From mud to shampoo

Religious conversions and empowerment among Santali women in India

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to study personal empowerment processes and the influence religion have in such processes. The theory of Naila Kabeer, Srilatha Baltiwala and Sara Mosedale has mainly been used as the theoretical framework in this thesis. In order to study the influence of religion i.e. conversion to Christianity in personal empowerment processes five Santali women in India have been interviewed. The interviews were done through WhatsApp with the help of a translator. The results of this thesis have shown that religion influence women’s personal empowerment. In the sense that religion contribute to important changes in lifestyle, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Key words: empowerment of women, personal empowerment, Santals, Santali women, religion, Christianity, conversion, India
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Mera Bharat Mahan. My India is great, is a very common saying or slogan that can be seen everywhere in India, on buses, at airports or in TV-commercials. Living and working in India as a young woman, my head was constantly full of impressions; one very special experience stands out in my mind, how my Indian co-workers would not eat together with me out of ‘respect’ for me as a foreigner. However, I took my plate and walked demonstratively over to them and had my lunch with them. In the beginning it was a constant battle however step by step they understood that I enjoyed their company. They were three women from the countryside which recently had moved into the big city to be part of a humanitarian organisation. For six years I had the privileged to see them grow into responsibilities and leadership roles, learn English and interact boldly with foreigners and local officials, make a difference in their families and for hundreds of underprivileged children and the best of all, making me and my foreign colleagues superfluous. Empowerment or no empowerment, it is the most beautiful transformation I have ever seen.

A question that puzzled me over the years is about religion and if it effects the personal empowerment process. In India religion is everywhere, only from my home in Kolkata I could see two mosques, one church and three Hindu temples. In other words, religion is an evident factor of the society in India and it is constantly present in every area of life and occasion in life (Singh, 2007, p. 62). Religion influences the private sphere in providing an assurance that a higher power is in control and in giving hope for a better tomorrow. Consequently, it contributes to reduce extreme stress, anxieties for the future and existential uncertainty that vulnerable and poor people experience in developing countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2011, p. 19). Thus, it is imperative to explore the impact of religion in personal lives and subjectivities.

Empowerment refers to a process and to create awareness about power structures; in women becoming more self-confident, taking control over their lives and claiming their rights (Cornwall, 2016, s.342-343). Today empowerment of women is mainstream within development projects and studies all over the world, it has become an end that can be reached through provision of resources. Microloans and vocational training are typical and effective examples of means that generate income and help women to manage poverty. However, to deal with the fundamental causes of disempowerment Andrea Cornwall call for more than new policies and institutions facilitating
women’s resources and income (Cornwall, 2016, s.345). Women’s personal empowerment processes needs to be included, because they might be the real factors of change. In other words, a change must take place on a personal level:

“... unless women are liberated from their existing perception of themselves as weak, inferior and limited beings, no amount of external interventions ... will enable them to challenge existing power equations in society, the community or the family”

(Cornwall, 2016, s.345).

The aim of this thesis is to explore whether religion i.e. conversion to Christianity influence empowerment by focusing on women’s personal empowerment processes. In order to narrow down the thesis it will focus on Indian Santali women, their personal empowerment processes and the role of religion. Santals are the largest indigenous people group in India, they have a history of marginalization and discrimination and they have strong religious connections to Christianity and Santal-Hindu indigenous beliefs (Sahoo, 2017, p.2; Das, 2015, p.10). Large groups of Santals have converted to Christianity throughout history and some still do today (Das, 2015, p.10). Moreover, as demonstrated in this thesis, Santali women have a double burden of marginalisation to tackle, Santal have low status in India and Santali women have low status within the Santali tribe. In order to grasp Santali women’s personal empowerment processes interviews were conducted with five Santali women. In one of the interviews the respondent told me a remarkable story about her mother. She stated that after her family’s conversion to Christianity, her mother started to use shampoo instead of mud when washing her hair. The same mud Santals use to construct houses, the respondent’s mother used for washing her hair. Replacing mud with shampoo seems to be an unusual consequence of converting to a new religion.

Nevertheless, the research questions of this thesis are: does religion (conversion to Christianity) influence Santali-women’s personal empowerment process? If yes, how?

1.3 Relevance of the Thesis

Today empowerment of women is mainstream in development projects and studies all over the world. It has become an end that mainly can be reached through provision of resources. Micro loans and vocational training are typical and effective examples of means that generate income and aids the women in managing poverty. However, Andrea Cornwall argues that in order to deal
with the fundamental causes of poverty and the gender inequalities new policies and institutions facilitating women’s resources and income is required (Cornwall, 2016, s.345). Women’s personal empowerment processes needs to be included, because they might be the real factors of change. In other words, a change must take place on a personal level. Moreover, the empowerment literature is offering, as abovementioned, several definitions, applications and methods for measuring the outcomes of empowerment. However, I would argue that it fails to thoroughly examine women’s personal empowerment taking place in the private sphere. For example, Hanna Cueva Beteta, argues that UNDP’s measurement tool GEM fails to include women’s private sphere, that is their own decision-making power at the household level and over their own bodies (Beteta, 2007, p. 230).

Religion could be one of many factors influencing individuals private sphere. In the case of India, Hinduism is the major religion in India and it is practiced by approximately 82% of the population. Islam is the largest religious minority in India followed by Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists (Singh, 2007, pp. 62-63). Moreover, religion is an evident factor of the society and it is constantly present in every area of life and occasion in life. “From a mother performing puja for her child’s exam, to a mechanic who has renounced his material life and set off on the path to self-realisation, religion suffuses every aspect of life in India” (Singh, 2007, p. 62). Puja is a ritual of worship that plays an important role in Hinduism. In Hindu homes there is normally a dedicated place for worship were member of the family pray to gods of their choice. Beyond the home Hindus worship at temples that can be find in every Hindu neighbourhood, in the same manner as mosques and churches in Muslim and Christian neighbourhoods (Ibid, p.67). Furthermore, Indians celebrate various religious festivals, “with a pantheon of 33 million Hindu gods and goddesses, and the holy days of all the other religions that coexists in this country, it is hardly a wonder that each day is a festival” (Biswas, 2010, p. 22). The festivals are signs of humans’ belief in a higher power, a time to revitalise oneself and a time of celebration with family and friends (Ibid, p.22).

Moreover, the empowerment literature does not include religion even though it is such an obvious element for people living in the development world. In Sacred and the Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart present world-wide data showing that people living in poor and vulnerable societies/countries value religion and its basic values higher than residents in developed countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, pp.17-18). The data also shows
how the industrialized countries have become more secularized in the last 50 years while the world has more people than before belonging to any of the traditional religions; Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism etc (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p.5). Additionally, Norris and Inglehart describe how these traditional religions, but also secular ideologies, influence the private sphere as they provide an assurance that a higher power is in control and that the universe follows a certain plan that guarantees you a better life now or later if you follow the guidelines or rules of the religion. This so-called personal faith gives hope for a better tomorrow and contributes to reduce extreme stress, anxieties for the future and existential uncertainty that vulnerable and poor people experience in developing countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p.19).

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised as follows. Chapter two presents the development of empowerment of women and the ongoing discussions on the subject, followed by a chapter about the Santal people. Chapter four introduces the research design, research questions, method, data and sample used in this thesis. Chapter five presents the analysis and chapter six the conclusion of the thesis.
Chapter 2
Theory

2.1 Introduction of the Chapter

This chapter will discuss different development approaches that resulted in empowerment of women and in the end of this chapter the relevance of this study will be explained.

