let us go to the house of the lord. Another *zaboore*, *Yesu hai zindagi, tu hai bandagi, tu hamara khuda, sacha hi ha tuhi, tu zindagi ka raasta* translation is-- Jesus you are my life, you are my God, you are the truth and the way. The PCC also reinforces its Punjabi identity by dress; all the members wear traditional Indian dress to church on Sunday. Men and women generally wore the traditional *salwar kameez* and for special events like weddings or engagements, women would wear something fancier like a *langa* or *sari*. A *salwar kameez* is a long tunic top with loose fitting pants and is worn by both men and women. A *langa* is a long, embroidered and pleated skirt with a short top. A *sari* is 6 yards of material that is wrapped around the body.

Many of the Punjabi Christians at PCC are first-generation Christians. The first-generation Christians whom I interviewed had converted mainly through marriage. The history of the Punjabi is a complex one that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Relevant to my research are the religious struggles of the region, as mentioned in the first chapter. The 20th century in India was a tumultuous time for religion and politics. The historical significance of the partition of India was not lost on my subjects. While most of them were not alive during the partition, many of them experienced the lasting effects of the religious prejudices that were inflicted upon their family members during that time.

The SAIF church is different from the PCC church in terms of formalities. The congregation is Asian from a variety of backgrounds though Indians are the dominant group. The service is held in English and all worship songs are sung in English as well. The church is in the conference room of an office building so the feeling of being in a sanctuary is lost, for me at least. There are no decorations except for an image of the cross, which is projected

onto a screen. I would compare the looks of SAIF to any college lecture hall—it is simply just a room. There are no cultural formalities like taking off your shoes or covering your head. Church-goers were dressed in western styled clothes, many in pants, even the women. There is not a communal identity like there is at PCC. Although many of the members are Indian and the Church was founded by a Punjabi, the congregation is mixed. One of the biggest similarities is the feeding of members after church. Because SAIF is held in a business building, there is not a canteen for them to cook so they order Indian food to feed the members after service. The members eat inside a parking garage with tables and chairs set out.

2.3 Punjabi Church in Dallas, Texas

The Punjabi Church in Dallas is called the United Christian Church (UCC). This church is a combination of the PCC and any traditional American-style Christian church. The church has a formal dress code similar to PCC in Singapore. Modesty is expected of both men and women as they enter the church to worship. Women either wear the traditional Indian attire similar to the women in the PCC. The women wear *salwar kamize* for less formal occasions and saris for more formal events or they wear American style clothes. However, the younger generation tends to come in more westernized style dress while the older generation wear the traditional clothing. Only during special occasions like Christmas or Easter did I notice the younger demographic in traditional Indian dress. The congregation is approximately 150. The church sits on the side of the freeway. It has a triangle shaped entrance with a cross on top of the building. Upon entering the front of the building, on the right side are the restrooms and Pastor's office and on the left are the swinging doors that enter into the sanctuary. Attached to the church is a huge gymnasium where they hold

Christmas, and Easter functions, as well as a meeting place to serve food and eat together during special occasions.

The Pastor at UCC alternates between Punjabi and English during the service. The service is held primarily in English, but I witnessed on numerous occasions when he got excited and he starts speaking in Punjabi. The Lord's Prayer is also recited in Punjabi. Most of the members are from Punjab and speak Punjabi. The congregation is made of individuals with direct ties to India and Singapore. Although most of the converts at UCC were not first-generation Christians, the few I was able to interview were. The others were born into the faith of their parents who converted while they were young. I did not spend much time talking to these people because their conversion narratives were not relevant to my research. My research focused on first-generation converts. This church service also did not go on for several hours. In Singapore, Church is part of one's social life. In Dallas the use of time is much more efficient. I believe this has to do with how fast paced life is in the U.S. The service started at 10:30 am, and by 12:30 the parking lot was clear and people were headed home. Food is not served after worship like it is in Singapore. Only on special occasions such as Christmas everyone gathers in the church gym to eat food prepared by members of the congregation. All previous examples are very brief insights into the church dynamics.

2.4 Methodology

Given the small size of the Punjabi Christian population as well as the circumstances whereby many of these converts are spread all over the world, I chose instead to focus on two Punjabi Churches in Singapore where I had connections because of family, and one Punjabi Church in Dallas, Texas. This church is in close proximity to Houston, Texas, where I live. The Punjabi Christians were generally very receptive of my presence and were willing to

engage in discussions. From the beginning, I had made known my identity and purpose as a researcher in the field.

I started building rapport with the Punjabi Christians by attending and taking part in their church services on Sundays. During the initial participant-observation sessions, I tried to socialize with the members of the church and refrained from asking too many questions related to my research study. Only after getting to know them better and learning about their background from the church leaders, I sought their permission to conduct formal interviews. By spending time with the Punjabi Christians, I was able to gain insight into how these people perceived their own realities after conversion. This process was more difficult for me in Dallas than Singapore. In Singapore Rebecca arranged all of my interviews for me. I met Rebecca through a family member. My uncle was visiting the U.S when I began embarking on my master thesis journey. He told me he knew someone who would be helpful and when he returned to Singapore he made arrangements for Rebecca and I to meet and speak. Prior to my arrival she and I corresponded through text message. She wanted to make sure my time was used wisely since I was only going to be in Singapore during the Summer months. Once I arrived in Singapore I spent two Sundays “getting to know the converts.” I went to Church on Sunday, and a few Church functions where I was able to mingle and allow my future subjects to feel comfortable with my presence. All of my interviews in Singapore except for one took place after church in one of the meeting rooms.

