

# Dalit Christians: Betrayed by State and Church

*Dalits who have converted to Christianity find that not only are the benefits of reservation not extended to them in contravention of constitutional provisions but even the church and the non-dalit Christian community actively discriminate against them.*

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When a group of dalits in Haryana protested against upper caste discrimination and decided to convert to Christianity,<sup>1</sup> various leaders of the frontal organisations of the Sangh parivar, that is, the Hindutva force, rushed to the spot and tried to persuade them not to carry out their threat. They also implored the upper castes to behave “humanly” with the dalits. This shows that dalits do not have freedom within the existing social order and if they want to opt out of it, they are rebuked for wanting to embrace a foreign religion. Those dalits who converted to Christianity are denied equal status in the Christian community and also do not get the benefits of reservations because they are Christians.

The demand for including dalit Christians and dalit Muslims like the dalit Hindus, dalit Sikhs and dalit Buddhists into the ambience of reservation has come to the fore in the last two decades. To understand the status of dalit Christians it is necessary to understand the scheduled caste (SC) origin of this social group, the discrimination they suffer due to their caste background both within Christian community and wider society. Those who are of caste Christian<sup>2</sup> origin claim that the dalit Christians benefit from Christianity. But they continue to treat the dalit Christians as untouchables.

Significantly, the state perceives the dalit Christian issue only from the point of view of conversion, just like the social scientists and social activists. Even the so-called upper caste leadership within the church projected the issue of the dalit Christians from the point of view of them being discriminated by the government due to their conversion. But all of them fail to see the Christians of SC origin as dalits or SC first and then only as converts to Christianity.

At the outset it needs to be stated that one is confronted with lack of data with regard to dalit Christians. There have been some studies about dalit Christians of south India and Punjab but even these are very sketchy. Secondly, due to the fact that the Christian community is perceived to be homogeneous, the church, the state and the society, does not recognise the discrimination suffered by the dalit Christians.

## **Dalitisation and Christianisation**

It is estimated<sup>3</sup> that of the 20 million Christians in India, that is, two per cent of the population, nearly 70 per cent are dalits. They include the pulayans in Kerala, pariahs in Tamil Nadu, tigas in Karnataka, malas and madigas in Andhra Pradesh, chamars in MP, UP and Bihar, churhas in Punjab, vankars in Gujarat and mahars in Maharashtra to name a few. Interestingly, though they converted to Christianity they continue to be referred to by their caste names.

Many studies have revealed that conversion to Christianity does not change the social condition of the dalits. According to John Webster the Punjabi dalit Christians provide an instructive case study of an oppressed group converting in order to gain an “emancipatory identity” but ultimately being subjected to atrocities on all fronts. For most Punjabi Christians the context in which they converted did not change; they continue to be poor, landless rural labourers under the thumb of landlords and moneylenders. Change within that context could only be limited and its long-term consequences open-ended. While the missions provided some support in the early years of this struggle for an emancipatory identity the landlords have generally opposed it.

One of the reasons why reservation is denied to these dalits is the fear that many

of them will start converting to Christianity. This does not seem to be true on two accounts. Firstly, the population profile of various religious communities in India from 1961 to 2001 reveals that there has been no growth among the Christians, on the contrary the population has declined (Table 1). With all the "pull factors", which were supposed to have been offered to the weaker sections in India, Christianity remains a marginal religious community. Secondly, even the small group of people who got converted to Christianity from dalit origins have not improved their lot dramatically.

Further, the number of dalit Christian students in Christian institutions is abysmally low (Table 2). Higher the educational institutions, lower the proportion of dalit Christian students there.

Caste-based discrimination continues unabated even today. For instance, in Chunduru village of Andhra Pradesh, 12 dalit Christians were massacred by the Reddys allegedly because a dalit Christian youth sat with his feet up in the local cinema hall and accidentally touched an upper caste youth sitting in front of him. This massacre took place (1993) just because the "offender" was a dalit Christian and not a kamma or reddy Christian. If the youth were a kamma or reddy Christian the offended would not dare to create a ruckus since other kamma or reddy Christians would retaliate. Thus, the prevalence of brahmin Christian, kamma or reddy Christian, syrian Christian, caste Christian or dalit Christian itself is an indication of continuance of caste even after a person has given up following Hinduism.

