

Research Report

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Title of Research: Spreading Christianity among the Chepang Community in the Remote Mid-Hills of Nepal: The Socio-Cultural Implications

Purpose of Research: (400 words)

The Chepangs are one of the 59 indigenous nationalities in Nepal. Majority of them live in the remote terrains of the Mahabharata Hills ranging 1000 to 1900 meters above sea level, lying within the administrative boundaries of Chitwan, Makwanpur, Dhading, and Gorkha districts. Their livelihoods have transformed over the last century from hunting-gathering to shifting cultivation (Hodgson, 1874; Rai, 1985), and further to sedentary farming (FORWARD, 2001). Many Chepangs also depend on wage laboring. With the aid of development interventions in the community over the last two decades, few Chepangs have started selling the agricultural and forest produce in the local markets and yet fewer Chepangs also undertake non-farm skilled jobs. Nevertheless, farming and forestry still form the mainstay of their livelihoods (Piya et al., 2011).

As much as their livelihoods are based on natural resources, so are their religion, deities, and rituals. The Nepal Chepang Association (NCA) has named their traditional religion as *prakriti dharma*, meaning ‘religion of nature’ (Personal Communication). Their traditional beliefs and festivals revolve around animism and shamanism. The Chepang shaman, known as *pande* (or *jhakri*) is the key social figure in many life cycle rituals and festivals (Gurung, 1995). A *pande* is also believed to be the traditional healer in the community with power to communicate with the spirits (Riboli, 2000). The traditional festivals of the community are interconnected with their way of life. For instance, Chepangs celebrate *bhumi-puja* (worship of the Earth-deity) in March to mark the beginning of agricultural season and *nwagi* in August to mark the season of harvest.

Christianity among the Chepang community was introduced in 1968 by a foreign linguist, who lived with the community in a remote village in Makwanpur district primarily to study their language (Gurung, 1995). Despite strict government restrictions to promote Christianity before 1990, Christianity thrived and spread among this community. Currently, among all the indigenous nationalities in Nepal, Chepangs have the highest converts (Rai, 2013). According to 2001 census, 8.8% of the Chepang population follows Christianity (CBS, 2003). The national Christian population have jumped from 0.2% to 0.5% of total Nepalese population over 1991-2001 and from 0.5% to 1.4% over 2001-2011 (CBS, 2003; CBS, 2012). Official estimates of Christian Chepangs in 2011 census is not available, however, the increase is estimated to be at a higher rate than that for the national population.

What are the factors that motivated the Chepangs to leave their religion practiced since the ancestral times and adopt Christianity? How do the conversion to Christianity impact on the social values and customs of the community – the pros and the cons? These research questions form the central theme/purpose of this research. This research assesses the socio-cultural dynamisms by which a community undergoes a religious transformation or cultural adaptations owing to national and international influences.

Content/Methodology of Research: (800 words)

Research sites: The central committee members of NCA were consulted before finalizing the research sites. Out of the total Chepang population (68,399), 42.4% (28,989) reside in Chitwan district and 28.1% (19,233) in Makwanpur district (CBS, 2012; 2013). Therefore the research was focused in these two districts. Within Makwanpur, Kankada and Manahari Village Development Committees (VDCs)¹ were chosen as the study sites. Within Kankada VDC, the research was focused in Maisirang village while in the village with identical name Manahari was focused in Manahari

¹ The lowest administrative tier above wards in Nepal

VDC. Maisirang village in Makwanpur district is also the place where Christianity was introduced among the Chepangs. Manahari lies on the East-West highway contrary to Maisirang, which is very remote. In Chitwan district, Shaktikhor and Siddhi VDCs were chosen. Both the villages are connected to East-West highway through earthen roads. Settlements of Dhanbari, Gairibari, Supar, Kolar, Bangsurang and Darbetaar were surveyed in Shaktikhor VDC while settlements of Majhbang and Kasbang were surveyed in Siddhi VDC.

Data collection and analysis: A combination of key informants' interviews, focal group discussions, and participatory observation were adopted for collection of primary data from the research sites. Key informants were composed of central committee members of NCA, district committee members of NCA in Chitwan and Makwanpur, and Christian pastors and *pandes* in study villages. The researcher participated in several weekly (every Saturday) prayer sessions in the churches of study villages, celebration of *nwagi* festival of non-Christian Chepangs, and Christmas celebrations of December 2012 among Chepangs in the study villages. Checklists were formulated for key informants' interviews and group discussions prior to the field visits. The study adopts qualitative approaches for the analysis of information obtained from the field and presentation of research results.

