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Social Exclusion and Economic Discrimination: Analysing the Socio-Economic Marginalisation of Dalit Christians in India

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Abstract

Dalit Christians in India experience a form of double marginalization —socially, within the entrenched caste hierarchy, and institutionally, through exclusion from the Scheduled Caste (SC) protections provided under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950. This study employs a narrative review and conceptual synthesis approach to interrogate the denial of SC recognition as a state-mediated socioeconomic stratification process, examined across three analytical domains: educational attainment, labor market outcomes, and asset ownership. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature, government commission reports, and national data sources published between 2000 and 2025, this study conceptualizes exclusion as a cumulative causal process in which constitutional ineligibility restricts access to affirmative action, thereby lowering the expected returns to human capital investment, restricting occupational mobility, constraining productive asset accumulation, and reinforcing intergenerational poverty. Evidence from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and selected national sources indicates that Dalit Christians are under-represented in higher education, over-represented in informal and low-paid employment, and characterized by higher household poverty, with an incidence estimated at around 30 percent —substantially above that of their caste-Hindu and upper-caste Christian counterparts. Given the largely observational nature of the underlying evidence, the findings are presented as theory-driven associations rather than as causal estimates. The study concludes with institutionally feasible and constitutionally informed policy recommendations across four domains: legal recognition, educational equity, labor market inclusion, and asset building. This calls for future research grounded in nationally representative, religion-disaggregated primary data collection, together with longitudinal and intersectional designs capable of estimating causal effects. These findings have implications for social policy, constitutional jurisprudence, and the broader scholarship on caste-based stratification in post-colonial South Asia.

Keywords: Dalit Christians, Social Exclusion, Scheduled Caste Status, Institutional Discrimination, Affirmative Action, Intergenerational Poverty.

Introduction

Caste stratification in India is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is interwoven with religion, geography, gender, and the histories of land ownership, and is productive of enduring socio-economic inequalities. One

of its most institutionally significant aspects is the constitutional definition of Scheduled Caste (SC) status, which governs access to affirmative action in education, employment, and legislative representation. The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, amended by subsequent presidential orders, only allows SC recognition to those professing Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism. This religious eligibility criterion systematically denies Dalit Christians (converts to Christianity from historically 'untouchable' castes and their descendants) access to the protective architecture of the Indian reservation system (Massey, 2007; Mosse, 2010).

This institutional structure creates a basic paradox. While Dalit Christians suffer from social stigma, occupational exclusion, and capability deprivation of caste identity, they are denied the mechanisms of affirmative action that are intended to correct this type of disadvantage. This phenomenon has been termed 'double discrimination' (Prabhakar, 2008) and 'religion-contingent exclusion' (Robinson, 2003), and has been the focus of growing interest among constitutional scholars, sociologists, and development economists. This debate has been extended in recent years by international scholarship that has rethought the historical origins of the 1950 Order and argued that the religious restriction on SC eligibility, in the light of the evidence of the continuing disadvantage of converts, makes the classification under-inclusive and constitutionally problematic (Kumar, 2023). Comparative studies on caste-based exclusion in South Asia also show that discrimination in the form of occupational segregation, endogamy, and exclusion from institutional access is not limited to any particular religious tradition but is found across religious lines (Thapa et al., 2021).

Despite this emerging interest, scholarship on Dalit Christians is scattered across disciplines and regions. Empirical studies are localized to Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and there is little evidence for national-level generalization. Often, existing scholarship has confused correlation with causation and has not placed observed disparities in a coherent analytical framework that connects institutional exclusion to socio-economic outcomes. The present study aims to fill these gaps by using a theoretically

informed narrative synthesis that conceptualizes the exclusion of Dalit Christians as a cumulative causal process. The lack of SC protections limits access to affirmative action, diminishes the benefits of investing in human capital, limits labor market mobility, and limits asset accumulation, all of which exacerbate intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage. This sequential causal pathway will be used as the organizing framework for the analysis that follows.

Principal Contribution. This study has three contributions. First, it systematically uses the social exclusion framework to examine the socio-economic marginalization of Dalit Christians and provides an analytical description of the mechanisms by which exclusion works. Second, it brings together disparate empirical evidence on education, employment, and asset ownership in a coherent conceptual framework. Third, it posits that the denial of SC recognition is a state-led process of economic stratification that has identifiable downstream impacts on human capital accumulation, occupational mobility, and intergenerational wealth transmission.