### Caste-based Discrimination

Historical data abound with caste segregation and discrimination within the church right from its inception. The cathedral at Tiruchirappalli, built between 1839 and 1841 was provided with the customary caste bar. In some places, the dalits had their own churches, in other places they attended the services standing outside the church. In common churches they were seated in the side or at the back and could take communion only after the caste Christians. It is not that the church authorities did not know about this or were unaware of the discriminatory practices. At the Synod of Pondicherry in 1844, the seating arrangement in church for different castes, inequality and injustice to dalits

was discussed and a statement issued. But the caste Christians accused the missionaries of trying to abolish the caste system. Church attendance was boycotted till the old order was restored.

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. From 1893 to 1900, high caste students refused to dine with the students from the fisher community in St Joseph's College at Tiruchirappalli. It is this college which boasts of being the alma mater of president Abdul Kalam. Sit-in strikes and throwing of water snakes by caste Christians and acts of violence against the adi dravidars had taken place to prevent them from entering the church of Tiruchirappalli. The Bishop of Mylapore, pleaded in the conference of the Indian Hierarchy in 1921 to reiterate the non-implemented instruction of the Propaganda Fide of 1783, which disapproved of separate seats in churches, and again the letter of the Propaganda 1865 which demanded that all castes be admitted into the catholic schools. In 1933, south Indian Bishops wrote a common pastoral letter in favour of the abolition of caste distinction in the church.<sup>4</sup>

Even though dalit Christians are about 65 per cent in the catholic church in Tamil Nadu, only about 3.8 per cent among the priests and nuns are dalits. Similarly there are not even about eight dalit Bishops among the nearly 155 catholic bishops in India. This is again a serious exclusion of

the dalit Christians from the mainstream of the church even though they form a big majority in the catholic population. It is a clear proof that the caste-domination is operating at all levels of making the choice,

**Table 3: Labour Pattern among the Dalit Christians of North-west India**

S No	Occupation	Per Cent
1	Seasonal farm labour	14.08
2	Night-soil labour	11.48
3	Bonded labour	05.09
4	Child labour	02.49
5	Casual labour	47.93
6	Migrant brick-klin labour	05.44
7	Public road construction labour	00.83
8	Grain market labour	04.85
9	Rural handicraft labour	01.66
10	Skilled labour	06.15

Source: Vidya Sagar Dogar, 'Rural Christian Community in North-west India', CISRS and ISPCCK, New Delhi, 2000.

**Table 4: Occupations of Dalit Christians of Tamil Nadu**

S No	Occupation	Per Cent
1	High administrative	0.62
2	Lower administrative	2.68
3	Professional	0.68
4	Teaching	3.57
5	Clerical	1.73
6	Trade and commerce	0.75
7	Transport and public utility	1.72
8	Manufacturing, processing and service	2.26
9	Construction	2.80
10	Own cultivation	7.29
11	Agricultural labourers	54.75
12	Livestock, forestry	1.05
13	Menial	1.80
14	Others	18.74

Source: Antony Raj, Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu, Madurai, Ideas Centre, 1992, p 357. (This is an unpublished manuscript.)

**Table 1: Population of Religious Communities 1961-2001**

	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
All religions	439,234,771	547,949,809	665,287,849	838,583,988	1,028,610,328
Hindus	83.45	82.72	82.63	82.00	80.45
Muslims	10.69	11.20	11.35	12.11	13.43
Christians	2.44	2.59	2.42	2.34	2.34
Sikhs	1.79	1.89	1.96	1.94	1.87
Buddhists	0.74	0.69	0.70	0.76	0.78
Jains	0.46	0.47	0.48	0.39	0.41
Others	0.34	0.39	0.41	0.38	0.65
Religion not stated	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.07

Source: The First Report on Religion Data, Census of India 2001, New Delhi.

