



Status of Dalit Christians in India

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ABSTRACT

Dalit Christian is not recognised as a valid social category in India. Hence, they are not covered under any compensatory measures such as reservations and special legal safeguards which are otherwise extended to Dalits who belong to Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities, though caste-based prejudices are strong in Christianity and Dalit Christians too face similar forms of discrimination and exclusion as other Dalits. Though there is enough evidence in social science literature on the identity issues and discrimination faced by Dalit Christians, there remains several other questions to be addressed alongside while examining the claim for group-specific policy interventions for Dalit Christians. The most important one possibly is the caste-religion interface of non-Hindu Dalits. This is significant in the context that religion is the primary criterion to officially define Scheduled Castes in India as per the Constitutional Order of 1950. As per the formal definition “no person who confesses a religion different from the Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist religious conviction shall be considered to be a member of Scheduled Castes.” This paper attempts to address some of the questions using the available literature and official data. The study is largely based on the historical and current social science literature on caste among the Christians in India.

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I. Introduction

Christianity in India, like other religions, does not belong to the monolithic category. It has further subdivisions not only on the basis of congregational differences but also on caste lines. Caste-like characteristics such as hereditary, membership confirmed by birth, endogamy, social and occupational segregations, economic differentiation, etc., are also common among the Christians, especially in those places where conversion cuts across all castes. Several studies have noted that in most of the cases it was the Dalits who converted to Christianity. The primary motivation for conversion to Christianity could be to overcome the discriminatory caste system and to seek upward social and economic mobility. It is indeed a complex question that how far the Dalits who converted to Christianity could get rid of caste-based discrimination and make qualitative improvements in their life. In reality, as several studies and reports have highlighted, caste prejudices against Dalit Christians remained more or less similar both inside and outside Christianity in most parts of the country, especially where the traditional social and occupational relations did not change significantly over time. The most important one possibly is the caste-religion interface of non-Hindu Dalits. This is significant in the context that religion is the primary criterion to officially define Scheduled Castes in India as per the Constitutional Order of 1950. It completely ignores the reproduction of caste relations and its discriminatory attributes in Christianity and leaves several crucial questions unaddressed such as: Whether caste or religion is the primary identity of the converted? How have the identities of the converted been perceived both inside and outside their religion? What is the self-identity of the converted Dalits? Whether caste practices are being perpetuated and reproduced

in Christianity the way it happens in Hindu religion? If yes, what are the present forms and nature of discrimination that Dalit Christians face and whether caste prejudices limit them from access to services, amenities and other economic opportunities? Whether discrimination and exclusion are mirrored in their development performance? If Dalit Christians have group-specific development deficit, how does it vary from other socio-religious groups? Finally, whether there is a justification for group-specific policies for Dalit Christians on the basis of their development profile? This paper attempts to address some of the above-mentioned questions using the available literature and official data. The study relies on official data on select development indicators such as demographic profile, educational status, occupational pattern and poverty situation of the Christians who identify themselves as Dalits.

IIa. Caste among the Christians: Evidences From Social Science Literature

In India, the inequalities and hierarchies within Christianity and Islam have been well discussed in social sciences, especially in anthropology, sociology and other development literature. There are different views on whether subdivisions among these religious groups could be equated to caste. Several scholars have attempted to study caste or caste-like subdivisions among these religious groups from a standpoint that both the religions have the considerable number of converts from the Hindu fold, especially from the lower strata of its caste hierarchy, along with others. Broadly speaking, it is in fact a tricky task to trace the entire social origin of a religion, especially Christianity and Islam, which have historically evolved into its present social composition and is also a blend of a ‘foreign’ or non- indigenous religion with local cultures and traditions in India. Islam existed in

India through Arab migration to the Malabar coast; trade relations with Turkey, Arabia and Afghanistan; and further through the conversion of the populations of the then existed territory. Similarly, the social origin of Christianity can be traced from the pre-colonial period to the mass conversion movements in the twentieth century.