In Dallas the Pastor recommended individuals he thought would be receptive to my research. I would contact them by phone from Houston and arrange a time to meet with them in Dallas. Prior to my interview sessions with the converts I did spend time in the Church in Dallas. I went to Sunday worship and I had an opportunity to spend Christmas holiday in

Dallas in 2013. Some of the converts knew who I was and were aware of my research prior to our “talk”. I encountered a few issues with my Dallas subjects. Many of them did not want to meet with me after I explained my research to them on the phone. They refused to sign anything and refused to be recorded. As the researcher I did my best to assure confidentiality but was not successful. Consequently I interviewed fewer people in Dallas than I did in Singapore. Based on the history of the treatment of Christians in India there was an understandable fear of retaliation of family members still living in India. I did not encounter issues with fear in Singapore as I did in Dallas. There are two major factors that played into the skepticism and fear of the Dallas participants. One is their proximity to India. Dallas, Texas is very far from India and expensive to make travel arrangements. Therefore if a family member was put in danger by talking to me they would have no way of helping them, or getting to them. The other is simply the lack of trust and familiarity. The women did not know me and the Pastor was busy tending to his wife who was diagnosed with cancer wife during this time. I do believe that communicating over the telephone because of the geographical distance negatively affected my research because it made this less personal and more suspicious to the subjects. I did not have a research assistant in Dallas like I did in Singapore. Although, Hannah was helpful I would not give her the title of research assistant like Rebecca because her involvement was minimal in comparison.

Data collected was qualitative in nature, involving a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals who converted from Sikhism/Hinduism to Christianity. All of the converts were first-generation Christians. This study is based on interviews and fieldwork conducted between October 2013 through August 2014.

I used a list of questions as a guide to interviews. The interviews were conducted at a place of the subject's preference and convenience. All of the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purpose of content analysis. As for the four non-recorded interviews, detailed notes were taken. Informants were selected through a referral process and in some cases selected purposefully. Informal conversations and discussions also took place frequently. The findings are based on the interviewees' self-reports of their attitudes, behaviours, and opinions on what constitutes a Punjabi identity and what conversion has meant for them. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, all names of interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms.

My mixed ethnic identity was an important factor in the process of fieldwork and data collection. My father is African American and my mother is Punjabi. This benefited me in my research because I was aware of most of the cultural norms since I was exposed to them in my own home growing up. While in Singapore I crossed paths with many individuals who 'remembered' my mother as a child and this 'link', as I was her daughter provided me with a much smoother process in Singapore than in Dallas. I have a working understanding of Punjabi and Hindi however all of my subjects spoke English fluently.

As a Christian myself I was rather open and receptive to everything happening around me. I had to be very careful of my own biases when it came to the converts. I had many conversations with converts, and their narratives consisted of a mixing of the two religions thus creating a hybrid religion. I will discuss the implications of this. However as a Christian I am aware of biblical implications of this and how one must be very careful. From my vantage point the women were not worshiping idols or gods from their previous religions but

they were partaking in religion/cultural activities as it related to their family members who were not Christian, this consisted of attending Hindu weddings and festivals.

I immediately notice this 'judgement' happening inside of me and became very conscious and aware of not letting it impact my research. I had to be extremely cautious about my own biases and had to avoid taking sides as to provide a balanced and objective account. But these were complex issues with no straightforward solutions and an outcome had to be negotiated in the course of my research fieldwork.

I would say my religious and ethnic orientation generally played a positive role in my research. Being Christian and Punjabi allowed me and the converts to share some relatability. I did encounter issues with my faith and my research in Singapore. In Singapore I was invited to the Sikh temple, a Hindu wedding, and Sikh wedding, I had some internal religious struggles on whether or not I should attend. There was concern of offending my hosts, as well as the question of whether I would be jeopardizing my soul.. I did however attend a Sikh Temple service and a Sikh wedding. It is important to understand that my beliefs are centered around my experience of Christianity and as the researcher I am aware that other faiths welcome inter-faith participation and my understanding of what is jeopardizing to my faith is not universal. The Sikh temple was carpeted and the men and women sat on different sides of the room on the floor; there were no chairs. I did not go to the Hindu wedding I was invited to. I made a choice based on my personal religious beliefs and upbringing not to go to the Hindu temple because of the idols inside. My host was very understanding and supportive of my reluctance. There are no idols inside Sikh temples. There is only the holy book which Sikhs bow down to upon entrance, I did not do this. Idols of gods consist of statues, fixtures or any tangible item that is prayed to; gods come in many forms and vary from religion to

religion but are not to be confused with God (the Christian understanding)—Christ--the risen King.

Conversion testimonies are important sources of documentation because a large number of Punjabi Christians I spoke to are first-generation Christians. There are no historical or academic sources that have looked at conversion of Sikh or Hindu women to Christianity in Singapore or Dallas. Thus the anecdotal evidence and narratives are important sources to understand the journeys these women have as experienced in their road to conversion, as well as to historicize the phenomenon.

2.5 Using Conversion Narratives as Data

There are many theorists who believed conversion narratives are skewed accounts and that they do not hold up over time because the converts elaborate and eliminate elements of their story as time progresses. In his study with Jehovah Witnesses, Beckford pointed out that the testimonies of converts are artfully put together based on the ideologies of the Watchtower movement rather than being an individual construction of neutral and objective personal accounts (Beckford 1978). The converts constantly constructed their accounts based on the movement's changing organizational rationale and as such, they developed the ability to put together "suitable" verbal accounts of their own conversion experience. Beckford captures this temporal variability of the converts' accounts in accordance with the ideology of the movement. Additionally, the retrospective character or backward-looking tendency of converts' accounts means that these are not fully reliable sources of data due to the tendency to redefine these stories in light of new experiences. Yet, these are still of interest since they reveal converts' perspectives, additionally, as a researcher I am aware that memory is selective.

In the absence of factual evidence, I would say that I did run into this problem during my research at a very basic level. The leaders in the PCC church in Singapore had a tendency to “lay hands” on members of the congregation. There was a standard response from the women; they would all “lose consciousness”. It was rather difficult to determine whether it was real or staged however from my vantage point after 9 women all “lost consciousness” I began to question the validity. As the researcher, this invokes elements of religions syncretism. For some of the women this trance like state was reminiscent of their previous religion, particularly those who practiced spirit possession. This trickled over into my interviews. Many women discussed being possessed and how church members and the pastor had to come to their homes and cast the evil spirits away. Many of the women expressed concern that the devil was mad at them after they converted thus the need for spirits and demons to be casted out of their homes by church authorities. Their narrations were in Christian terms and they used a very selective language choice to describe them. Harding says, “conversion is an inner transformation that quickens the supernatural imagination as it places new believers within the central storied sequence of the Christian bible and enables them to approach the Bible as living reality...conversion transfers narrative authority to narrate one’s life in Christian terms” (Harding 2001, pg 34). As mentioned previously the understanding and internalization of the Christian experience varied amongst the participants based on where they fell along the spectrum of Evangelical versus Pentecostal.