Statement of the Research Problem

In India, affirmative action is a constitutional measure to address social disadvantage. The SC reservation system was created specifically to address the inter-generational cycle of disadvantage created by caste-based untouchability. However, the religious eligibility clause in the 1950 Presidential Order produces a structural anomaly: it provides state protection based on a social identity (caste), which conversion does not affect, but it does not provide state protection based on a religious identity, which conversion does affect (Jaffrelot, 2006). This imbalance is an institutionalized contradiction that works to the systematic disadvantage of Dalit Christians. The exclusion is not merely symbolic. The 1950 Order restricts the opportunity structures of Dalit Christians compared to their Hindu counterparts of the same caste origin by depriving them of educational scholarships, quotas in government jobs, and political reservation. Recent constitutional analysis suggests that this exclusion, when balanced with the continued empirical evidence of caste-based disadvantages for converts, is more of an act of

constitutional evasion than reasonable classification (Kumar, 2023). This is exacerbated by market-based discrimination in employment, credit, and land markets, creating a multi-layered socio-economic disadvantage that is not sufficiently tackled by existing policy instruments.

Objectives

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the constitutional and legal mechanisms through which Dalit Christians are excluded from Scheduled Caste protections in India.
- To analyse the differential impact of this exclusion on educational attainment, labour market outcomes, and household asset ownership.
- To situate these disparities within the social exclusion framework and trace the causal pathways through which institutional exclusion produces socio-economic stratification.
- To critically evaluate the heterogeneity of socio-economic outcomes within the Dalit Christian population across region, denomination, gender, and rural–urban location.
- To formulate institutionally feasible, evidence-based policy recommendations addressing both structural and market-mediated barriers to inclusion.

Review of Literature

The scholarship on the socio-economic marginalization of Dalit Christians has evolved in several different streams of inquiry, which have until recently developed in isolation from each other. This section provides an overview of these works, highlights their similarities and differences, and outlines the gap that this study aims to fill. Theological and sociological explanations of caste in Indian Christianity, constitutional and legal perspectives on Scheduled Caste eligibility, empirical socio-economic research on Dalit Christian communities, and the wider literature on caste-based economic discrimination and social exclusion theory are all considered.

The caste system in Indian Christianity. Theological and sociological research has

demonstrated that conversion to Christianity did not eradicate caste identity but rather often reinforced it in the institutional structures of the church. Research on subaltern Christianity and Dalit liberation theology (Clarke, 1998; Prabhakar, 2008) has revealed the continued presence of caste hierarchy in the church, in the seminary, and in church governance, and the exclusion of Dalit Christians is seen as an issue of church as well as social injustice. Robinson (2003) and Massey (2007) place these dynamics in the broader context of Christian communities in India, and Zelliott (1992) situates the Dalit Christian experience in the broader context of the Ambedkarite movement. It is analytically rich and historically grounded, but mostly descriptive and qualitative, and seldom quantifies the socio-economic consequences of the exclusion it documents. It is its main contribution to establish that caste is a persistent axis of stratification even after religious conversion, which is the basis of the present analysis.

Constitutional and legal scholarship. A second strand concerns the constitutional and legal framework of SC eligibility, particularly the religious restriction added to the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. Jaffrelot (2006) places the reservation system in the context of the politics of affirmative action, and successive commission reports, most recently the Sachar Committee (2006), have highlighted the socio-economic situation of religious minorities and raised doubts about the logic of religion-based eligibility. The exclusion of converts is a majoritarian afterthought, as the activist narrative has it, but this is not a straightforward claim, as recent scholarship has made clear, as Kumar (2023) demonstrates by a re-reading of the Constituent Assembly Debates, the SC list was never meant to be strictly religion neutral, even as he concludes that the continued exclusion of Dalit Christians is hard to square with contemporary evidence of persistent caste-based disadvantage. This literature explains the legal-historical basis for the exclusion, but is mostly normative and doctrinal and only loosely linked to measured socio-economic outcomes.

Empirical socio-economic studies. The third strand consists of micro-level empirical studies of Dalit Christian communities, mostly focused in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. George (2012) systematically

presents the development deficit of Dalit Christians, which includes lower educational attainment and higher drop-out rates compared to similar Hindu SCs, and warns explicitly against lumping Dalit Christians together. Studies conducted in the region show similar trends of educational, occupational, and asset disadvantage (Rajesh, 2009; John, 2015; Pinto, 2010; Tiji, 2023), and Raju John (2017) brings the comparison to the national level. The picture is complicated by the findings of Zachariah (2016) based on the Kerala Migration Survey, which showed significant differences between denominations and migration experiences, a welcome addition to studies reporting community-wide averages. Collectively, this literature confirms the presence of persistent disadvantage, but is methodologically limited: the evidence is predominantly cross-sectional, geographically limited, and often fails to account for the effects of other factors that might affect outcomes, such as family income, parental education, or local labor market conditions.