Empowerment arose as a critique of the development interventions in the Third World, exemplified through WID (Women in Development), WAD (Women and Development) and GAD (Gender and Development) (Baltiwalla, 2007, p. 558). To get an understanding of empowerment and its development, application and intention, a revisit is essential to its early beginnings, including the routes leading up to today’s buzzword. This following section will provide a brief description of the three transitions.

2.2 Women in development

WID (women in development) is the earliest approach among the abovementioned models and the central opinion articulated can be divided in two interconnected parts. First, a critique to modernization that dominated international development from the 1950s into the 1970s. The goal of development in the Third world intended to make the world modern i.e. Western. Influenced by colonialism, development specialists at this time saw Third women “as the most backward members of ‘backward’ societies” (Marchand & Parpart, 1995, p. 13) and therefore impediment to development (Ibid, p.13). Women were not seen as an entity and therefore women’s experiences could be equalized to men’s experiences, in the end all would benefit equally as societies became more modernized. These perceptions of Third World women justified the exclusion of women in development arena (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 490). Second, WID therefore emphasises that women need to be integrated into the development or modernization process (Parpart, 1995, p. 227). However, Western stereotypes of the women in the Third World, as victims, as inferior to Western women in need of being ‘civilized’ or ‘developed’, was largely unchallenged (Marchand & Parpart, p. 13). Ester Boserup’s pioneering work “Women’s Role in Economic Development” called for women’s inclusion in development policies and practices. Boserup emphasized women’s
involvement in agricultural and industrial development, and exposed development policies and processes course of action from colonial times as biased against women (Boserup, 2007, pp. 1-2).

2.3 Women and Development

The second approach, WAD (women and development) arose as a critique to WID, claiming that development could not occur through reform within traditional power structures (Parpart, 1995, p. 232) and that WID fails to fully address patriarchy and women’s subordination and subjugation (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 493). WAD is therefore partly based on radical feminist’s claim that “women can only develop outside patriarchal power structures” (Marchand & Parpart, 1995, p. 13) Consequently, WAD emphasize women-only projects to avoid male domination and the participation of women in planning and implementing development projects (Parpart, 1995, p. 233). The development agencies dedicated to this approach were determined to avoid large governmental interventions as much as possible, to keep development projects on a small scale, and to include and respect local knowledge. Moreover, WID followers adopted a hands-on and participatory approach to development to give grassroot women a say in development projects and to regulate the involvement development experts. WAD emphasizes the need to listen to the women’s needs and ideas, and to enable the women to take charge of their own lives. However, WAD fails to challenge the Western representations of the Third World women and sound like its predecessor WID when characterizing women in the Third World as victims, as vulnerable and without a voice (Ibid, p.233).

2.4 Gender and Development

The gender and development approach, GAD emerged as an alternative to the earlier WID perspective. WID analysed women and women issues as homogenous group in isolation from men however, in the long run this could rise the assumption that women are the problem rather than the inequalities women face. GAD is the first development approach offering a solution to this assumption in emphasising gender, studying women in relation to men and the way these relations between them are socially constructed (Elson, 1995, pp. 4-5). The GAD approach is interested in finding and challenging fundamental explanations for women’s subordination in relation to gender ideology, political and economic power structures and the sexual division between labour and power (Parpart, 1995, p. 235). Moreover, GAD adds value to both men and women:
“A gender-aware perspective on development facilitates the design of more human-centred development strategies which recognise that human beings are not simply instruments for increasing the gross national product but are valuable in and of themselves” (Elson, 1995, p. 253).

GAD focuses on gender and the social construction of gender roles and relations in regard to development rather than on women-only development projects (Marchand & Parpart, 1995, p. 14). Biologically, people are born as man or woman however gender roles are socially determined relations that separate men’s and women’s experiences. GAD recognize gender division regarding labour i.e. “women’s work” and “men’s work”. GAD is therefore able to enter the private sphere in the household and in the family to understand whether women are facing inequalities that so far has remained hidden for development practitioners and researchers (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 494). Diane Elson underlines in an interview that the inclusion of gender in development is relevant for two reasons;

“One is the issue of the distribution of the costs and benefits between different members of households: you miss a lot if you do not look inside them to see what differentiates women and men. The other is that if you don't do a gender analysis of policies you don’t see the impact of those policies. Everyone needs to recognize the different ways that men and women, boys and girls, will be interacting with policy, based on the gendered structure of that society and that economy” (Olsen, 2017).

The goals of GAD are both short-term and long-term. The short-term goals relate to education, micro-loans and improvements in the legal system. The long-term goals refer to collective action and to inspire women to challenge gender institutions and ideologies that subordinate women (Parpart, 1995, pp. 235-236). In other words, a gender-and-development perspective acknowledges women as agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries of development assistance, and it encourages women to organize themselves for a stronger political voice. This perspective does not only put women on the development agenda, it promotes a fundamental confrontation of social structures well embedded in society, in the end it may give more freedom and power to both men and women in bringing down power elites (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 494). However, even though the GAD approach is a breakthrough in many ways, it has not been able to deal with the Western or modernist stereotypes of the Third World women whom are frequently represented as the underprivileged and vulnerable “other” (Parpart, 1995, p. 236).
2.4 Empowerment of women

Empowerment emerged during 1980s following debates and critiques from women’s movement all over the world, and especially from the Third World feminists who were discontent with the current apolitical and economic development intervention models above mentioned WID, WAD, and GAD (Baltiwala, 2007, p. 558). Empowerment of women are frequently used terms in today’s development projects and interventions orchestrated by unilateral, bilateral and private human development organisations all over the world. Despite its popularity it has become more of a fuzzy buzzword than a life transforming experience for poor women in the Third world. Empowerment is and has been well-used and abused within the development and social change work in the Third world (Mosedale, 2005, p. 243). Consequently, when policy makers and practitioners decide to use empowerment of women or poor, scholars in this field are questioning empowerment’s meaning and purpose because development organisations, practitioners and intellectuals use empowerment to mean different things. Empowerment scholars such as Srilatha Baltiwala, Andrea Cornwall and Naila Kabeer have come to refer to empowerment as a fuzzy buzzword (Baltiwala, 2007, p. 560; Kabeer, 1999, p. 436; Cornwall, 2007, p. 474), or an approach that has been through depoliticization and has been transformed from its central objective to change power relations to development’s magic bullet (Cornwall, 2007, p. 474).

Naila Kabeer’s seminal work defines empowerment as: “empowerment is about the process which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). According to Kabeer choice can be divided into three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Kabeer also offers a method for measuring empowerment by connecting the definition to the three interrelated dimensions. First, resources refer to the pre-conditions that improve the possibility to make choices regarding material, human and social resources. Moreover, to operationalize and measure empowerment resources are defined as access to resources, control over resources and decision-making in relation to resources. Second, agency relates to the actual process that Kabeer divides into ‘the power within’ and ‘the power to’. The former is referring to ‘motivation, meaning and purpose’ of action and the latter relates to “people’s capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in face of opposition” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Measuring agency
relates to ‘decision-making agency’ and are usually based on interviews with women regarding their role in connection to specific decisions. In the case of India, it could be; purchase of food or major household items or small personal items such as jewellery; decisions concerning children’s education and type of school; course of action if a child gets sick (Kabeer, 1999, pp. 444-446). Decision-making responsibilities are commonly known by the community and family, appoints certain responsibilities to men as the head of the household and women as mother, wives and daughters. However, interviews or statistical perspectives on decision-making, tend to miss or tell us very little about the private discussions between men and women in their private lives. They only provide a glimpse of processes of decision-making in a certain context and underestimate the informal decision-making that women so often practise (Kabeer, 1999, p. 447). Third, achievements or outcomes are concerned with the measurement of the results of empowerment. However, to measure achievements a distinction must be made between differences in choice and inequalities in the ability to make a choice. An empowerment perspective is more interested “in possible inequalities in people’s capacity to make choices rather than in differences in choices they make” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 439). Moreover, for measurement purposes Kabeer suggest focusing on universally agreed ‘functionings’ as achievements related to basic well-being and survival, such as access to shelter, food and good health.