It is argued that it is vital for scholars to note that conversion accounts must not be read as literal descriptions of what took place but rather as narratives-stories told to explain one’s experience of transition change over time in a coherent and meaningful way to one’s self and to others. While I do acknowledge the problems some scholars have with using

conversion stories, I argue that this does not make the narratives of the Punjabi Christians collected any less important. Unlike Beckford, I will not be analyzing how the stories are put together but rather, focus on the discourses that these narratives inform and communicate to us. These discourses are what will be remembered by the group and is what will be recorded as history. Moreover, in a group with a large number of people being first generation Christians, it makes these narratives more important as they are the stories that will be told when recruiting other members.

3.1 Conversion Narratives and Spiritual Experiences

The multicultural and multi-religious demographical scene of the population in both Dallas and Singapore indicate that religious conversion often leads to a hybridization of belief systems. In this chapter, I will discuss how my subjects created their own hybrid religion; a combination of the religion they converted from and the religion they converted to-Christianity. It's important to note that this blending or hybridization of culture and religion is individualized, and, tailored to the needs of each particular convert.

All the subjects recounted the personal journeys of their conversion. They discussed the challenges they faced during and after the act of conversion. As such, in this chapter, I will use these narratives to uncover the motivations for conversion as well as illustrate the issues faced by these converts.

In most of the conversion narratives collected, I noticed a dominant theme, which resonates strongly with converts. There was a tendency to make a constant reference to a spiritual experience. This spiritual experience was then later used to partly explain why they converted. Respondents would explain their spiritual experience as 'God spoke to me' or 'I heard Jesus' voice'. This spiritual experience will be discussed throughout this chapter.

Such descriptions of encounters with the supernatural were commonly cited in trying to account for conversions. The term supernatural is being used to describe divine experiences with the holy-ghost. However, a careful analysis of the testimonies shows there is also the presence of social factors, which prompted the conversion process before such supernatural encounters. Furthermore situational factors inducing tensions were prevalent in many of the conversion accounts. Tension inducing factors were illnesses, the lack of stability in life, discrimination, as well as marriage, and family turmoil.

Mary is one of my subjects who highlighted supernatural experiences during her conversion experience. Mary was an older woman from a small town outside Punjab called Jalandhar. Many of the women interviewed were from here. Mary said,

“Shortly after I was introduced to God...I was very sick and I was praying for healing. I had kidney stones and they were very painful. I had to have an operation and after the operation and I was very scared to use the bathroom but God spoke to me and told me it was okay and ever since then I have been fine.”

She went on to explain that if she did not have God in her life during that time she was experiencing this medical issue she believes she would have died. Mary’s story is very interesting. She was born into a Hindu family and her mother arranged for her to marry at the age of 14. However, she did not go to live with her husband until she was old enough to obtain the proper documentation to leave India. The man who she was arranged to marry was Christian. When I asked Mary why her mother arranged for her to marry a Christian man she said, *“I don’t think she knew how hard it was going to be for me. She wanted me to have a better life”*. Mary did not specify whether her mother-in-law received payment of any kind for her arranged marriage to the Christian man. However, given the complexities of India’s history with dowry I think it is safe to assume Mary’s mother-in-law received payment in some form. I later asked Mary if her mother-in-law received payment for arranging her marriage to the Christian man and she said, *“I do not know”*.

Mary said, *“There were many occasions where my mother-in-law would hit me for various reasons, mostly for not doing things to her liking, like cooking or cleaning. I was forced to follow their beliefs and practices and give up my Hindu ways. My sister-in-law started bringing me to Church and that is how I came to know God. She would read the bible but at*

that time I could not read or write. In India during this time girls did not go to school only boys. So over time my sister-in-law taught me how to read the bible although I can read in English I prefer the Punjabi bible because it is easier for me to understand... So in the beginning I was praying to both Jesus and my Hindu Gods because Hinduism is all I knew and becoming Christian was basically forced upon me by my husband's family." Mary went on to explain that although Indian households are patriarchal in nature the mother-in-law tends to run the home.

According to researcher Sara Lamb elders hold a superior position in the hierarchy of the family. A daughter-in-law is supposed to serve her in-laws, it is considered one of her most important duties as a wife (Lamb 2000). This cultural understanding gives way to the dynamic between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Each relationship varies from household to household; however, the importance of respect for the in-laws is constant although the ways in which it is implemented are different.

Sarah is another convert whose entire family converted but only after they were placed in a very despairing situation. Sarah was born and raised in Jalandhar, which is small town near Punjab in India. She was in her early 20's during the time of the interview and lived in Singapore. Sarah was a housemaid who converted when she was 12 years old. She expressed her conversion as arising out of a very difficult time in her life. She described herself as "religion-less" but told me her family worshiped evil spirits and demons prior to her conversion. I asked Sarah to tell me about her life prior to conversion, she said: *"I did not belong to a specific religion, my family worshiped demons and evil spirits. I am from a background where they worshiped evil spirits as long as I can remember my family was this way. My grandparents even practiced this.* Evil spirits are

entities that at some point had a physical body while demons do not; demons are manipulators and can present themselves in many forms to gain the trust of individuals. This understanding has been orally passed down in the Christian faith for years. As a Christian, this is what I was always taught about the distinction between the two.