**Table 2: Catholic Institutions and Presence of Dalit Christian Students in Tamil Nadu**

	Primary/ Middle School	High School	College	Technical Institute
Catholic institutions	801	370	22	116
Dalit Christian students (per cent)	31.2	15.5	10.5	-

Source: Quoted in L Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church among Dalit Christians*, ISPCCK, New Delhi, 1999, p 88.

recommendations and decisions for the appointment of leaders.

A careful analysis shows that to a great extent the occupational pattern among dalit Christians is similar to that of the dalits following Hinduism. According to a study undertaken by Vidya Sagar Dogar in north-west India, about 30.16 per cent of dalit Christians are reported to be mainly workers. The labour employment is classified into two sectors: Over 72.41 per cent of them are employed as labourers in unorganised sector and 27.59 per cent are reported to be in service sector. Contrary to the myth propagated, most of the dalit Christians are engaged in unorganised sector and are not in service sector. Further, 11.48 per cent dalit Christians are engaged in manual scavenging (Table 3) like their Hindu counterparts.

According to the 1991 Census report, 64.29 per cent of the dalits were enumerated as agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu. A study of the dalit Christians of Tamil Nadu returned 54.75 per cent dalit Christians as agricultural labourers. Thus, the percentage is almost the same.

Similarly about 14.62 per cent dalits were returned as engaged in own cultivation while 7.29 per cent dalit Christians were identified as engaged in own cultivation (Table 4). A small percentage of dalit Christians has moved to lower administrative and teaching jobs. This may be due to the education they received from Christian institutions. But the vast majority are landless agricultural labourers like other dalits.

### **Demand for Equality and Right**

With the formation of Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) the struggle of the dalit Christians for equality, justice and non-discrimination became a reality. Though DCLM was limited to Tamil Nadu, it had ripple effect in other southern states. In some of the northern states too some attempts to unify dalit Christians has been going on. Presented below is the manifesto of dalit Christians that was submitted to the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Conference.<sup>5</sup>

(1) There is no room for the practice of untouchability within the church. Its practice in any form should be forbidden. The

church authorities should enact necessary laws to declare such practices as a punishable offence.

(2) The authority structure in the catholic church should be decentralised and democratised so that there will be dalit clergy and lay participation in the decision-making bodies such as parish councils, boards of trustees for education and multi-purpose societies, and other administrative bodies.

(3) We demand social justice from the church. For us, justice necessarily means sharing of power. This should be based on the principle of proportionality. As a necessary prerequisite for adopting this principle, the TNBC should order a caste-wise census throughout Tamil Nadu, which will avoid all dubious claims by different castes.

(4) We do understand that vocation is a call from god. But to have only 3.8 per cent of priests and other clergy from the dalit Christians indicates certain covert and overt discrimination. Necessarily structural changes should be brought in, in order to recruit more boys and girls from

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the dalit community to rectify the glaring imbalances.

(5) The Christian churches in India, which form just 2 per cent of the total population, are able to provide 20 per cent of the education services to this country. Such a mammoth organisation should adopt dalit Christians as their target group and work for their educational development. Preferences should be given to the dalit Christians in admission and appointment. These educational institutions are run in the name of minority rights, and among the minority, the dalit Christians are the majority.

(6) The multipurpose society with its huge budget should channel its resources to improve the quality of life (housing, health and food) of the dalit Christians in their dioceses. There should be dalit representatives in the board of directors and in the administrative posts.

(7) In our struggle to get our rights from central and state governments, the church should adopt harder options in order to politicise the issue. The church should call for an indefinite closure of educational and medical institutions.

(8) We call on the church to come out with imaginative economic programmes to alleviate the hunger and misery of these dalits who live below the poverty line, particularly the landless labourers.

(9) Those dalit Christians who work in movements and organisations for the betterment of the cause of the dalits should not be penalised or victimised.

These demands clearly indicate the fact that the issues raised in the demands are based on caste that is socio-economic-political and cultural in nature rather than religious.