In ‘Women’s Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices’ Srilatha Baltiwala provides one of the first documents conceptualizing empowerment defining it as: ‘process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups’ (Baltiwala, 2007, p. 560). The document also provided a definition of gender as “the transformation of the relations of power between men and women, within and across social categories of various kinds” (Ibid, p.560). Based on these two definitions Baltiwala further describes empowerment as a process transforming the social power relations between individuals and groups in three critical ways: by challenging ideologies that uphold social inequalities, by reforming existing conventions of access to and control over economic, natural and intellectual resources and by changing the institutions and structures that underpin and enforce existing power structures. Moreover, Baltiwala underlines that there is no ‘quick fix’ or ‘magic-bullet’ procedure to women’s empowerment such as providing women with micro-loans or vocational training.
However, to sustain empowerment and to see a real social change a transformation in the ideological and institutional dimensions is crucial (Ibid, p. 560).

The empowerment-concept spread rapidly over the world and development agencies adopted the word into strategies and programmes. Donor agencies abandoned earlier WID, WAD and GAD approaches and approved empowerment as an objective and methodology. In India for example, donors promoted empowerment among their development associates, several NGO’s and women’s organisations were obligated to incorporate empowerment in their vocabulary and possibly in their strategies and the government of India adopted the term as well (Ibid, p.558). Consequently, the spreading of the use of empowerment turned out to have a strong influence in eventually transforming it into a meaningless buzzword with a variety of definitions. Empowerment was still strongly linked to women and gender equality, however with time it transformed into a trendy word extensively used beyond the development arena (Ibid, p.561). The fuzziness of empowerment is even demonstrated in the development field: ‘I like the term empowerment because no one has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a breathing space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means’ NGO worker (Baltiwala, 1994, p. 48). Moreover, Baltiwala consider the history of Western representations of the Third World as totally misleading and dividing the development field. In order to deal with these challenges, Baltiwala recommends practitioners and researchers to listen to women’s opinions and experiences (Baltiwala, 2007, p. 564). However, I would like to argue that considering the long history in this area, Baltiwala’s suggestions are not enough to transform the Western perceptions of women in development countries.

Sara Mosedale connects empowerment to a process of change that is moving from being disempowered to being empowered. Disempowerment and poverty are usually connected, a lack of resources to meet one’s basic needs often take out the capacity to make meaningful choices. Choice implies the possibility of alternatives, and the ability to have chosen otherwise. However, Mosedale underline that empowerment cannot come through a third party, NGO’s or development organisations cannot empower women, but they can create favourable conditions and promote empowerment (Mosedale, 2005, p. 244). Mosedale also suggests a method for assessing empowerment that is similar to Naila Kabeer’s contribution. Mosedale’s definition refers to a process creating possibilities for women to redefine gender roles to broaden their opportunities for
being and doing. However, her definition has two central differences from Kabeer’s work; “it emphasizes the gendered nature of women’s disempowerment” and it is concentrating on women “redefining and extending the limits of what is possible” rather on women obtaining a capacity to choose (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252). Moreover, Mosedale presents a framework that sets out to identify constraints to action; by providing a baseline that explains “the state of gendered power relations before any action is taken” (Ibid, p.252). An essential participatory process is a crucial part of this framework, which might help the women involved to understand that they are discriminated. The actual assessment later “focus on an action or groups of actions identified as the most significant by those constrained” (Ibid, p. 253). In practice, a facilitator would be part of the process to provide information that is rooted in the local context and to promote action without disturbing the actual empowerment process.

Naila Kabeer and Sara Mosedale both recognize empowerment’s underlying link to power as an important component for assessing empowerment. Kabeer connects it to the ability to make choices and agency while Mosedale links it to the process of identifying constraints (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436; Mosedale, 2005, p. 249). Both scholars divide power into four different dimensions that all effect empowerment and to some extent represent a zero-sum game (one’s persons gain is another’s loss); power over which may have negative outcomes such as overriding the agency of others. The three other forms of power are not necessarily another’s loss; 1) power within: refers to self-esteem and self-confidence, 2) power with: refers to collective action and 3) power to: refers to ability to act (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438; Mosedale, 2005, p. 250).

Moreover, Mosedale is on similar terms as Baltiwala regarding the history of Western representations of the Third World as totally deceiving and dividing the development field. Mosedale suggests that “women’s positions should be based on the realities of their lives rather than on generalized assumptions that they are oppressed” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 245). However, I would like to argue that because of the long history in this area, Mosedale’s suggestions are not enough to break the generalized perceptions of women in the development countries.

Hanna Cueva Beteta is also among them who argues that empowerment is a process and not an outcome. In “What is missing in measures of Women’s Empowerment?” she argues that the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) publication of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) needs vital improvements. GEM is currently containing three indicators: “the proportion
of seats held by women in national parliaments (...) the percentage of women in economic decision-making positions and the female share of income” (Beteta, 2007, p. 222). Beteta’s main critique against GEM is that it mainly intercepts the economically and socially privileged women and fails to include women’s private sphere i.e. decision-making power both at the household level and over their own body and sexuality (ibid, p.230). Moreover, she argues that a reliable legal and regulatory framework protecting and promoting women’s rights is one of the most important elements for women’s empowerment (ibid, p.234).

Furthermore, Saraswati Raju and Richa Nagar argues that practitioners and scholars of empowerment cannot have one uniformly applicable plan for measurement. “We have to contextualize the changes in order to appreciate the changes” (Nagar & Raju, 2003, p. 11). In other words, the empowerment women experience or achieve in South India, may not be reached in North India because issues and challenges may vary in different contexts (Ibid, p.11). Moreover, organisations involved in empowerment must have a clear strategy because it doesn’t make sense to say: “Let’s work to empower poor Dalit (‘untouchables’) women in this village” (Ibid, p.6). Organisations or practitioners must look, in this case, at the Dalits and their situation from multidimensional perspective. It is about the ways the Dalits have been marginalized, about how men’s and women’s challenges interact, what local and state level structures are responsible for their marginalization, and how empowerment of Dalit women is connected to their village and community (Ibid, p.6). Moreover, interventions empowering women in one area might disempower them in another. For example, Raju and Nagar refers to a situation where women that received training also got new jobs and an improved social status in the community. Unfortunately, they got less paid than their male colleagues, and the nature of their work took them away from their families and households into a new sector in which they felt marginalized in new ways. When considering these women and whenever evaluating empowerment it is of utmost importance to: “to listen to their own stories and interpretations of what they consider to be important achievements or transformations in their status, and why” (Ibid, p.7). Moreover, Nagar and Raju argue that it is not enough to document women’s own interpretations, but researchers and humanitarian workers involved must do their part in studying and analysing the women’s changes (Ibid, p.8). NGO’s all over the world are committed to empower women but it is easier said than done since there are a variety of definitions of empowerment and people from the same organisations may have totally different ideas of what it means.
2.5 Naila Kabeer’s definition

Srilatha Baltiwala, Naila Kabeer and Sara Mosedale all three agree on that empowerment is a process. However, Baltiwala refers it to changing power relations between individuals and groups while Kabeer’s processual definition focus on the ability to make choices for your own life that you could not do before. Mosedale connects the process to expanding women’s limits in what is possible in situations where they have been restricted. I would like to argue that Kabeer’s definition is best suited for this thesis, because it is applicable to women’s private sphere and personal empowerment: “empowerment is about the process which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435).
Chapter 3
Santals

3.1 Background

Santals are one of the largest tribal groups in India and they are spread over the central and eastern states Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Assam (See map in Appendix 1). There is also a Santali population in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. To understand the Santals and their history we need to recognise that: “In terms of religion, region, participation, caste, equal access of opportunities in health and education, they are not only backward, but historically marginalized” (Sahoo, 2017, p. 2).