Sarah never specified being Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. She did say that prior to her conversion she worshiped evil spirits. Her family did not consider themselves traditional healers or divine mediums. When I later asked for clarification of what she meant by worshiping evil spirits she explained she prayed to Kali, the Hindu Goddess of death. Kali is typically worshiped in South India. She also stated she prayed to a variety of Sikh Gurus. Sarah worshiped both Hindu and Sikh Gods and other idols prior to her conversion. The terminology, “*I worshiped evil spirits*” is specific to Christianity. Prior to conversion Sarah was not referencing her worship to these varieties as something evil. That was explained to her by her Christian mentor-her paternal grandmother. Christianity redefined Sarah’s previous life as something negative. In a later discussion I asked Sarah if she or her family practiced spirit possession, she said “*they did at one point but she did not want to discuss those things with me because it did not glorify God*”. My attempt to fully understand what she meant by worshiping evil spirits and demons was difficult. From my own cultural vantage point we call these individuals devil worshipers because the ‘devil’ encompasses all things ‘dark’ however Sarah did not have any concept of the devil prior to conversion. Her conversion transformed her interpretation of spirits and gave it a negative connotation.

Sarah, continued her conversion story by saying, “*but, one day my dad fell into a well and we all thought he was dead but his mother was a believer in Christ (father’s mother) so she sprinkled the blood of Jesus (holy oil) over him and said he is alive and he came back to*

life. This incident influenced my choice to convert.” The blood of Jesus is not literal; the mother used holy oil or anointing oil which is a representation of the blood of Jesus. This is very symbolic in Christian faith as the shedding of the blood of Jesus was believed to be done for the removal of our past, present and future transgressions.

I would like to note that in addition to the self-referential term “Punjabi Christians” converts also call themselves and others who are Christians “believers”. These two terms were often used to describe their Christian identity. The term believer is prevalent among Evangelical Christians. I believe the use of the word Punjabi Christian is a clear indication of the importance of culture. As previously mentioned, being Punjabi is often correlated with being Sikh therefore the converts made the concession to call themselves, Punjabi Christians and not simply Punjabi.

Sarah went on to describe the incident with her father. She stated, *“My father was dead and he came back to life because of Jesus. My brother took poison trying to kill himself and God also brought him back to life. God kept my family alive while we were doing all these bad things because my grandmother was praying for us”*.

Sarah’s grandmother was a Christian and she believed that her family was able to overcome their near-death experiences because her grandmother was praying for them. I did not have an opportunity to speak to Sarah’s grandmother, she is deceased, but she played a major part in her conversion process. After these experiences, her entire household converted including her father. However, her father’s side of the family is still worshipping “demons” and “evil spirits”. I am aware of these terms, beliefs and practices. However, the discussion surrounding this terminology is disputed, ambiguous, and attitudes towards them are

ambivalent. However they were used specifically by Sarah resulting in her conversion experience. Her conversion experience is categorized as a rupture, not a hybrid.

Sarah was 24 when our interview took place and she converted when she was 12 after this incident with her father. I asked her if it was a difficult choice and she said it was very simple because Christ saved her father and brother's life. She now states that whatever she asks God, he gives to her. She explained to me that she immediately stopped worshiping demons and transitioned into worshiping Christ. She did not express any blending or hybridization of her old religion with her new. As mentioned Sarah is an example of a rupture not a hybrid. Sarah is one of the many conversion narratives that cite tension-inducing situations as a trigger that caused these individuals' to search for a solution and it is during this time that they found hope in Christianity and thus subsequently converted. Sarah's story and many of the other conversion narratives are reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's idea of religion giving meaning to suffering, if not entirely solving it (Geertz 1966).

3.2 Conversion: Lack of Understanding

Similarly another respondent discussed her choice to convert arising out of a difficult time in her life. Leah converted from Sikhism. She described herself as a "*proud staunch Sikh*" prior to conversion. She said she never missed her visits to the temple. She told me her father used to punish her if she did not read the Sikh scripture every day. "*My father was a very strict man and there was never any peace in my home...I would go out for walks and look at all the different temples...always asking myself who is God?*"

Leah is a pastor's wife and mother of two boys; she is a stay at home mom and in her late 30's. She was born and raised in Singapore. Leah's husband is also a convert. He converted from Islam. Leah's story is fascinating as she described herself as a staunch Sikh.

Yet, she describes herself as feeling empty as many of my subjects did with their pre-conversion religion. Leah however, tried out a variety of religions before she came to Christianity. She told me *“I used to pray to Buddha because I prayed to him once and he gave me what I wanted”*. She never expressed any turmoil at home with her choice to pray to Buddha or other temple Gods. Her father seemed to accept her behaviors.

The turmoil began when she started worshiping Christ. Through my research I was able to attribute this to a variety of cultural components mentioned in the previous chapter. Most importantly however, the strife arises from other family members because the main difference between Christianity and other religions is the worshiping of one God. The second commandment strictly prohibits the worship of other Gods or idols. So in a sense it creates a clear division between believers and non-believers. Because my research only focused on the experience of the female convert I did not get to speak to any of their family members. I was only told how the families reacted by the convert. I think the anger by non-believing family members can be attributed to the natural division created between believer and non-believer. Since religion and social life are so cohesive particularly in Singapore, leaving one faith for another creates dissension within the family.

Leah's story progressed with her curiosity about “who is God”. When she started telling me about her journey towards conversion, she talked about how when other Christian brothers or sisters would try to preach to her she would get very upset. She said she would yell at them and say, *“I was born a Sikh and I will die a Sikh.”* Initially she was open to all other religions except for Christianity. However, she finally came to a point where after she had explored Buddhism, Hinduism, and practiced praying to other deities, she decided to give Christianity a try.

There was a recurring theme in my research and it was the search for peace. Leah talks about how her family was self-proclaimed staunch Sikhs but in her home and personal life there was no peace. She told me they would spend every Sunday at the temple and come home to fighting and turmoil created by her father. She said, *"Something was missing within me...I don't know what was missing...why don't I have any peace...I felt like ending my life."* She said she decided that the next time one of the Christian brothers or sisters decided to share the Gospel with her she would listen instead of telling them to go away. One particular day after work, she was approached by a Christian. She stated that she asked the Christian brother, *"If I accept Jesus Christ today will he give me peace?"* She said the Christian brother told her *"Yes, of course as soon as you say the sinner's prayer you will have peace immediately."* She said, *"Okay, let me try, I accepted Christ and there was peace in me...that night when I was sleeping Satan came to my dreams and told me you have left and you have done a bad job and I will not leave you alone...I rebuked Satan and told him to get away."* Leah, telling me she was visited by Satan the same night she converted is a good example of how narratives change overtime. The concept of Satan causing one discomfort is central to the Pentecostal experience and is scripted language. As mention conversion gives the converts new religious vocabulary. Leah had no concept of Satan or his capabilities prior to conversion nor did she have an understanding of him the night she converted. She later told a church member the story and they put it in a religious script that was comprehensible and aided her testimonial. I by no means am saying it is not true rather, the language choice is specific to the religion.

