

## **Contextualising Caste Identity: Double Marginalisation of Dalit Christians in India**

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### **Abstract**

‘Dalit Christians’ represent a wide, multi-dimensional spectrum in India .They constitute for over 70% of the entire Christian population in India. Dalit Christians are more stipulated by being a Dalit than by being a Christian since the discrimination continues even on being converted to another religion. Also, the identity of Dalit Christians has far more to do with them being a Dalit than by them being a Christian. Dalit Christians are officially non-existent entities in India as one cannot be a Christian and a Dalit at the same time. Being a Christian requires renunciation of caste-status behind and moving into a faith where everyone is considered equal. Unfortunately this is not the scenario in India. The caste system is so much intertwined with the Indian culture and the Indian church that it is virtually impossible to escape from it. So, Dalit Christians continue to be subjugated and oppressed not only in the society but also in the church.

The Dalit Christians suffer the same socio educational and economic disabilities like the Dalits of the other faith. The change of Religion does not warrant any change in their socio-economic and educational status. It is evident that the Dalit Christians are subject to atrocities, violence and disabilities solely because they suffer the humiliation of untouchability. Even the Christians do not treat the Dalit Christians as equals. Though the Dalit Christians undergo the same unjust Caste discrimination as the other Dalits, the Dalit Christians are deprived of the privileges of protection of Civil Rights Act and Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989. Not only are they excluded from the reservation system by the government but also omitted from priestly duties by the Indian church and clergy. This paper

intends to throw light on the double discrimination of this section of the society and the problem of caste identity within the church.

**Keywords: marginalisation, clerical, liturgy, Christians**

Caste system has been an essential component of the lives of Indians since time immemorial. It involves the division of people into castes or social groups. The assignment of the rights of this community being unequal and hierarchal are determines by their birth and heritage. Those at the top of the social ladder enjoy maximum rights with lesser amount of labour and vice versa. The rigid enforcement of this system prevents the people from deviating from it. Hence the doctrine of inequality forms the legal, social and economic foundation of caste system.

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According to the prevailing views, Dalits constitute around 70% of the Christian community which comprises of about 24 million Christians. Dalit community comprises of approximately 200 million people who are still downtrodden and discriminated against.

Religion	Population	Percentage
Hindus	140 Millions	70%
Muslims	15.5 Millions	7.75%
Christians	19 Millions	9.5%
Sikhs	15 Millions	7.5%
Buddhists	7.5 Millions	3.75%

**Percentage of Dalit population in different religious groups in India.**

The oppression of the Dalit Christians is subject to their location. It is a major problem in South India where there are more high castes than the Northern regions of India where there are few caste Christians. This discrimination is not a result of an individual just being a Dalit but also because he is a Christian. Dalit Christians suffer oppression on daily basis hence making them no different than other Dalits. John Webster writes in *Religious and Dalit Liberation*, “Although they form a majority of the Christian Community, they have been an oppressed majority” (89). He further states. “Like other Dalits, Christian Dalits live in a caste based society and their conversion has not been able to change that fact” (89). M.R. Arulraja, while formulating the reason for one not losing his Dalit status when converting to Christianity states in his book *Jesus the Dalit* : “Those who commit atrocities against Dalit do not differentiate between Christian Dalits and non-Christian Dalit. For an Indian, a Dalit is a Dalit whether Christian or not” (vi).

On the other hand, the fact that one is a Christian Dalit has some serious consequences on the daily life of an individual. Conversion to Christianity does not warrant redemption from social discrimination and untouchability. It only adds to their misery. The acceptance of new faith provided some hope regarding their lost socio-economic status but in reality it only proved to be a dream. As Dalit Christians they continue to suffer two-fold discrimination both at the hands of the State and the Church.