3.2 History and Lifestyle

The Santals had no written history until the British colonialists and western missionaries came to India in the 18th century. The Santali community have been exploited and neglected over the years, and they have little representation and participation in the political and public arena (Sahoo, 2017, pp. 1-2). The Hindus/the Bengalis are mainly portrayed as perpetrators, lending money to poor Santals with a constantly increasing interest rate and it sometimes happened that three generations had to work their whole lives to repay a debt. Santals are farmers and have for centuries cultivated rice but their perpetrators did everything in their power to take their land, sabotage their harvests or commercial activities. There are several records of Hindus seizing their lands, stealing and cheating when doing business with Santals (Dasgupta, 2013, p. 20). It all happened under the British rule and the colonizers claimed they had no idea of the degrading conditions and exploitation and didn’t show any interest in coming to their rescue. These and other degrading activities succeeded and made the situation unbearable for the Santals (Hadne, 1966, p. 21). In June 1855, 35 000 armed Santalis marched off to Calcutta (todays Kolkata) and expressed their complaints before the Governor General. On the way the march turned into a violent insurrection and many moneylenders and oppressor of the Santals got their reward. 10 000 Santals lost their lives and the rebellions leaders got hard punishments. As a result, a thorough investigation of their grievances was conducted, and plans were made to reach better and fairer conditions. Santal Parganas (district) in Jharkhand was formed with Deputy Commissioner in charge. However, it could not give permanent compensation for the Santals, their main issue didn’t settle, the
deprivation of their land (Hadne, 1966, pp. 22-23). Moreover, “Santal ignorance and habitual excessive drinking soon brought them into the hands of merciless moneylenders and landowners again” (Hadne, 1966, p. 32).

On the one hand, Santals were socially and culturally on the decline but on the other hand their social life was somewhat developing. The social life of the Santals has strong religious connections, their religious beliefs form their lives from birth to death and dominate all their affairs. Santals believe in higher beings called bongas, they are to be worshiped with fear and must be kept satisfied in order to be safe from their wrath. As the Santals life is dominated by their religion and the central factor of worship is fear, their worldview becomes one of “resignation, passivity and insecurity” (Hadne, 1966, p. 31). There are still many beliefs and practices among the Santals even today, however outside factors such as government, Christianity and Hinduism, have resulted in many changes in Santals lives.

Lars Olsen Skrefrud is one of the first missionaries arriving to Santal Parganas (now Jharkhand) in the 1870s. The Santals were in a state of disintegration and they were in big need of someone fighting for them and L.O. Skrefsrud turned out to be one of them (Hadne, 1966, pp. 33-34). However, introducing a new religion entailed a lot of opposition and fear that the missionaries would destroy the culture of the Santals. Several elements influenced the process of introducing Christianity and one factor should not be underestimated, the important social and humanitarian work; “We did for the people whatever possible, brought their trials and wrongs to the notice of the Government, and were enabled to do great things for them in their direst need ...” (Hadne, 1966, p. 167).

The number of converts increased as the missionaries built schools, dispensaries and churches that kept the Santals cultural traditions such as using the drum for calling people together instead of a church bell or using Santal hymnology (Hadne, 1966, p. 187). Moreover, thanks to the great Bengal famine in 1874 a mass movement towards Christianity emerged and so did several relief operations in Santal Parganas (Ibid, p.170). The success of the missionaries spread to their home countries and was received with joy and dislike. At a mission’s conference held in 1876 one of the members said: “If in the same manner I had preached the Gospel with a rice-bowl in my hand, I, too, could easily have baptized the whole population Menahe, (30,000 souls), without one exception” (Ibid, p.173). Whether the converts were rice-Christians or not is not for me to decide
however many returned to their tribal religion or turned to Hinduism. Nevertheless, the missionaries left behind a great legacy; land reforms for Santals, the first Santali alphabet, dictionary and grammar, the bible in Santali among many other publications, accessible health care and schools welcoming Santal children (Ibid, p. 299-300).

As time passed missionaries died and new missionaries arrived, India became independent and the world’s largest democracy. Santals have entered politics on a small scale however it is far from enough. An elder Santal expressed it like this: “our own culture and mythology kept us together. May be it also kept us poor. The new politics has brought us some benefit, but it has completely divided us” (Mahapatra, 1986, p. 21). Still today the majority of the Santals live poor lives and poverty is a great obstacle, they work hard in the rice fields, tea gardens or as day labourers. Moreover, after the raising of mass media many parts of the Santal community is being further marginalized because they don’t have much of a position to raise their voices (Sahoo, 2017, pp. 2-3).

### 3.3 Social status of Santali women

A Santali family is run according to a patriarchal family system and a higher status is therefore given to the father, paternal grandfather and paternal uncle. It is the responsibility of the husband to provide for the family and the wife oversees the economy and the household, including collecting firewood, raising children and shopping for the family and assist their husbands in farming activities like sowing and reaping. The sons for example help their fathers in the fields and the daughters mainly help their mothers in the household (Das, 2015, p.209). Marriage is an arranged agreement between the elders in the family and Santals are only allowed to marry within their own tribe. Moreover, a crucial concern of a Santal couple after marriage is infertility, a Santali man can divorce his wife for infertility or have a second wife with approval from his first wife. The Santali woman has an inferior position to the man in the Santal society and she is the property of her father until her marriage, and after marriage she is the property of her husband (Ibid, p.210). Moreover, the Santali women and their children are the main victims of male alcoholism which still is a wide spread problem in the Santali community (Ibid, p. 209)
Chapter 4
Design & Method

4.1 Design
The research design of this thesis is qualitative case study that will be conducted among Santali women, to listen to their voices in order to understand whether their religion or conversion to Christianity is influencing their personal sphere in regard to their personal empowerment processes. The case study design in the social sciences normally focus on social relations and processes, it focuses on one or more cases and enables the researcher to get a deeper knowledge and understanding of how such relations and processes functions (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 35). Moreover, the ambition of this thesis is to contribute to the research and larger discussion on empowerment and to get a glimpse of religions impact which has a strong presence in development countries like India.

4.2 Case Selection
The study will be conducted among Santali women in West Bengal, India in order to answer the research questions: does religion influence Santali-women’s personal empowerment processes? If yes, how? In other words, it will be a case of Santali women, to listen to their personal experiences of religion as conversion to Christianity and how their experiences relate to their personal empowerment processes.