Nonetheless, after her conversion Leah stopped going to the Sikh temple. Her father began to notice her absence and later found out she had converted to Christianity. He

demanding she return to the Sikh temple and she refused. He then ordered her brother and sisters to beat her up. After which they threw her out of her home. Leah was able to stay with friends for a few days but eventually had to return home. Every-time she came home her brothers and sisters would physically abuse her. On a few occasions Leah said they found her bible in her luggage and burned it. Because of the cultural norms in Singapore it is incredibly uncommon for Punjabi women to live on their own especially young women. For that reason, Leah had to go back to her family's home despite the physical abuse. She told me that all of her family broke ties with her because brought shame to her family by converting. She does not speak to any of them.

The violent reaction from family members was not uncommon, as previously mentioned one of my participants in Dallas was forced to leave India earlier than planned. After she converted her father tried to have her killed, he ordered her eldest brother to kill her. It was an attempt at an honor killing because her conversion had brought an immense amount of shame to her family. Honor killings typically take place after the woman has committed some sort of sexual transgression (Welchman 2005). In this case religion conversion is being given the same weight as a sexual transgression. Sexual transgression involves promiscuity, pre-marital sex, and even rape (Welchman 2005).

It can be seen that tension-inducing situations triggered these individuals' search for a solution and it is during this time that they found hope in Christianity and thus subsequently converted. There is a shared public narrative. All of the women converted under some sort of distress influenced by both external and internal factors. The most prevalent external factor present in my research was marriage, not particularly for caste reasons but for marriage opportunity. Meaning the women wanted to marry Christian men so they converted. Socio-

economics also played a role for many. One convert told me her conversion was influenced by her desire to go to a Christian medical school in India. All of my converts cited lack of understanding as internal motivator to convert. Whether it was their ability to understand the scripture or not being fulfilled by the rituals of their former religion, there was a consensus that their religion had failed them in some way. During trials in their lives all the converts looked to their Hindu and Sikh Gods for resolution. All of the subjects told me they were left unfulfilled by their former religion. Another internal factor was education; although many of my converts were housemaids the few who were formally educated and had graduate degrees were more questioning and wanted to assert authority over their lives.

I had the pleasure of meeting a young lady named Ruth. Ruth was the niece of one of the pastors in Singapore. Ruth was Hindu by birth and married a Hindu man and had two children who also practiced Hinduism. Ruth like all the others expressed a discontent with her faith. Prior to conversion she was struggling at work, nothing was working out in her favor and life was very difficult. In comparison to the other women Ruth's challenges were minimal. She did not suffer from any health issues, financial issues or marital problems. She was simply unhappy. She has been looked over for promotions and was not succeeding in a way that was pleasing to her. During our interview I tried to pry for a deeper understanding of her discontent. Hoping she would tell me some sort of life altering information like many of the other women, but she didn't. As a researcher, Ruth is one of the converts I think about a lot. I wonder at times if I missed something profound in her back-story. Nonetheless her unhappiness was attributed to the common woes of a working mother. She was mentally, emotionally, and spiritually tired.

One summer holiday her Uncle, who is a pastor and who also converted from Hinduism invited her and her daughter to a church camp. She told me, *"I didn't know anything about church camp but thought I wouldn't mind the free holiday."* She went with her daughter. The last night they were there the Pastor and the other Parishioners of the church were baptizing people. *"My daughter came running over to me asking if she could play in the water...at the time I had no idea that she was really asking me was if she could be baptized...knowing no difference I agreed."* Ruth's youngest child was baptized, said the sinner's prayer and accepted Jesus Christ into her life. The following week Ruth went to the Hindu temple and she said her daughter who is very well behaved refused to enter the temple. She said her daughter started begging to go to church. Ruth said, *"We had never been inside a church and she knew nothing about church so I was very confused."* Nonetheless, they went to church. *"It was my first time ever going to church and I immediately felt a sense of peace...I converted that day and I have never looked back."*

As mentioned Ruth was married and had a son. She told me she was very afraid to go home and tell her husband she has converted but she did tell him. He was happy; she said he was very unhappy with Hinduism as well. The following Sunday her husband and son went to the Church and converted. Her family has been Christian ever since.

Ruth made her conversion story simple. Converts, have the ability to, embellish, omit or change their story at any moment. However, this does not diminish the importance of their narratives as personal subjective testimonies. Through a variety of private conversations with church members, family members and friends I discovered that conversion from Hinduism to Christianity are relatively harder than other religions. The Indian Christians in Singapore in particular believe that there are certain ritualistic things that must be done to cleanse your

home and make it holy after conversion. These things are as follows: all idols must be buried, they cannot simply be thrown away, there is prayer of binding that is said over the idols and then they are buried. The home must be cleansed with holy oil and all members of the home must agree with the cleansing rituals otherwise there will be battling of the spirits, which can lead to divorce and destruction within the family circle. These beliefs are cultural and relative to Singapore as it did not come up in my discussions with the Dallas converts. Conversion is not a simple process it is rather extensive and ongoing; I believe this is true for all converts. I want to note that the discontent and search for peace all my converts expressed was an internal battle. They were in an uncertain state where they felt as if they lost control (Malinowski 1948). These feelings were never shared with members of their faith. Meaning they never sought spiritual guidance from anyone inside their religious circle. They were left to work their issues out with the Gods. There were no intercessors like there are in the Christian faith. I think this is also a push factor. They had no sound reasoning prior to conversion—no one to help them or to keep them from straying.