Major findings:

Motivating factors

1. Healing of sickness: The first Christian convert from the Chepang community was offered healing prayer by Christian pastors combined with modern medicines, which cured serious illness unable to cure by their traditional healing system. This incident was the major motivation for converting to Christianity. As of today, the Christian Chepang converts believe that prayers to Jesus can cure their sicknesses. In addition, the funds collected at the churches are made available to the needy ones for getting access to modern medical facilities, which were inaccessible before.

2. Questionable Shamanism: The traditional healing system of the Chepangs comprised of chanting and beating of drums by the Shaman, along with sacrifice of animals. Very often, one would have to go to debt for managing sacrificial animals, and yet the sick would not be cured. With the adoption of Christianity, the pastors pray for the sick without charging any fees. Also, access to modern medicines has become easier. This has put a question upon the effectiveness of Shamanism, thereby motivating the community to convert to Christians.

3. Extending relations to the wider world: The Chepangs are originally isolated communities, not only because of their socio-economic marginalization, but also due to their geographical remoteness. With the adoption of Christianity, they were offered to travel to new places for interactions, tours, and religious seminars. This also extended their relations to the wider world, even with the international community.

4. Historical process of social exclusion: The indigenous communities like Chepangs have been historically excluded from the mainstream of national development. The ruling elites, mostly from higher Hindu hierarchical caste, considered these indigenous people as subordinates. The state was announced a Hindu nation until 2006, thereby further marginalizing these people, whose original religion was different from Hinduism. The national discriminatory policy of one religion (Hindu), and one language (Nepali) further pushed the already marginalized indigenous people into further misery. Under the history of historical subordination to mainstream Hindu community, Christianity appeared as a new agency for the Chepangs. When the Chepangs were approached by the Christian community, they were very friendly and helpful, which was very different to the stern and dominating nature of the so-called elite communities. This also has been a major factor of motivation for adopting Christianity among the Chepangs.

5. Marginalized livelihoods and the development assistances: Chepangs live in a remote geographical area, largely devoid of basic facilities like health centers, roads, and schools. The Christian Missionaries have approached these people with assistance in the schooling of the Chepang children, and modern medical facilities. The development works combined with social services has been very successful to influence the Chepangs.

Impacts

1. Restrictions in consumption of alcohol: Chepangs have the culture of preparing and consuming liquor at home, men and women alike. With Christianity, they have found a means to control their habit of alcohol consumption. This has

profound impact on their level of food sufficiency because agricultural production for majority of Chepang household is barely sufficient to support them for the whole year, and availability of very few alternative source of income jeopardize their food security during the dry season. In these circumstances, using the available grains for liquor preparation further worsens the situation. Upon converting to Christianity, they no longer prepare or consume alcohol, thereby saving grains and improving family food security.

2. Marginalized role of Pandes: Pastors have emerged as the new central social figure, in place of Pandes.

Conclusion/Observation: (400 words)

Moving on from one superstition to another

The majority of Christian Chepangs interviewed by the researcher believed that upon adopting Christianity, sickness is healed by praying to Jesus. In this sense, faith healing has prevailed as a common belief in both indigenous religion as well as Christianity. However, introduction of Christianity has also increased the access of this community to modern medical facilities, which was not available before. The true healing power of the sicknesses is the role of modern medicines used for treatment. Yet, the Christian Missionaries have only highlighted the role of prayers as the major factor in healing. In a way, the Chepang community has moved on from one form of superstition to another. However, the advantage of Christianity is that the prayers are held by pastors free of cost while earlier healing by Pandes required sacrificial animals and grains as fee (though it was said that these will be offered to the spirits). In addition, the Church community arranges for assistances for accessing modern medicines, which earlier was affordable only for a few households.

Indigenous identity in crisis

The recent political developments in Nepal have put emphasis on identity politics. According to the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act 2002, one of the important criteria for being identified as indigenous nationalities is that the community should have their traditional rites, customs and distinct cultural identity. Cultural identity has thus emerged as a very important issue due to political implications for indigenous rights. The NCA also emphasizes on promoting its language, religion, and culture as a measure to secure the indigenous identity as Chepangs. However within the community, conversion to Christianity is increasing, thereby traditional rites, customs and rituals are fast disappearing in many hamlets. Christianity is identified as the religion recently imported, thus do not fit into the definition of NFDIN. In that sense, NCA is currently facing an identity crisis. At the same time, many Christian Chepangs are in a dilemma of which comes first – ethnic identity or religious identity?

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