**Discrimination by State**

Dalit Christians have been carrying the burden of subjugation like other Dalits for centuries. However in present times a distinction has been brought in by the State between one kind of Dalit and another. According to the National Commission of Scheduled Caste,

untouchability is only prevalent within the Hindu fold and no untouchability exists in Christianity. This notion has a serious effect on the lives of Christian Dalits. They are excluded from the Reservation System inspite of being considered inferior. Fixed by the Indian Law, it is an assenting activity whereby a percentage of seats in the public sector are reserved for the Scheduled Castes. However, only Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits are affirmed these benefits whereas Muslims and Christians are denied the same as a result of a Presidential Order in 1950. The Constitution (SC) Order was issued by the President of India in the year 1950. The third paragraph of the order stated that “notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of the SC” (*The Constitution of India* 163). The amendment to the above, done in 1956 and 1990 provided for the inclusion of the Sikh and Buddhist communities within the Scheduled Caste category. However, the Constitution does not consider Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity and Islam as eligible to avail the benefits of Scheduled Caste reservations.

The usual argument given while discussing the extension of reservation to the Dalit Christian community is that Christianity does not observe caste system. However, the truth remains the caste system is engrained in our society and Dalits of all religions live in the same society which follows caste values and discriminates against Dalits of all castes. The Christian Dalits are deprived of the Scheduled Caste status inspite of Article 17 of the Constitution stating that no one is allowed to motivate untouchability. The denial of benefits by the State is an act of violation of its own laws meant to safeguard the equality of all people irrespective of their caste and class distinction (Article 14, 15 and 25). Article 15 of *The Indian Constitution* states that the “State shall not discriminate against any citizen only on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them” (7).

According to Godwin Shiri, the famous Christian Dalit writer, the latter are not only deprived of Scheduled Caste benefits but also of ordinary state benefits meant for Other Backward Classes and economically weaker sections of the society. As a result, many Christian Dalits conceal and deny their Christian identity while claiming Reservation benefits. Caste is a social stigma that does not vanish on conversion to another religion. They are stigmatized and subjugated by the wider society. The long history of oppression does not end after the adoption of a non- casteist faith neither does their socio-economic condition improve. Hence, comes the problem of double marginalisation where a Dalit Christian is not only discriminated against because he is a Dalit but also because he is a Dalit Christian.

### **Discrimination by Church**

The Church in India is predominantly a Dalit church because Dalits constitute approximately 70% of India's 25 million Christian population. Even though Dalits are in majority, yet their influence and position in the church is minimal. This is all the more true in the case of the Catholic Church where the Dalits are eclipsed by the powerful high-class Catholics.

Christian Dalits remain marginalised not only in the society but also in the Church in India. In spite of turning to a religion with the hope of getting redemption from inequality and caste discrimination they fail in attaining liberty. Caste cuts across barriers of religion on account of being deep rooted in the psyche of the Indian society. Caste system has penetrated each and every religion. Practitioners of other religious faiths are just as rigid in adhering to the system of caste as Hindu practitioners. Though Christianity does not preach caste system and upholds upliftment of the downtrodden, castism is still practised among the practitioners. Discrimination in the Church dates back to the Colonial times when the early missionaries maintained the caste system instead of eradicating it. These Christian missionaries were thereafter criticised by Ambedkar on the grounds that they denounced idol worship but did nothing to cast down the idol of caste. Christianity does not preach caste system but there are upper and lower castes among Christians. The churches have a hard time eradicating the age-old tradition. The notion that Dalits are downtrodden is engrained in the psyche of the caste Christians.

### **Educational Discrimination**

This discrimination affects the educational system as well and deprives the Christian Dalit children from studying in Christian schools. Says a victim, "Our children face educational discrimination because we are poor. In Jhansi, there are very good Christian schools. But while children from other castes are able to study there, poor Christian children are thrown out by sixth or seventh grade because we cannot afford the fees" (Narain). These educational institutions belong to the church but the church refuses to take responsibility for the contemptible form of bias. James Massey, the renowned Dalit theologian states in an interview, "Take the case of elitist Christian schools. How many Dalit children have been admitted to them so far? These schools cater almost entirely to the 'upper' caste elites, Hindus and others. So, in this sense the Churches we have are not the Church of Christ. Christ tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves. Who are the neighbours of the leaders of the Church? Are they the starving Dalits, who may share their Christian faith, or the rich

industrialists who are sucking the blood of the poor and who send their children to elitist Christian schools in air- conditioned cars” (web)?