3.3 Conversion Narratives: Marriage

Marriage was another factor that motivated efforts to understand Christianity and subsequently conversion. The motivation to have a similar religion in the home with one's spouse and to be able to engage with God together was a key factor for some subjects. In the following section, I will discuss three of my subjects and how conversion and marriage affected their lives. The main push towards conversion, which is true for all the subjects, is lack of understanding. There was a disconnect between the subject and their religious community. I will delve into this more later. I just want to note that the lack of comprehension of the religion (Hinduism or Sikhism) internally was a major factor towards

conversion. Lack of understanding was a major push factor, and is relevant to the discussion of marriage because the socialization process in the temple became an important factor in creating a sense of strife for devotees and subsequently a loss of interest towards Sikhism and Hinduism by the women that I interviewed. Women do not hold positions of power in the temple they are specifically out-cast as divorced women and widows.

One such respondent, Rebecca, was a Sikh and did not convert until she met her husband who was a Christian by birth. Rebecca is in her late 30's and converted to Christianity about 7 years prior to my interview. She was in a previous marriage to a Sikh man who was involved in a marital affair. She decided to terminate the marriage. Rebecca did not express any discontent with Sikhism like the other women. She did express the pain associated with her divorce, which subsequently caused her to stray from the faith. Based on my experiences the Indian culture is patriarchal. The intensity of the patriarchy varies from household to household; however there are some cultural elements that are unchanging. Sikhism as previously discussed in other chapters is male dominated; women don't have a significant role in the organization and leadership of the temple. In other words, Rebecca's Sikh husband who was sexually involved with another woman was her push factor. Now in the PCC (Punjabi Christian Church) Rebecca leads the women in prayer and helps her husband head the choir and band. She has a much more authoritative role in the PCC than she would have had in a Sikh temple.

Another respondent had a similar experience in Dallas. Hannah was an older woman in her early 50's. Her family was originally from Lahore and she did not have any children. She worked as an account for a company in Dallas. Hannah was married to a Sikh man who also was having an extra-marital affair. He would often leave the home for many days

without contacting her. This resulted in many conflicts in the home. There were other factors that contributed to her conversion. During her divorce she lost all of her friends. She also became unemployed at that time. Moreover she came to a point where she could not understand the meaning of life and she felt very lonely. She told me she was looking for peace and understanding in her own life. A converted friend of hers encouraged her to go to church.

Hannah said, *"I initially went to church because I was lonely and I needed people...very selfish motives...but after going for a while I finally heard something I could understand and I felt peace."* Even though she was Sikh she said she never understood the teachings of Sikhism and would simply recite them because that is what a good Sikh does. This rote behavior changed for her once she began going to UCC (United Christian Church). She said because she was unemployed and going through a divorce she spent 4-5 days a week in the church learning about God.

It is common that a push factor for conversion is marriage but for Hannah and Rebecca the push factor for conversion was divorce. They had a desire to leave Sikhism and the negative impact it had on their lives. For many of these converts, they were at the lowest points in their life and felt that there were no answers available to them in their respective religions. By "accepting Jesus", it offered them a sense of hope and their future was oriented towards a utopia. For them, the present and the future are filled with positive changes. Even if something unpleasant was to occur, the blame is no longer placed on God but is justified in various other ways, like demonic attacks.

Additionally, conversion for these converts often means that they are faced with challenges from family, relatives, friends and the community whose responses at the act of

conversion are not typically viewed in a positive manner. The converts have to deal with these difficult and painful emotions most of which are negative and derogatory, aimed at them for converting. A majority of the converts I spoke to face some form of backlash from their family or friends, especially during the initial stages of their conversion. A sense of betrayal is what many of them feel towards these converts.

Many converts faced backlash from their family members during their conversion process. However, according to Rebecca her family was very supportive she had difficulties at work. Rebecca is a nurse and she told me one year she requested off for Christmas—the most widely celebrated Christian holiday. Rebecca’s boss who knows Rebecca is a convert told her that if she wanted that day off for religious reasons she needed to change her religious card to say Christian and not Sikh. Rebecca told me she was shocked by her boss’s response and subsequently did not receive the time off. When I asked Rebecca why she had not changed her religious card she told me she didn’t feel it was necessary she knows who she is and that it is a very tedious process and she did not want to face anymore scrutinization from outsiders.

While all converts sought out conversion as a means to obtain something better for themselves some escaped difficult situations like Sarah, while others created difficult situations for themselves like Leah. In previous chapters I discussed hybridization and how converts blend old and new and make new rules and guidelines for themselves within the framework of their new religions. However on the other side is the rupture of one’s past life. Sarah completely broke ties with her previous life due to the complexities of “spirit” worship and the boundaries of Christianity she was unable to create a hybrid system.

4.1 Punjabi Cultural/Ethnic Identity in Diasporic Communities

This section explains how converts negotiate their “new” identity vis-à-vis a dominant and strong Punjabi Sikh/Hindu community. Despite the problems faced by Punjabi Christians in their conversion process or perhaps because of them, the converts I spoke to continue to make an effort to retain and emphasize their identity as Punjabis. However, this too is a struggle and is continuously negotiated. There is a constant “code-switching” between culture and religion. Amongst the converts lines are blurred, crossed and reinvented.

As previously mentioned in my fieldwork, there was a general agreement among Sikhs, Hindus, and Punjabi Christians that a Punjabi is one who is able to trace one’s ancestral roots to the state of Punjab. Among converts, there was general consensus about what constitutes “being a Punjabi”, but with some small differences. For all of them, speaking the Punjabi language, wearing the traditional *salwar-kameez* and *kurta*, and eating certain types of food was what being a Punjabi is about at an everyday level.

Although the Punjabi Christian recognized a distinction between religion and socio-cultural practices, they still tended to highlight how converting does not change one’s cultural roots. Although they lived in Singapore far from Punjab, they took every opportunity to celebrate their Punjabi identity through food, language, song, and dance.

In regards to conversion in post-colonial nations like Singapore, India and the United States, many converts discussed the anger from family members for converting to Christianity. As mentioned earlier, there is an underlying belief that Christians in Punjab who converted were from a destitute faction of society. The belief is that these destitute Punjabis only converted to Christianity because of the history of the missionaries in Punjab.