The Bishops of Tamil Nadu who met in 1990 analysed and acknowledged caste discrimination within the church as violations of human rights. At the end of this meeting they brought out a joint statement condemning the caste system in the church and announcing many concrete proposals.<sup>6</sup>

(1) That the catholic scheduled castes be treated equally, without being rejected in places of worship and in cemeteries;

(2) That an increase in vocations to the priesthood and to the religious orders from the catholic scheduled castes in the diocese be promoted;

(3) That responsibilities and rights of membership be offered to catholic scheduled castes in catholic educational institutions, diocesan institutions, pastoral centres and social service institutions, and that good leaders be created from among them;

(4) That preference be given to catholic scheduled castes in admissions to catholic schools, especially teacher training schools and professional centres and the like and that special coaching classes for poor students who are backward in education, and especially the scheduled castes be conducted;

(5) That scholarship be given to eligible scheduled caste students in professional and technical education, in institutions run by the dioceses and the religious congregations;

(6) That the scheduled caste catholics be given preference in selection for jobs in the schools run by the dioceses and the religious congregations;

(7) The economic projects planned for the scheduled castes be arranged and that greater opportunities be offered to scheduled castes for participation in the training camps organised by these organisations;

(8) That scheduled caste and scheduled tribe commissions be instituted in each diocese immediately;

(9) That considerable funds be raised through the joint action of Tamil Nadu bishops and the religious congregations for the higher education of eligible scheduled castes catholics;

(10) That continuous efforts be made to obtain rights for the Christian scheduled castes from the centre and state governments.

### **Dalit Christians and the State**

Historically speaking, the Indian Constitution on the basis of Article 341(1) empowered the president of India to specify the castes and groups which can be considered as the scheduled castes and who can avail the provision of reservation. The president promulgated an order known as the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. The third paragraph of this order considers only the dalit Hindus as SC and provided them with the privileges and rights bestowed to the scheduled castes by the Constitution.

The Sikhs and the Buddhists were brought under the scheme of reservation in 1956 and 1990 due to political pressure. Another reason could be that these two religions are considered to be offshoots of Hinduism. But the Constitution speaks of SC as a social category in Articles 330, 332, 334, 335, 338 and 341. In these articles there is no mention of religious background of scheduled caste communities.

The third paragraph of the Order has violated the constitutional rights of dalit Christians and dalit Muslims. On the basis of this argument, a petition has been filed in the Supreme Court. The High Court of Madras also has admitted a plea filed by a dalit who challenged the exclusion of dalit Christians from the ambit of the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1976. Christians feel that this religion-based discrimination is in violation of Article 15(1) and contravenes the provisions of Article 15(4) of the Constitution of India. Constitutional principles prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

It is pertinent to note that various state governments and commissions like the Mandal Commission, the Backward Class Commission of Andhra Pradesh, recommended to the central and state governments to extend SC reservation privileges to dalit Christians. This is what the Mandal Commission debate had to say about the continuation of caste-based discrimination even after religious conversion. "The change of religion did not always succeed in eliminating castes. The converts carried with them their castes and occupations to the new religions. The result has been that even among Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, casteism prevails in varying degrees in practice, their preaching notwithstanding. Casteism has thus been the bane of entire Indian society, the difference in its rigidity being of a degree varying from religion to religion".<sup>7</sup>

On December 22, 1986 an attempt was made to introduce the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders (Amendment) bill once again drawing the attention of the Parliament to look into the demands of the scheduled castes. One of the main arguments of P J Kurien who moved this Bill was that socially, economically and educationally the SC converts to Christianity are at par with and in certain cases below that of their Hindu counterpart. Kurien further argued that a convert who has reconverted to Hinduism is eligible to be a member of the scheduled castes and for all benefits. Here the freedom of religion does not have any meaning. Kurien went on to argue that the bill be passed which seeks to delete para 3 of the presidential order, which will go a long way in rectifying the distortions of our reservation policy and in providing justice to a larger number of people who are deprived of these benefits due to change of religion.<sup>8</sup>

Once again an attempt was made from 1991 to 1994 to introduce a bill making provision for reservation to the dalit Christians. Narayana Swamy introduced a private member bill recommending the amendment of the Constitution (scheduled castes) orders so as to include the dalit Christians under this purview. This bill made the point clear that the scheduled castes and converted Christians from scheduled castes are living in the same village or town under similar social set up. There is no reason to deny them the rights on the ground of conversion. But this bill also could not see the light of the day.