4.3 Sample
The sample or sampling of this thesis is totally dependent on the context, on the nature and design of the study (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 5). In order to get in contact with Santali women, I contacted my former colleague in Kolkata, she is herself a Santal and nowadays she lives in the big city of Kolkata and she is working with marginalised street children. My colleague is regularly visiting her own village Alankarpur in Midnapore district, three hours train ride south of Kolkata and she has therefore a broad social Santal network. Moreover, she speaks Santali, Bengali and English and will therefore function as an interpreter in the interviews. The choice of interviewees is quite basic because semi-structured interviews are based on people’s experiences and
perceptions about different phenomena that is of importance (Esaiasson, et al., 2015, p. 259). However, with the assistance of my former colleague the sampling has been made based on the following agreed criteria: the interviewers should be Santal, young women (age 25-35) and must have converted to Christianity. Regarding the number of interviews there is a recurring answer in the Qualitative Interview literature; ‘it depends’ (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 66). The number of interviews depends on “practical issues such as the level of degree, the time and finances available and institutional committee requirements” (ibid, p.66). Furthermore, “epistemological and methodological questions about the purpose of the research: whether the focus of the objectives and of analysis is on commonality or difference or uniqueness or complexity or comparison or instances” (ibid, p.66). The number of interviews can therefore vary significantly, a single interview is enough if it is exceptional and not comparable and several interviews are required to compare specific groups. This Bachelor thesis will make use of five semi-structured interviews on the basis of the size of this study and that five interviews have “the ability to build a convincing narrative based on rich detail and complexity” (ibid, p.66).

4.4 Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews provide the researcher with good opportunities to receive unexpected answers and to ask follow-up questions, something that a questionnaire never can register (Esaiasson, et al., 2015, p. 251). The purpose of qualitative interviews is to visualize and to explain how certain phenomena occur. Qualitative interviews main fields of application are 1) when entering an unexplored field, 2) when we want to how the research participants perceive their world, 3) when the purpose of the research is to develop theories or concepts, 4) testing of theories, 5) as a complement to other research methods (Ibid, pp.252-257). This study among Santali women is clearly connected to point 2, since this study is entering an unexplored field in regard to empowerment and religion and aiming to know how Santali women perceive their everyday. Moreover, qualitative interviews can be structured, semi-structured or flexible. In this study semi-structured interviews will be used because such a structure leave room for flexibility and follow-up questions. Furthermore, qualitative interview is:

“A perspective regarding knowledge as situated and contextual, requiring the researcher to ensure that relevant contexts are brought into focus so that the situated knowledge can be produced. Meanings and understandings are created in an interaction, which is effectively
The interview guide is one of the main tools of a qualitative interview, it is a list of questions or series of themes that the researcher wants to cover in the interview. However, there is flexibility of how and when the questions are asked and how the person interviewed can respond. These kinds of interviews give much space to the interviewees to answer in their own way than a structured interview does (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 29). The interview guide of this study is described in section on conducting the interview.

Qualitative interviews face a series of challenges and not all qualitative interviews constitute good research. The main critique of qualitative interviews is that it is “illustrative, descriptive, unsystemic, biased, impossible to replicate and not generalizable” (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 91). Moreover, the main challenge for the individual researcher is to be as transparent as possible and to practice reflexivity in considering possible and actual effects of all other factors involved (ibid, p.92). For example, an ‘interviewee-effect’ is such a consequence, meaning that the interviewees answers vary depending on who is asking the questions (Esaiasson, et al., 2015, p. 267). Interviewing people from marginalized groups such as Santals, may have different effects on an interview. The social status or the identity of the interviewer in relation to an interviewee may shape an interview (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 79). In the interviews with the Santali women the identity and social status of the interviewer, a foreigner in India, had certain implications on the interviews. However, the confidence building was already in place since I have been living in India for eight years and working with the interpreter for six years. I encountered Santals many times in my work and my colleague taught me some basic Santal expressions ice-breakers in the beginning of the interviews. Consequently, it is important to practice reflexivity to examine how and where some of my assumptions and views might affect the interpretations of the interviewees words. A ‘voice relational method’ will be take into consideration, i.e. the researcher places background, history and experiences in relation to the respondent and reads the narrative to listen for own emotional and intellectual responses in regard to the interviewee. This will give the researcher some grasp over the blurred boundary between the respondent’s narrative and the interpretation (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 419).
Furthermore, qualitative interviews enable the researcher to uncover findings that a quantitative questionnaire or research cannot do. The strengths of qualitative interviews show how researchers can capture the weave of everyday life, understand the respondents’ experiences, understandings and imaginations, and to comprehend how social processes, discourses and relationships work (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 91). Another important aspect regarding qualitative research is regarding the ethics of this research field. Ethical problems in this area mainly occur because of: “complexities of researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2006, p. 158). It is therefore of utmost importance that the researcher properly informs the respondents of the nature and purpose of the study and get full approval from the researched to take part in the study (Esaiasson, et al., 2015, p. 257). These ethical principles were explained and respected by the author of this thesis and the interviewees gave their full approval.

4.5 Conducting the Interviews

Before conducting the interviews, an interview guide was created based on the research questions of this study; is religion influencing young Santali women’s personal empowerment process? If yes, how? The questions of the interview guide were divided into three themes: generic questions, religion and conversion to Christianity, empowerment – resources, agency, power within and achievements. Moreover, a test interview was done with the translator in order to improve the interview and to avoid misunderstandings. The actual interviews were conducted via WhatsApp video call on the interpreter’s phone and the interviews were recorded with a computerised voice recorder program. The interviewer was able to have face-to-face contact with the interviewees and took carefully notes while the interpreter was translating. According to Edwards and Holland, internet technology is a very valuable interview method since it is “low costs, easy access, minimization of ecological dilemmas and the partial overcoming of spatiality and physical interaction” (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 49). In the case of the interviewer this was a preferable method due to long distance, lack of time and resources in other words it is a convenient method for the interviewer. The interviews in this study took place during two days in the afternoon (Indian Standard Time), in connection to the women’s home and each interview lasted for about 1h 45 minutes. One of the interviews was suddenly interrupted by a heavy thunderstorm causing a two-hour power cut, consequently the interview had to be continued after the storm.
4.6 Operationalisation

Operationalisation is a process defining the measurement of a phenomena or concept that cannot be measured. It is a process assigning the theoretical definition of a concept with one or several indicators that will enable measuring (Esaiasson, et al., 2015, p. 55). In this case two concepts requires to be operationalised, religion and empowerment.

The definition of religion in Oxford dictionary (2018) will be used as a theoretical definition: “The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods”. However, the operationalisation will be conducted with the help of several questions used in the interview. Below follows a brief example of questions, for full operationalisation see Appendix 3.

Naila Kabeer’s theoretical definition of empowerment will be used: “Empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). Kabeer’s inter-related dimensions: resources, agency and achievements will partly be used in the operationalisation. However, since the purpose of this thesis is to study the private sphere and the personal empowerment, Kabeer’s concept of empowerment will be modified. Agency will be replaced by ‘the power within’. Agency is normally operationalised as ‘decision-making power’ in social sciences however ‘power within’ includes the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency (Kabeer, 1999, p.438). Kabeer keeps ‘power within’ as a part of agency however, in order to capture the personal empowerment process of the Santali women, ‘power within’ is only used because it is a more suitable indicator for this study rather than agency. Resources, ‘power within’ and achievements will be measured with the help of a certain number of interview questions relating to each indicator. Below examples of questions are presented, see Appendix 3 for full operationalisation.

Religion
Who introduced you to Christianity?
Why did you choose Christianity?
What benefits to get from being a Christian?
How do you express your religion?
Empowerment

*Resources:*
Who is the main economic earner?
How does it work with the money distribution in your family?
Who takes the financial decisions in your family?

*Power within:*
Do you have any dreams? Could you please tell me a little bit about your dreams?
Are there any of these dreams that you can’t do because of the context you are living in?
If you could change one thing in your life, what would that be?
Do you feel at peace with yourself through your religion?
Does religion give you security?
Do you think Santals have the same value as Bengalis or other Indians?