However there is also an element of betrayal. This was shown in the case of Leah, who came from a family of self-proclaimed staunch Sikhs—her father allowed her to explore other religions except for Christianity. Leah experimented with Buddhism, Hinduism and a few others before converting to Christianity. When she made the choice to convert to Christianity, she was disowned. This ‘disownment’ is attributed to two things; firstly, the historical association of Christianity and poverty, and, secondly the belief that by converting you are becoming more like the English culture which had previously conquered and divided the nation of India.

Through my research I discovered that although the religion changed, the culture did not. The language is not altered; the food remains the same as do clothing and music. Punjabi food consists of the typical curries and spices most associated with India. Punjabis are however known for their tandoor style cooking. Punjabis eat a variety of meats and wheat. It is common to have lamb or goat meat, tandoori chicken is also a staple food as well as paratha or naan—which is comparable to a tortilla. Basmati rice is the grain of the region and is served with every meal.

A point of great contention among the Sikh community and the converts is the retention of their names in the continued use of ‘Singh’ and ‘Kaur’. For the Sikhs, using the ‘Singh’ and ‘Kaur’ denotes a religious association, and such an act is viewed as hypocrisy. On the other hand, for the converts, the retention of their names is seen as part of being a Punjabi and they understand it as part of their lineage. All of my converts’ whether married or single maintained their Sikh last name. Singh is mainly used for men, while Kaur, which translates to Princess, is reserved for Sikh women. For converts, there is constant ‘give and take’ almost like a bartering of socio-cultural practices. They take on one thing to give up

another. At times they try very hard to hold on to their past practices which define their views on life. Rebecca is the best example of this push-pull force converts struggle with. Rebecca is the only member in her entire family who is Christian. She often attends weddings and other ritualistic functions at temples per her family's request. The choice to attend is not difficult for Rebecca, she told me, "they are my family". When I asked her if they attend any Christian related functions she told me she believed they would but she had not asked. She said she did not want to pressure them and she believed they would come around on their own time.

Most interviewees felt that they have preserved their cultural practices of being a Punjabi through the everyday practices they have mentioned. For them, one's name is not an indication of one's religious affiliation. Rather, the only change they see is an internal spiritual change. Rebecca said, *"I am a Punjabi Christian, so therefore my culture as a Punjabi will still hold because the type of food I eat, the way I dress will still be the same, the movies I watch Punjabi or Hindi is still the same. But Christianity I believe is a way of life, it is the way you think of yourself and the surroundings around you...you don't have to change your name to have a Christian name like English name James or Stephanie just because you become a converted Christian. You can still hold the same name that you used to have from birth which your parents have given you...the only thing that has changed is your spirituality"*

As such, it is evident that ethnicity transcends religion for these converts. Malinowski argues that religion, magic, and other rituals alleviate anxiety by performing psychological functions for individuals—helping them cope with dangers, uncertainties that cause stress. Malinowski identifies two times where religion preforms this role. First, when the outcome is

important but is uncontrollable thus making it uncertain. Second, at times of crisis where there are major changes in one's life (Malinowski). This is true for all of my converts.

Religion also brings out how they view ethnicity as a primordial attachment that survives religious conversion. An ethnic Punjabi identity thus persists for these converts after religious conversion and ethnicity is not something that is lost in the conversion process. The converts make a distinction between religious and ethnic identity and in the process, they shape and negotiate what it means to be a Punjabi and they separate that from the Sikh and Hindu religious content. Ethnicity then becomes the focus of their identity that remains throughout their lives and persists beyond religious change. A Punjabi is one who comes from the state of Punjab. It is a lifestyle. It is a regional group. It is the varied aspects of a culture that include food, clothing, and language. According to the subjects it is not a religion as there are many religions practiced in Punjab namely Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

4.2 Conversion is Individually Based

When I began this research my hypothesis was that women were being pushed to convert by social factors. I initially completely overlooked internal motivators. I was holding onto this notion that Indian women were being held in this very primitive state and religion was their escape. While patriarchy is still a factor in Indian households and some converts experienced the wrath of their brothers and fathers for converting, they all converted individually and were pushed to do so by more than just social factors. However despite the motivator all of the converts gained something through their conversion whether it was divorce, marriage or a job promotion they attributed their conversion to those things. All of my converts expressed some sort of discontentment with life pre-conversion. There was a

life-altering event that gave them the final push to convert. People convert to obtain something they are missing. There is a transaction in a sense—out with old in with new. I did not interview anyone who did not gain something from their conversion. They were all motivated to convert by both external and internal factors. Leah felt empty like many others converts and longed for understanding and belonging. Ruth expressed difficulties at work, she was not succeeding in a way that was pleasing to her. There is always a gain of some sort for the convert—they find answers to questions they were unable to answer in their pre-conversion state. They use their post-conversion religion to explain “bad” things that happened pre-conversion.

4.3 Research Benefits

This research is relevant because it gives voice to an under-studied population of people. Scant research is available on Indian women living in America and Singapore, let alone those who converted to Christianity from Hinduism. Understanding the comparison and context of the two religions, and the effects conversion has on women living outside of their traditional environment will shed light on issues and challenges of conversion in relation to gender and stratification. I want to find out what motivates a Hindu woman to convert, and why is Christianity more appealing than other religions. Additionally, “when immigrants change their residence, they are free from the original social bonds...conceivably immigrants pay lower costs when they decide to change religion and participate in a new religious organization that is different from their traditional faith” (Chao).

Zinnabauer and Pargament studied religious conversion and have formulated theories as to why people convert (Zinnbauer 1998). Their main assertion is that “the old self and way of life are seen as inadequate, and the only solution is to seek a radical change...existence

itself has become the problem and a fundamental change is called for” (Zinnbauer 1998). This idea of getting rid of the “old self” that may have been plagued by the difficulties of patriarchy and dominance is very relevant in the lives of Hindu women who convert. Conversion allows them to break the mold, so to speak. The object of conversion is to change, and transformation of one’s life for the better.

Although very little work has been done on Indian-American-Christians, specifically in the context of women converting from Hinduism to Christianity, there is research on immigrant-women who convert from their traditional religion to Christianity in the U.S. The studies of Khmer, Hmong, and Taiwanese female immigrants who converted to Christianity in the U.S. are enlightening. This research benefits the world of anthropology in a variety of ways. Since there is limited research done on this population of women; this research deals with conversion from a gender specific vantage point.