However, the question of the social origin of religion and its caste or caste-like hierarchies could become relevant even today when it is placed in the wider canvas of citizenship and human development. It is also important then to probe further, whether such hierarchies lead to social and occupational segregation, economic differentiation, discrimination and widening of disparities. If caste is a reality in Christianity then how has it been historically perpetuated and reflected? Whether the defining characteristics of caste such as endogamy, notions of purity and pollution, and occupational division are attributable to Indian Christianity? How have the identities of the converted Dalits been perceived both inside and outside their religion? Finally, what is the self-identity of the converted Dalits? This section attempts to address these questions with a special focus on Christianity through a survey of relevant social science literature.

Ib. Social Origin of Christianity in India: Assimilation of Local Traditions

Christianity, which is the subject of discussion here, is classified broadly into three distinct groups by scholars. They are: (a) The Anglo Indians, a distinct product of miscegenation and colonialism (b) Those who became Christians through mass conversion movements (mostly people from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBC) that took place during the colonial period (c) Pre-colonial Christians who claim to be converts from the upper castes' (Oommen, 2010: 22). Apart from that, the social origin of the majority of Christians has marked differences across India. For instance, in northern India where proselytization is relatively recent, the Christians are mostly of 'lower caste' origin including the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Deliege, 1998). In southern India where conversions occurred even before the colonization and British rule, the Christians comprise all castes which also include a small number of upper castes (Ibid).

The underlying logic of mass conversion of lower castes was that it would enable them to come out of the discriminatory caste system. Most of the conversion that took place among Dalits was to Christianity, Islam and Sikhism in the beginning and later to Buddhism by the middle of the twentieth century. As per the estimates are given by Webster, by the early twentieth century, approximately one million Dalits had converted to Christianity (Webster, 1992: 33). The mass conversion took place mostly among Dalit groups which include Chuhras of Punjab, Chamars of North India (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh), Vankars of Gujarat, Mahars of central and western India, especially Maharashtra, Paraiyars of South India and Pulayars of Kerala. It was noted that the Christian population grew from 3912 in 1881 to 3,95,629 in 1931 in the Punjab region as a result of Chuhra conversions (Webster, 1977). Another mass movement of conversion to Christianity was by Mazhabi Sikhs, Bhangis and Chamars in Uttar Pradesh. Eventually, by 1931 there were about 1,73,077 Christians in Uttar Pradesh who had converted from these groups (Turner, 1931). In the western region, about 15,000 Vankars in Gujarat converted to

Christianity between 1889 and 1905 and a large number of Mangs and Mahars in Maharashtra also embraced Christianity by the beginning of the twentieth century (Webster, 1992; op cit). The southern part of India, especially Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, witnessed the more vigorous mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity. For instance, a majority of the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh converted to Christianity. Similarly, a large number of Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu, Paraiyars and Pulayars in Kerala, and Tigalals in Karnataka converted to Christianity.

II.c. Christianisation of Caste: Interactions of Church with Local Social Systems

The ways in which various Christian denominations and congregations integrated with the Indian society and local cultures and traditions to a greater extent appear to be accountable for the continuation of the caste system among the Christians. The classic example of Church authorities' tolerant attitude towards caste practices was the letter of Pope Gregory XV in 1923. As Prakash Louis (2007) cited, "the letter allowed the request of the missionaries to adjust to certain caste practices, considering the 'difficulties' faced by the upper caste converts."

The integration of Christianity with the Hindu traditions and the Indian society also resulted in the continuation of its caste hierarchies and thereby practices. As a result, as several scholars observed, the lower caste Christians remained 'untouchables' in society. Robinson (2010, b, op cit) noted that it was mostly the converts who resisted 'egalitarian relations' within the Christian groups in order to maintain their status distinctions. It is interesting to note that in South India, where conversion cuts across all castes, the church eventually got divided along caste lines (Deliege, 1998, op cit). The defining characteristics of caste such as endogamy or marriage within the caste group, residential segregation, restricted social interaction, hierarchies, caste-based occupation and above all notions of graded ritual purity or pollution were reproduced among the convert Christians.