In a cabinet note dated March 6, 1996, welfare ministry had proposed to include SC converts to Christianity as scheduled castes in the Constitution (scheduled castes) orders so as to make them eligible for all statutory safeguards and benefits accruing to the members of scheduled castes. The cabinet approved this proposal at its meeting held on March 7, 1996. In pursuance of this decision, the Constitution (scheduled castes) Orders (Amendment) Bill 1996 was prepared. The bill sought to amend the earlier Constitution (scheduled castes) Orders so as to remove the bar on Christians converted from the SC being deemed to be members of the SC. Although the bill was listed for introduction as a supplementary item in the Lok Sabha on March 12, 1996, it could not be introduced. Following the adjournment of Parliament, the cabinet decided on March 14, 1996, that an ordinance be issued for the purpose. An ordinance was proposed to the president but was not promulgated.<sup>9</sup>

By appointing the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, the UPA government has shown that it is open to examining the demand of the dalit Christians and dalit Muslims.

Opposition to the just demand of the dalit Christians for reservation could come from the following quarters:

(a) A Hindutva force has been opposing reservation for dalit Christians and dalit Muslims on the pretext that if the dalits from these religions are given reservation other dalits would en masse leave Hinduism.

(b) Dalits who are following Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism will oppose this move since they feel that they will have to share the reservation with this additional group too. Instead of exploring the possibility of how to bring in all the dalits into one banner and find greater solidarity to fight for their rights, they are worried about losing reservation. This demarcation of

15.5 per cent reservation for the scheduled castes is not a holy cow that cannot be re-examined;

(c) Caste Christians will oppose fearing the equalisation of dalits with them. All along they have opposed any move to bring in change and countered the church when it tried to introduce change in the lives of the dalit Christians.

(d) Finally, politicians will remain uncommitted on this issue since the dalit Christians do not constitute a comprehensive vote bank. Conferring or denying reservation for dalit Christians will be predominantly determined by the electoral prospects.

Finally, taking all these facts into account the government should demand that the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities submit its report at the earliest and the report should be carefully examined. The prime minister should make proactive statements as he did with regard to the Sachar Committee Report and bring the dalit Christians under the umbrella of reservation within a stipulated period. 

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## Notes

- 1 'Dalits Threaten to Convert', *The Hindustan Times*, December 3, 1999.
- 2 The term "caste Christians" is used here purely as a sociological category as used by social scientists to avoid the negative connotation – dalits and non-dalits. Instead of the terms dalits and non-dalits, they use the terms dalits and caste Hindus or general population.
- 3 Most of the data on dalit Christians are estimates at the present since no census on caste-religious background has been undertaken. Now there are some attempts to collect data but these too are localised.
- 4 L Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church among Dalit Christians*, ISPCK, New Delhi, 1999, pp 109-111.
- 5 Antony Raj, *Betraying the Hope of the Poor*, DCLM Publication, Madurai, Nd, pp 4-5.
- 6 T B Jayaseelan, *Human Rights of Dalit Christians and the Code of Canon Law*, Pontifical University, Rome, 1998, pp 93-94.
- 7 Article 400, 'Mandal Case Judgment', *Judgment Today*, Vol 6, No 9, November 30, 1992.
- 8 Jose Kananakal, *Scheduled Castes in Search of Justice*, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1986, pp 15-16.
- 9 S Lourduswamy, *Towards Empowerment of Dalit Christians: Equal Rights to All Dalits*, Centre for Dalit Studies, New Delhi, 2005, p 113.