In the article “Taiwanese Immigrant Women and Religious Conversion” author Carolyn Chen explores the reasons behind conversion. A woman becomes free from the cultural restrictions placed on her because they no longer apply. “Religious salvation is often at odds with traditional familiar obligations” (Giddens 2010). Because Christianity is officially, viewed as a “gender-less religion”, the appeal is greater to women, and the end result is that women are afforded greater opportunities outside the home. Women use religion to “resituate themselves” within the context of the female American identity (Chen 2005). My research has explored how far these theories applied and how immigrant Indian Women use Christianity to “resituate themselves” and the ways they negotiate this in context of their lives; for example, the household, family, work, and education. The Punjabi women converts

use religion similar to a counter hegemonic discourse, recalling some scholars findings on female spirit possession (Boddy, 1988 and Rasmussen 1995).

There is balance between being an Indian-Christian and maintaining one's Indian "ethos" (Thangaraj 2006). Although conversion allows for women to experience greater autonomy, one should not forget 'where they are from'. The need for new-converts/immigrants to maintain cultural ethnicity within a foreign country is paired with feelings of marginality, and discrimination from predominantly Euro-American congregations. Thus the impetus to form Indian-Christian churches that catered to their Indian-ness as well as their Christian identity (Kurien 2012). Women converts feel that conversion allows them to get their foothold in American society. However culture is also maintained by remaining in one's ethnic group identification (Kurien 2012). My research also explored this sense of "home" culture, amongst U.S and Singaporean Punjabi women and to what extent they modified or discarded customs.

5.1 Conclusion

When I began this research my hypothesis was that women were being pushed to convert by social factors. I initially completely overlooked internal motivators. I was holding onto this notion that Indian women were being held in this very “primitive” state and religion was their escape. While patriarchy is still a factor in Indian households, and some converts experienced the wrath of their brothers and fathers for converting, they all converted individually, and had different reasons for converting. Some were pushed to do so by more than just social factors. However, despite the motivator, all of the converts gained something through their conversion whether it was divorce, marriage or a job promotion. In their interviews they attributed conversion to those things. All of my converts expressed some sort of discontentment with life pre-conversion. There was a life-altering event that gave them the final push to convert.

Conversion allows the individual to take on a new identity thus their reference point is found in their new beliefs. While the converts are holding on to their Punjabi identity, the new religion also becomes a source of cultural and social identity. As I mentioned before, there is fluidity with the give and take. The converts are subconsciously in this constant state of what is a Punjabi, what is a Christian and what is a Punjabi Christian. However, the research showed that while the religion they converted to allowed them to become new in a spiritual way, yet it also allowed them to hold on to their culture and tradition. It did not mandate that they had to rid themselves of their culture or traditions. Given the data gathered from the conversion narratives I believe the meaning of conversion to these women was to produce an alternative cultural script and conversion supplied a coping mechanism for issues internally while allowing to maintain their culture.

Empirically, how people create meanings out of their everyday situations is relevant for uncovering how individuals who have converted perceive themselves in terms of their identity. This thesis has been an attempt to fill some of the gaps in the literature by undertaking a study of religious conversion among Sikh/Hindu women in both Dallas, Texas and in Singapore. My sample has been the Punjabi community of women in Dallas and Singapore where conversion rates are relatively low. My data suggests that religious conversion for them is not entirely linked only to socio-economic attributes such as age, educational attainment, and class background but rather, linked intimately to significant tension-producing life events.

As there is no other academic study that has been produced on female Punjabi Christians, my thesis then contributes towards understanding the question of why Punjabi women are converting to Christianity even though being a Punjabi is closely tied to the belief in Sikhism/Hinduism. It has offered some tentative explanations. However, this is only a preliminary study, and future research on this topic may further explore certain patterns. Secondly, this thesis has shown that conversion to Christianity does not mean a complete change in one's ethnically given cultural identity, or even a disassociation of former belief systems. As illustrated in the preceding chapters, conversion becomes a process of "adaptations, modifications, and negotiations, to retain the elements of the cultural system of the converts while at the same time, a change in religious beliefs" (Tong, 2007). There is then an accommodation, and at times a re-definition between the new religious beliefs of the individual and the cultural practices that the individual has been socialized into.

This study has contributed to the wider knowledge of why women convert and more specifically what conversion means to them and more broadly the relationships they have

with people. It also has broader implications in the gender and religious fields. This research has shown how women obtain their own mobility, how religion can be stifling and uplifting, and how context is relative and that converts go through either a hybrid or rupture process. This research opens the forum on gender, religion, and conversion. For future purposes anthropologist may want to ask the question why these women converted to Christianity and not another religion? Why were they willing to make a sacrifice—in some cases to be disowned or even harmed by their family members? Another possible area of consideration may be to conduct a study in Punjab and ask Punjabi Christian women what challenges they face daily in living in a community that is largely Hindu. As the researcher I would love to do a longitudinal study to determine if their narratives change overtime. It would also be beneficial to study the families of these converts to examine how the conversion of these women affected them. Class and education also play a major role in the conversion experience one could examine those from a lower status versus those from a higher status and how their narratives differ.

More broadly this research opens the forum to many future studies particularly on women and spirit possession. The converts never used the term spirit possession when they discussed being filled with the holy-ghost as mentioned in previous chapters, however the widely used anthropological term is spirit possession. Janice Boddy discusses women in the Hofiyat community who equate spirit possession to marriage. The women in this community are troubled by spirits once they get married however the issue is not marriage itself its what marriage symbolizes (Boddy 1989). The relation of Janice Boddy's work and mine is that the converts new life creates new experiences. The idea of being overtaken by the holy-ghost is welcomed and encouraged. It's like reaching a religious pinnacle—the height of your

religious experience. Another value of this study is studying converts from a psychological standpoint.

This research also shows the complexities and rewards of multi-sited ethnographic research. This research was conducted amongst similar ethnic communities in two different parts of the world. As discussed throughout my research this was both stressful—emotionally and mentally but also very rewarding to be able to make lateral comparisons between the two field sites.

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