*Achievements:*
Do you have anything you are proud of?
If you can mention something in the last three years, what are you most proud of?
Are you equal to the male members of your family?
Chapter 5
Analysis

5.1 Introduction

The aim of chapter 5 is to analyse and discuss the semi-structured interviews with five Santali-women in the age of 25 to 30 years old. The analysis is divided into three sections which are reflecting the research questions of this study: Does religion influence Santali-women’s personal empowerment processes? If yes, how? The empirical data is organized around three themes that are reflected in the data and potentially reflect on the main research questions. The three themes are represented by the following three questions:

Does religion have any influence in women’s personal empowerment?

Does religion effect women’s decision-making power?

Is religion liberating women from their existing self-perceptions of themselves?

In order to analyse all these accounts, it is important to take Saraswati Raju and Richa Nagar advice into consideration, “to listen to their own stories and interpretations of what they consider to be important achievements or transformations in their status, and why” (Nagar & Raju, 2003, p. 7).

5.2 Background information of the respondents

Five Santali-women were part of this study, their age is between 25 to 30 years, they come from Alankarpur, Dantan, Sabong and Debhog, four villages in the Midnipur district in West Bengal in east India (See map in Appendix 2). The main occupation of the respondents’ families are rice-farmers and all the respondents are involved in the farming. Two of the women’s main occupation is housewife and the three others consider themselves as farmers. Moreover, the education level of the respondents is different, two women have no education and the other three have primary education until grade 5, 6 and 9. Four of the women are married and have children, and the respondents either live in their parents or parents- in-laws house. In India the idea of joint family is custom, therefore after marriage a girl moves into her parents-in-laws house and before marriage she lives in her parents’ house (Singh, 2007, p. 70). Furthermore, all the respondents used to be, what they call Hindu-Santals (Santal religion mixed with Hinduism) and have converted to
Christianity. Four of the respondents’ conversion stories are based on quite hopeless situations whereas conversion to Christianity seemed to be their last beam of hope. The fifth respondent were curious about Christianity, started going to church and converted together with her family after a while. The respondents express their religion by attending church every week, attending house fellowships/prayer meetings, praying and some of them read the Bible every day. Moreover, a dominant characterizing idea among the respondents is that they perceive or used to perceive themselves as weak, inferior and limited beings. According to the respondents’, the reason for these self-perceptions are the Bengalis (Indians living in West Bengal) because they are treating Santals as backward and ‘dirty people’. In order to distinguish the respondents answers each respondent is coded from R1 to R5.

5.3 Does religion have any influence in women’s personal empowerment?

Santals life is deeply rooted in their religion and the dominant factor in their worship is fear, their attitude to life becomes “one of resignation, passivity and insecurity” (Hadne, 1966, p. 31). However, “Santali men and women find their joy and happiness in their daily lives, through dances and excessive drinking (...) their minds and hearts may for a short time, be lifted above everyday trivialities and sorrows” (Hadne, 1966, p. 32). Moreover, the Santali women and their children are the main victims of male alcoholism which is a wide spread problem in the Santali community (Das, 2015, p. 209).

Several of the respondents’ accounts show that alcohol consumption still is a problem:

“all in my family were drunkards” (R2)

“many people are drunkards” (R3)

“all are drunkards in our village area” (R4)

After their conversion to Christianity the respondents can see a change in their households:

“we were drunkards, now we are not touching alcohol anymore” (R1)

“one positive thing with Christianity is that I’m released from alcohol” (R3)

“now (after becoming Christian) alcohol totally stopped in our house” (R5)
Moreover, the respondents were asked if their religion provides them with peace and security, and they all answered positively. The accounts of the respondents also indicate that peace and security are positive elements of Christianity. When one of the respondents was asked to express something positive with Christianity she said: “one thing I can say, I get more peace” (R2). Another woman answers the same question: “it was hard before now the entire family is living in peace” (R3). However, I would like to argue that the peace and security is connected to the stop of alcohol consumption since excessive drinking drains the economy, disturb the peace in the family and causes domestic violence (Dasgupta, 2013, p. 10). Nevertheless, based on the respondent’s accounts, after converting to Christianity it seems like the peace was restored in the family and excessive drinking stopped. Furthermore, when talking about whether conversion to Christianity made a difference or brought about change, one respondent came up with a very interesting answer: “yes, if I say our lifestyle is totally changed. My mother is older, has some other thinking, one simple example I can say, that time when our hair was dirty we don’t use shampoo, we had another thinking, mud is better than shampoo, we use mud and now we use shampoo and I see my mother use shampoo even if she is older” (R1). To clarify I asked if this really had to do with their conversion to Christianity, she answered: “Yes, now she is going everywhere to churches, prayer meetings, house fellowship and see more, this has opened her eyes a little bit and totally her lifestyle is changed” (R1).

In order to further understand this woman’s answer, it is important to have some knowledge and understanding about Santals and village life in India. My background as an NGO-worker in India and some important insights from my Santal colleague will shed some light to these answers. First, the actual change came through her mother, an older woman that has a traditional Santal mindset and thought mud to be better than shampoo for washing hair. In the shops in the cities in India (an all over Sweden) mud masks for hair are available however they are specially developed as a hair product. The mud this woman is referring to in the interview is the same kind of mud they use when building their mud huts. It is a different way of thinking than in other villages or cities in India. After the respondent and her family converted to Christianity, she could see changes in her family’s lifestyle, particularly changes in her mother’s way of living were evident since she is an older woman with a very traditional way of living. In this story the respondent’s mother stops using mud and starts using shampoo when washing her hair. Is it really an effect of converting to Christianity? At first it seems far-fetched however, it might not be the conversion per se that
evoked this change. Belonging to a Church community develops a sense of community and social capital, which enabled the respondent’s mother to acquire knowledge about her social well-being and other women’s day-to-day lived experiences, which might have inspired her to start using shampoo.

Another respondent had a heart-breaking story leading up to her conversion. She is 27 years old and she has a daughter that is 11 years old and a son that is 7+ years old. She became a mother at 16 and got married when she was 13-14 years old. Before she got her daughter, she had three miscarriages in the later stages of pregnancy (5 months, 6, months and 9 months). She was never examined by a doctor only by the ‘witch doctor’ in her village. (My former colleague told me that Santals normally don’t consult doctors, because of their indigenous believes they turn to their gods or witch doctors.)

“I thought I would never become a mother, we did many pujas, but it didn’t help” (R2).

However, shortly after the third miscarriage she and her family converted to Christianity and after a year she was pregnant again.

“This time I was nervous and very much afraid, but everything was different” (R2)

The respondents baby girl was later born that year. This is the respondents own experience and it cannot be taken away from her however, when analysing her story, it is necessary to take the circumstances into consideration. She had three miscarriages before turning 16 years old, a reasonable explanation for that could possibly be that her body was not mature enough to have a baby nor did she not have access to proper health care. At the age of sixteen her body could apparently handle a full pregnancy and a second child at the age of twenty.

The abovementioned accounts do not demonstrate empowerment as defined in this thesis. However, the experiences of peace and security, the decisions to stop drinking alcohol, the change from mud to shampoo or the birth of two anticipated children are examples of events or actions that represent important changes in the lives of the respondents’ which have practical effect on their personal empowerment. For example, the respondent who experienced all the miscarriages was rather empowered by having children because not having children as a woman in India is attached to a stigma (Singh, 2007, p. 56). Moreover, I would like to argue that the respondents’ experience of having children is positively influencing the ‘power within’ which relates to self-
esteem and self-confidence (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). In other words, the respondent’s self-esteem and self-confidence improved as having children took away the stigma of her situation. Nevertheless, these findings are not providing enough evidence to claim a causal relationship between their conversion to Christianity and the respondents’ experiences of empowerment, in order to do that further research in this area would be required.