### **Dalit Representation in Clergy**

Another sphere where discrimination occurs is in the appointment of the clergy in the church. According to surveys, very few Dalits hold any significant position in the church either administrative or liturgical. The church is dominated by the upper- caste Christians inspite of the fact that the Dalits are in majority. Elske van Gorkum, a Dalit delegate to Global Ecumenical Conference states in an interview: “You could see this even at the Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits of the World Council of Churches in Bangkok, in March 2009. There was not one Dalit among the delegates of the Church of North India and the Church of South India. And this conference was entirely about Dalits” (Riemer 13)! The below statistics, a part of the Memorandum sent to the Pope by four Dalit Catholic priests in 2013, show the exclusion of Dalit Catholics from Clergical duties:

<b>Population</b>	<b>Total Number</b>	<b>Dalit Catholics</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Total Indian Population	1200 millions		
Totals Christians	25 millions		
Total Dalit Christians		20 millions	65%
Total Catholics	18 millions		
Total Dalit Catholics		12 millions	65%
<b>Catholic Dioceses</b>	167		
Catholic Bishops	180		
Dalit Bishops		07	4%
Catholic Diocesan Priests	15420		
Dalit Catholic Priests		754	5%
Religious Priests	7031		
Dalit Religious Priests		310	4%
Religious Nuns	65000		

Dalit Religious Nuns		3200	5%
Cardinals	06		
Dalit Cardinals		Nil	

**Source: Memorandum sent to the Pope 1999**

The majority of catholic bishops, priest and lay-leaders belong to the upper caste and this 30% occupies 90% of the administration of the church.

**Discrimination in Worship**

Dalits are segregated from the caste- Christians in places of worship. In some parishes two separate chapels are constructed and liturgical services are conducted separately. It is not possible for the Dalit Christians to worship with the high castes and have to sit separately on the floor. They have no role in the liturgical ceremonies and traditions. Discrimination is also prominent in rituals like the Holy Communion where the Dalits are not allowed to drink from the cup before the high castes and have to stand in a separate queue. In many villages Dalit churches have been constructed to enable them to worship freely. The burial ceremony also exhibits discrimination where in some places there are two separate cemeteries and hearses for the dead. Dalit boys are not involved in the sacred liturgy as altar boys or lectures. Processions like Corpus Christi and Palm Sunday are restricted to the non- Dalit areas. Dalits are forbidden to participate in feet washing ceremony at Maunday Thursday and at the feast of the village patron saint. Similarly they are not allowed to contribute to funds for special occasions in order to restrict their participation in the same.

**Discrimination in Christian Community**

Dalit Christians suffer caste discrimination in the social life of their own community Dalits are not allowed in the houses of non-Dalits and inter-dining and inter-marriage between the two is considered a taboo. In states like Goa and Tamil Nadu the upper caste Catholic Brahmins discriminate against the lower castes by forbidding marriage between the two classes and prohibiting intermingling of the lower caste with the upper caste.

The position of Dalit Christians is still not better than the status of other Dalits in India. It can be stated that in some ways their condition is even worse and deteriorating everyday not only because they are Dalits but Dalit Christians. The experience and perception of the Dalit Christians is completely different from that of the other caste Christians. In spite of the initiatives taken by the Dalit theologians and Christian Dalit Liberation Movement, the existence of the Dalit Christians is still neglected as they continue with the traditional theology. Hence a paradigm shift is required in the outlook of the Indian Church towards the

Dalit Christians and it should become more holistic. Concern for the downtrodden and the marginalized was the basis of Christ's mission in the world as he himself reincarnated as a humble and poor being for the salvation of the oppressed and needy. The Indian Church should contribute to the socio-economic upliftment of the Dalits and hence be an impetus in the social transformation of India.

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