IId. Identity Questions and Status Conflicts among Converted Christians

The reproduction of caste relations also mirrored in social relations among the converted Christians in one form or the other. As several scholars pointed out, marriage was the important occasion, when caste practices were most visible as those who belong to different caste among Christians do not inter-marry (Mullens, 1854; Luke and Carman, 1968; Hardgrave, 1969). For instance, Christian Reddys in Andhra Pradesh and Christian Nadars in Tamil Nadu prefer to marry Hindus of their own caste than Dalit Christians (Robinson, 2010, a). Similarly, Syrian Christians in Kerala do not marry Dalit Christians. Even intermarriage between Bamons and Sudras in Goa is quite uncommon.

Continuation of caste-based occupational patterns among Dalit Christians is another important evidence to ascertain caste among the Indian Christians. Dogar (2000) for instance, highlighted that occupational patterns (including manual scavenging) prevalent among Dalit Christians in north-west India are quite similar to that of Dalit Hindus. Similarly, in most parts of the country, like their Hindu counterparts, Dalit Christians continued as agricultural workers, daily wage labourers and small cultivators. Most interestingly, as existed between caste Hindus and Dalit Hindus, there existed a 'patron-client relationship' between caste Christians and Dalit Christians in several parts of India. Arguably, the continuation of caste-based occupational patterns even after

conversion, in a way, reproduced caste relations in Christianity.

Another important marker was the notions of 'impurity' in rituals and eating habits among converted Christians. Japhet (1986) noted that social segregation on the ground of impurity was predominant in the intermingling of Dalits and upper caste Christians in Karnataka. It included the use of separate wells, denial of the service of people like barbers to Dalit Christians, and separate eating and drinking utensils in hotels and teashops (Ibid: 61). Similarly, Caplan (1980) highlighted the prevalence of such things among Tamil Protestant communities. While Christian doctrine does not prohibit any dietary practice as such, the majority of the Protestant Tamil Christians who consider themselves as non-Scheduled Castes do not eat beef or pork as these foods are categorised as dirty and polluting by the Hindu society (Ibid: 230).

Participation in church functions was also a major factor which evidenced caste relations in Indian Christianity as in many cases the converts were able to reconstruct their socio-cultural systems around churches as Robinson (2004) argues. For instance, Dalits were given inferior roles in mass, funerals and festivals among Catholics in Tamil Nadu (Wiebe and Peter, 1977, op cit). Some studies brought out the practices of un-touch ability against Dalit Christians by caste Christians similar to that of caste Hindus against Dalit Hindus. Raj (1992) gives an account of such practices against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu in church and related social life in 1980s. It had everything separate for Dalit Christians such as chapel, seating arrangements within the chapel (Dalits had to sit on the floor), queues to receive holy mass, cemeteries as well as hearses to carry dead bodies. Moreover, it restricted Dalits to become altar boys, avoid processions of Palm Sunday and Corpus Christy in the locality of Dalit Christians, exclusion of Dalits from participation in washing feet ceremony during Maundy Thursdays and separate celebration of the feast of village patron saint. Robinson (2004) in a study conducted among a church community in Goa noted that upper caste converts were given privileges and honours in the church-related rituals. Such honours and privileges in rituals given to upper caste members of the church also defined or demarcated social relationships and political authority with visible hierarchies. She further noted how caste-based social relationships are reproduced in church life through their roles and privileges in rituals in the church in Goa:

"The Vellalars of Vadakkankulam refused to take communion, that is, symbolic and sacred body of Christ, within sight of Nadars after the priest had knocked down the wall, which had kept the two groups from seeing each other in the church. If in the Hindu system, the shadow of an untouchable falls on the caste Hindu he is polluted. In Christianity, if two castes see each other even in the holiest of holies, it results in pollution." (Louis, 2007: 18)