5.4 Does religion effect women’s decision-making power?

Marriage is an important institution in the Santal culture and it is arranged by the elder members of the family (Das, 2015, p. 210). The respondents were asked if they married a man of their own choice, they all gave negative replies, and three of them were convinced that the same arrangement will apply for their own children.

“In Santali area family decide, family decide when where and whom” (R2).

“Arranged marriage is best for my children. Not much has changed after becoming Christian” (R3).

“I like arranged marriage” (R4).

However, two of the respondents gave surprisingly different answers and one of them explained an up-coming trend among young Santal-Christians.

“My younger sister got married and she was in class six, my sister didn’t want to get married, so my parents allowed her to continue with her studies. We don’t have any elder brother, uncle was pushing us. We said no but that is not allowed, the older will decide and we need to obey that one and she got married. This happened before we became Christian, it is not the same today, because I saw many Santali-Christian people from many houses, they can have own choice, we are only allowed to marry Santal people, if we want to marry from other cast you can’t stay here, but when we became Christian we can get married to other casts, like Bengali-Christian” (R1).

“For marriage there is free choice, no pressure” (R5).

The last quote indicates a change within the Santal-Christian community that was not there before, ‘cross-caste-marriage’ or ‘inter-religious-marriage’ to be correct. It is important to note that caste-thinking is a dominating thinking in India. Caste refers to occupational status and economic
mobility (Singh, 2007, p. 57) but the respondent refers to Bengali-Christian as a caste, however in reality, it is a religious group in the dominant Bengali community.

However, the respondent did not experience this, so there is no sign of empowerment in this area in her private sphere. Nevertheless, her account witness of a new phenomenon, an indicator of empowerment which is closely related to Naila Kabeer’s definition of empowerment as people’s capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in face of opposition’ (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Looking through the lens of Kabeer, the people the respondent is referring to has the capacity to define and pursue their own goals or dreams, even in the face of opposition and therefore moving away from the disapproving village. Additionally, it is important to note that the respondent talked about both men and women when referring to ‘Santali-Christian people’ however the interview was not enough to capture the extent of ‘inter-religious-marriages’. On the other hand, I would like to argue that occurring ‘inter-religious-marriages’ could also be indicating an ongoing empowerment process among the young Santal-Christians because; “empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 244).

Furthermore, Santali women are normally having a key role in the family’s economy, although the father or the oldest man in the household has the ultimate responsibility and authority in the family (Das, 2015, p. 210). The five semi-structured interviews represent five households, in four of the households the husband or the male members of the family are responsible for income, in two of them the husbands are also overseeing the economy, in the other two the wives are responsible for the finances. In one household the mother of the interviewee is responsible for everything since she is a widow and the male members of the family are living in another village. Moreover, the five interviewees explain that they can express their opinion freely in the home and that they can discuss and settle daily matters together with their husbands. Based on these accounts, I would like to argue that religion does not influence the respondents dealing with daily matters and finances because according to the respondents nothing has changed in this area after the conversion to Christianity.

Santals have a reputation of having a worldview of “resignation, passivity and insecurity” (Hadne, 1966, p. 31) the respondents indicate that this is not the case regarding their dreams, plans and changes they would like to see in their society and in their own lives.
“Religions in here tell us, lower cast are not so much holy, and higher cast don’t sit with them, this kind of thing I would like to change so that they think we are all same” (R1).

“Santals don’t have toilet, I want to build toilets for every house” (R2).

“We are very much poor, we don’t have rice field or anything like that, I dream of having a rice field” (R4).

The dreams of these women are bigger than themselves but at the same time it refers to Sarah Mosedale’s definition of empowerment to redefine and extend the limits of what is possible (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252). In other words, changing the mind set of an entire population, build toilets for every Santali home that does not have a toilet or one day owning a rice field are in my opinion clear examples of redefining and extending the limits of what is possible. Moreover, the respondents are longing for more knowledge and education for both themselves and for their children.

“I want to change my education, to study in a higher class” (R3).

“In church I saw many children having education and going to school, I want the same for my children*, so they understand who they are” (R4).

“I want education and for my children* also” (R5).

Looking through the lens of Saraswati Raju and Richa Nagar it is obvious that an important achievement is accomplished when a Santali-woman send and want to send her children, both boys and girls, to school. I would like to argue that education will transform the status of inferiority in the future generation of Santal women;

“When a Santali girl is born we don’t have much value, when we get little bit older we (should) get married and handle the home but that kind of thinking is changing now. Those that are older are thinking that girls don’t need to study, she will handle everything in the new home. Biggest change now, many are educated. Everyone needs education to know their right” (R1).
Moreover, the longing to change the existing perceptions of Santals as “dirty people” and for other casts to view Santals as equals is a remarkable aim for transformation:

“Religions in here tell us, lower cast are not so much holy, and higher cast don’t sit with them, this kind of thing I would like to change so that they think we are all same” (R2).

Another reason why Santals believe a transformation in this area is important for their status is based on the way other people perceive them:

“Santali people are lower cast and other people think we are dirty. If we touch something of non-Santals, they have to clean it they think we make it dirty” (R1).

To conclude this section, in my opinion it is important to appreciate the thoughts of change expressed by the respondents. Their answers indicated that they are tired of discrimination and are longing to improve their quality of life (toilets, education and equal values). However, based on the semi-structured interviews of this thesis it is difficult to determine whether religion influence Santali women’s decision-making. On the other hand, an ongoing empowerment process can be recognised based on Saraswati Raju and Richa Nagar thoughts on assessing empowerment and since “empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 244). However, “the Santal women are still under the shadow of darkness. Though the influence of Christianity and awareness towards education has contributed a lot to educate the Santal women and to engage them chiefly in educational and medical field as teachers and nurses but still miles to go to empower them to reach a dignified status in their tribal society” (Das, 2015, p. 211).

**5.5 Is religion liberating women from their self-perceptions of themselves?**

As mentioned before in the background of the respondents, Santals have a history of being marginalized and exploited by dominating Bengalis and other Indians (Sahoo, 2017, p. 2). This was clearly shown in the interviews when the respondents were asked if Santals have the same value as Bengalis or other Indians:

“No. Bengali people hate Santals” (R2).

“Yes, Bengali people are thinking that Santals are fools and not educated. Santal cast need to develop, we need more education” (R3).
“As a Hindu I was taught that we are of lower cast, Bengalis made us think like that, they didn’t want to touch anything of our things or things we touched. Now I think we have same value” (R4).

“No, because they know that Santals are lower cast so how they could have same value, they make us feel our value is less” (R5).

“Yes, we have the same value, but people make us understand that we are lower” (R1).

Based on these quotes, I would like to argue that the perceptions Santal people have regarding themselves as backward and inferior is because dominating Bengalis made them feel that way. However, a potential solution might be (like one of the respondents mentioned) to increase the education level of the tribe to further develop and to fully understand their rights as citizens of India. On the one hand, conversion to Christianity doesn’t seem to make a big difference in this area however one of the respondents expressed that after her conversion she thinks Santals and Bengalis have the same value. On the other hand, some of the respondents expressed a different opinion when asked if these sentiments changed after the conversion to Christianity:

“Yes, of course, Santals who become Christians change their mind and many other things” (R1).