Economic discrimination and social exclusion based on caste. A fourth strand, although not directly about Dalit Christians, provides analytical leverage and rigorous empirical evidence. The literature on the economics of caste (Deshpande, 2011; Thorat & Newman, 2010) shows that caste discrimination is still present in formal and urban labor markets, and correspondence and econometric studies offer some of the best evidence of caste discrimination in hiring and wages (Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Thorat, Madheswaran, & Vani, 2023). Recent comparative analysis suggests that market and non-market discrimination both compel the need for policy innovation beyond quota-based instruments (Behera & Kumar, 2025). This literature, however, is mainly on Hindu SCs who continue to enjoy reservation, and the results have not been systematically applied to converts who do not have reservations. The conceptual vocabulary of social exclusion (Room, 1995; Atkinson, 1998; Sen, 2000; Gore & Figueiredo, 1997) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) provides a framework that can bring together these diverse findings, but has not been used extensively with Dalit Christians. Comparative evidence from other parts of South Asia also suggests that caste-based exclusion is not limited to any particular

religious group (Thapa et al., 2021), further supporting the need for a non-religious approach.

Synthesis and the present contribution. Together, these four strands focus on the issue of persistent disadvantage, but are split in three ways. First, they are disciplinarily isolated: theological and legal and economic accounts rarely interact, and the moral power of the former, the doctrinal exactitude of the latter, and the empirical rigour of the latter are rarely applied to a single analytical question. Second, the empirical evidence is geographically limited and mostly cross-sectional, meaning that the causal relationship between SC exclusion and socio-economic outcomes is often assumed rather than proven. Third, much of the literature assumes that Dalit Christians are a homogeneous group, which fails to account for the denominational, regional, and gendered diversity that George (2012) and Zachariah (2016) demonstrate to be significant. The present review builds on this scholarship by combining the four strands in a single social exclusion framework, by theorizing the denial of SC recognition as a state-mediated causal pathway with identifiable downstream effects, and by foregrounding intra-group heterogeneity and the limitations of causal inference from observational evidence. It aims to do this by making a more descriptive and fragmented literature into a coherent analytical account that can inform policy and future empirical studies.

Methodology

This study uses a narrative review and conceptual synthesis method. Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, government commission reports, census documents, and civil society publications. The sources were identified by systematically searching Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and PubMed using the keywords: Dalit Christians, caste discrimination, social exclusion, affirmative action, and socio-economic status. Only publications from 2000 to 2025 were prioritized, and earlier foundational texts were included if theoretically warranted. The evidence was presented in three analytical areas: education, employment, and assets. The synthesis involved (i) identifying converging empirical findings from independent studies; (ii) addressing

divergent or conflicting evidence and exploring potential explanations; and (iii) tracing causal mechanisms proposed by the available evidence in the theoretical framework described below. The study is based on secondary data, which are mostly observational, and the results should be interpreted as indicative associations rather than causal estimates. The findings are also geographically limited to Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which further limits the generalizability of the findings. These limitations are explored in more detail in Section 11.

Theoretical Framework: Social Exclusion

Social exclusion, as developed in European social policy scholarship (Room, 1995; Atkinson, 1998) and later expanded to South Asian settings (Gore & Figueiredo, 1997; Sen, 2000), is a dynamic process by which individuals and groups are denied full access to the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of the society in which they live. Social exclusion is not just a description of material deprivation but also a focus on the processes and institutions that create and sustain disadvantage over time. Sen (2000) differentiates between ‘constitutive’ exclusion (bad in itself) and ‘instrumental’ exclusion (bad because of its consequences). For Dalit Christians, both are in operation: exclusion from SC status is constitutively unjust, and instrumentally harmful in terms of income, assets, and capabilities.