Ii. Identity of Dalit Christians Outside Church

Whether the caste identity of converted Dalit Christians had changed outside the church after conversion? The answer perhaps is 'no' since as discussed elsewhere they always carried the dual identity such as Dalit first and a converted Dalit Christian later. It is interesting to note that in certain cases, even if converted Dalits do not wish to identify them as 'Dalits', their identity is often reflected in their socio-cultural life as they are viewed as Dalits by others, irrespective of their change of faith. For instance, Ambrose Pinto (2010)

highlighted the identity issues of Dalit Catholic Christians in a study conducted in Bengaluru. He pointed out that even though Dalit Catholics do not wish to identify themselves as Dalits, their identity mattered when they mingled with other castes.

Recent studies on Dalit Christians in Gujarat showed that the identity of Dalits who converted to Christianity has not changed much till now and they suffer from caste-based discrimination by upper castes on one hand and alienation from other non-converted Dalits on the other (Patil, 2010). It is also important to note that Gujarat is a state where the traditional village power structure and its caste relations are still prevalent.

III. Discrimination and Atrocities: Contemporary Challenges of Dalit Christians

As discussed in the previous section, Christianity in the process of integration with Indian society also sustained the hierarchical structures of Hinduism and the caste identity of Dalit converts remained the same despite efforts of a church for inclusiveness from some quarters. Therefore, Dalit Christians, like other Dalits, continue to confront their identity in various spheres of life and suffer discrimination and atrocities. Several studies have pointed out that caste-based discrimination is still a reality in Indian society; it prevails in all spheres of life such as education, health, employment, housing, trade and business, labour market, etc., (Chakravarty, 2003; George, 2004; Hasan and Mehta, 2006; Shah et al, 2006; Acharya, 2007; Nambissan, 2009; Thorat and Newman, 2007; Jodhka, 2010) and Dalit Christians to face them along with their counterparts in other religions. This section specifically examines the present nature and forms of discrimination which Dalit Christians face and whether caste prejudices limit them from access to services, amenities and other economic opportunities. It also discusses the atrocities on Dalit Christians which were rampant in post-independent India.

IV. Demographic and Development Profile of Dalit Christians

It merges from the previous discussions that Dalit Christians like other Dalits suffer from various forms of discrimination and exclusion. It is well established that discrimination and social exclusion lead to a widening of income inequalities, degree of poverty and deprivation through denial of equal opportunities and access to resources and services (Thorat, 2003; Thorat and Louis, 2003; Sundaram and Tendulkar, 2003; Himanshu and Sen, 2004). Therefore, when it comes to questions of citizenship and development, discrimination appears to have manifold ramifications related to exclusion from economic entitlements, basic services and opportunities on one hand and humiliation, subordination, exploitation and denial of rights on the other. Social exclusion of Dalit Christians in this particular context raises further concerns on their development trajectory. First of all, it is important to examine whether discrimination and exclusion are reflected in their development performance such as education, material condition, poverty, etc. If Dalit Christians have group-specific development deficit, how does it vary from other socio-religious groups? Whether there is a need for group-specific policies for Dalit Christians on the basis of their development profile? This section attempts to address these questions drawing from available data on certain indicators of development.

The data on demography and development indicators for Dalit Christians are taken from the National Sample Survey (NSS) and other published reports. It should also be noted that Dalit Christian is a self-reported category in NSS surveys. The sample size of Dalit Christian households in the survey is also a matter of attention here. It includes 155 Dalit Christian households in rural India and 123 in urban India. Since the sample size is small, further disaggregation across states is not attempted. Data extracted from NSS rounds include household by social groups by religion, level of poverty by social groups by religion and some of the characteristics of poor Dalit households with regard to household type and occupation, landholding, education and industry of occupation. Indicators on the educational status of Dalit Christians are adopted from the report Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge by Satish Deshpande and Geetika Bapna, submitted to the National Commission for Minorities.

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