“I’m not sure, beginning I was Santali-Hindu and we are lower cast. When I became Christian now I am higher because I developed myself, lifestyle is going somewhere, cleaner, dress up has changed, people are saying we are changing” (R3).

“Yes, there is difference, I am comparing with the life before and now I feel good” (R4).

Christianity seems to have had an influence in the respondents’ mind set and lifestyle and they express that feel better about themselves. However, this study fails to grasp the extent and impact of these changes. A possible solution to this could have been to add follow-up questions regarding their attitudes towards Bengalis or other Indian whether they would offer them help in a time of need. Another way could have been to ask the respondents to further elaborate their answers and to give examples. In order to interpret the answers as signs of empowerment would be difficult because the existing perceptions of them as lower people are still at play. However, the respondents accounts point to improvements in many areas indicating an ongoing empowerment process.
because “empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 244).

Moreover, it is important to understand that Santal as a people group have a low status in India and Santali women have a low status within the Santali tribe. I would therefore like to argue that Santali women have a double burden of marginalisation and inferiority to tackle. The status of a girl is explained by the following two quotes:

“When a Santali girl is born we don’t have much value, when we get little bit older we (should) get married and handle the home but that kind of thinking is changes now. Those that are older are thinking that girls don’t need to study, she will handle everything in the new home. Biggest change now, many are educated. Everyone need education to know their right” (R1).

“As a girl we don’t have that much value people are not hearing us. It changed slowly after we became Christian” (R2).

Another interesting aspect is equality between men and women, based on the previous quotes about the value of a girl, inequality would possibly be a major problem among the Santals. However, the interviewees responses to if men and women equal are rather interesting and points to the contrary:

“Yes, and now our government knows this” (R1).

“Yes, I have one daughter and one son and I’m thinking that they are equal to me” (R2).

“Yes, now I’m believing, before I did not have this type of thinking, not important to educate girls, after I became Christian I saw and understood that (what) men can do women can do” (R4).

“Yes, we are equal” (R5).

Equality between men and women is related to power relations and gender, Srilatha Baltiwala provides a definition of gender equality as “the transformation of the relations of power between men and women, within and across social categories of various kinds” (Baltiwala, 1994). I would like to argue that the respondents accounts regarding equality indicate potential transformations of gender relations among the Santals. As abovementioned one respondent said, “It changed slowly after we became Christian” (R2), another said, “I became Christian I saw and understood that
(what) men can do women can do” (R4) and a third “now even our government knows this” (R1). Additionally, I would like to suggest that it could also be interpreted as an ongoing empowerment process (Mosedale, 2005, p.244). To conclude this section, is religion liberating women from their existing perceptions of themselves? Based on the analysed accounts, religion is somewhat liberating women from existing perceptions of themselves as weak, lower and restricted beings to some extent. However, it may also be other factors at work that this study is unable to capture.

5.6 Conclusion of the analysis

What we see in the narratives is certain themes indicating that religion has somewhat added more content to the empowerment processes of the respondents in terms of better self-confidence, self-esteem, social capital, peace and security. Moreover, what somehow emerges is that religion seems to have empowered the Santals in their everyday lives as illustrated in the three themes. It is important to note that religion might not be the only factor influencing their empowerment processes, traditions and culture could also play a role in these processes. The scope of this thesis is not able to fully identify these other factors. Furthermore, empowerment is a process and my intention is not to argue that a complete empowerment has taken place. However, it is important to note that there are ongoing interactions between religion (including other factors) and empowerment processes that are not complete.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to answer the following research questions; does religion influence Santali women’s personal empowerment processes? If yes, how?

Based on the work of Kabeer, Baltiwala and Mosedale, empowerment refers to acquire denied abilities to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435), challenge existing power structures (Baltiwala, 2007, p. 560), to redefine what is possible for women (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252). Moreover, it is important to understand empowerment as a process and not as a final product (Ibid, p.). Earlier development approaches did not recognise women as an entity even though they were included in development projects (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 490). Empowerment of women recognised women as agents of change and meant to give women a voice of their own (Sen, 1999, p. 19). The intent of this thesis was to look at a small facet of the concept, personal empowerment which relates to the private sphere i.e. self-esteem, self-confidence and decision-making power in the household and over one’s own body and how religion influences personal empowerment. Furthermore, this study was conducted among Santali women in India. Santali people are the largest tribal group in India, Santals are historically marginalised and discriminated, but they are also a community that has seen religious conversions in Indian history (Sahoo, 2017, p. 2). The interviews in this thesis vaguely indicate that religion seem influence Santali women’s personal empowerment processes. However, even though other factors such as traditions and culture might influence as well, signs of ongoing personal empowerment processes appear in terms of improving self-confidence, self-esteem, social capital, and in experiences of peace and security. Nonetheless, when talking about empowerment and that the Santali women are being empowered, I never suggest that these women are completely empowered and as I have pointed earlier empowerment is a process. To conclude and answer the research questions, religion are to some extent influencing Santali women’s personal empowerment processes in bringing changes in their private spheres, however the interviews do not provide enough evidence for stating a causal relationship between religion and personal empowerment. Moreover, the accounts from the interviews also show interesting interactions between religion (including other factors that are not accounted for in this study) and empowerment processes that are not complete however these interactions seem to partly evoke change, from mud to shampoo.
7. References


Appendix 1 – distribution of Santals in India

![Map of Santal distribution in India](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14743/IN)
Appendix 2 – Map of West Bengal

The interviews were conducted in Midnapur district.

(https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/westbengal/westbengal-district.htm)
Appendix 3 – Interview guide

Background questions:
What is your name?
How old are you?
Are you married?
Do you have children?
Do you live with your parents or in-laws?
What do you work with?
What does your husband work with? Or other family members?
Where did you go to school?

Religion / Conversion / Christianity:
Which religion do you belong to?
How did you become a Christian?
When did you become a Christian?
Is your whole family following the same religion?
How do you express your religion?
How often do you do this?
How does your religion affect daily life?
Do you like being a Christian?
What benefits to get from being a Christian?
Who asked you to become a Christian?
Why did you choose Christianity?
Who introduced you to Christianity?
What do you find in Christianity that is positive and negative?
Empowerment:
“Empowerment is about the process which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Naila Kabeer)

Resources (pre-conditions):
Who earn the money in the household?
How does it work with the money distribution in your family?
Do you have direct access, or do you get pocket money?
Who is in charge of the household and its resources?
Do you have a say in daily in household expenses?
Do you have a say in daily matters?
Is all the household Christian?
Did any of this change after you became a Christian?

Agency (process):
(‘decision-making’)
Do you have any plans for the future? Could you please share them with me?
Do you have any dreams? Could you please tell me a little bit about your dreams?
Are there any of these dreams that you can’t do because of the context you are living in?
If you could change one thing in your life, what would that be?
Did any of this change after you became a Christian?
Are you allowed to marry a man of your choice? What about your children?
In your opinion, in what ways does your religion effect decisions in your personal life?

Power within:
(the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency/ ‘the power within’) (Kabeer, 1999, p.438).
How would you describe yourself?
Do you compare yourself to other women?
If yes, in what ways do you compare yourself to other women?
Do you think men and women are equal?
Do you feel at peace with yourself through your religion?
Does religion give you security?
Do you think Santals have the same value as Bengalis or other Indians?
From an equality perspective, is there any difference between your old and new religion?
What was your religion before Christianity?
Do you find Christianity liberating?
What was your first interaction with the missionaries like?

**Achievements (outcomes):**
Do you have anything you are proud of?
If you can mention something in the last three years, what are you most proud of?
Are you equal to the male members in your household?
If no, in what ways do you experience inequalities in your household?