Ambedkar (1936/2014) systematically explored the historical roots of Dalit marginalization and claimed that caste is not just a division of labor but a hierarchical division of laborers backed by social, religious, and legal mechanisms. His critique remains central to any contemporary analysis of exclusion, even for Dalit Christians who converted but did not remove the social stigma of their caste origin. This analysis is extended in *The Grammar of Caste* (Deshpande, 2011) to contemporary labor markets, where it is shown that caste-based economic discrimination is still found in the formal and urban sectors and directly affects the occupational disadvantage of Dalit Christians. This is supported by more recent empirical studies: an in-depth econometric study of the Indian labor market suggests that wages of the Scheduled Caste workers are significantly lower in both public and private

sectors, and a significant portion of this wage gap can be explained by occupational discrimination, which refers to discrimination in access to jobs, not within jobs (Thorat, Madheswaran, & Vani, 2023). A recent comparative study of caste, affirmative action, and employment in contemporary India also suggests that policy innovation is needed beyond quota-based measures to tackle discrimination in the informal and private sectors (Behera & Kumar, 2025).

In the Indian context, caste is the main mechanism of social exclusion, which manifests in the form of interlocking processes of ritual pollution, residential segregation, occupational heredity, and political marginalization (Thorat & Newman, 2010). These caste-based mechanisms are further complicated by the legal exclusion mechanism of denial of SC status to Dalit Christians. This leads to a situation in which market-based discrimination and state-mediated exclusion work together to create patterns of disadvantage that are not sufficiently mitigated by market liberalization or general poverty reduction programmes (Deshpande, 2011; De & Pathak, 2018). A systematic review of caste-based exclusion in South Asia also shows that Dalit communities, outside the Hindu religious sphere, are disadvantaged in social and economic participation across the region, suggesting that the exclusion process is not religion-specific (Thapa et al., 2021).

The social exclusion framework is also enriched by the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), which emphasizes the cumulative disadvantage experienced by those at the intersection of several axes of marginalization. Caste, religious minority status, and gender intersect for Dalit Christian women to create a kind of exclusion that is not easily captured by any one factor. This framework is needed to correct analyses that assume that Dalit Christians are a homogeneous group and is used to guide the analysis of intra-group heterogeneity in Section 10. The disadvantage is multi-dimensional and cumulative and is unlikely to be remedied by interventions that focus on one domain.

Causal Pathways of Institutional Exclusion

The exclusion of Dalit Christians from SC protections is conceptualized in this study as a cumulative causal process operating through the

following sequential pathways:

Constitutional Exclusion → Restricted Access to Affirmative Action → Lower Returns to Human Capital Investment → Labour Market Segmentation → Asset Deprivation → Intergenerational Poverty

Constitutional exclusion constitutes the starting point of this pathway. As judicially interpreted, the 1950 Presidential Order excludes Dalit Christians from the reservation provisions of Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution. This exclusion has direct consequences for human capital formation because it ensures reserved seats in higher education and offers financial scholarships, residential allowances, and coaching programs that substantially reduce the private cost of higher education for SC students. These are absent for Dalit Christians, and the returns to educational investment are lower, as is the household incentive to invest in additional schooling, especially for households already constrained in their liquidity. This is because lower levels of education limit occupational mobility.

There is some evidence that Dalit Christians are over-represented in informal, low-paid, physically demanding work (Prabhakar, 2008; Mosse, 2010). This occupational crowding is not only due to lower educational levels but also to direct discrimination in formal labor markets, where caste identity, as indicated by surname, regional origin, or social networks, is used as a screening criterion (Thorat & Attewell, 2007). The lack of SC reservation in government jobs also further limits access to formal, stable, and relatively better-paid jobs, which has been the main avenue of upward mobility for SC communities.

Labor market segmentation creates limited income paths, thereby limiting savings and asset building. Dalit Christian households have significantly less agricultural land, residential property, and financial resources than Hindu SC households who have received state welfare or upper-caste Christian households who have had historic access to church institutional resources and networks (Zelliot, 1992; Clarke, 1998). In turn, asset deficits limit access to formal credit markets, where collateral is a key component of loan underwriting, and thus, opportunities for self-employment and enterprise development. The result

is an intergenerational poverty cycle that perpetuates socioeconomic disadvantage from generation to generation.

Educational Deprivation

Education is one of the key pathways of intergenerational mobility in the credentialised labor market in India. The evidence from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and some national datasets suggests that Dalit Christians continue to face educational disadvantage, but to different extents in different regions. The gap in enrolment at the primary level has also decreased substantially since the 1990s, in line with the overall trend of universalization of elementary education. However, the shift to secondary and tertiary education remains weak for Dalit Christian families. This attrition seems to be linked to the lack of SC reserved seats in higher education institutions, limited access to pre-examination coaching programmes, and the high opportunity cost of extended schooling for families depending on child labor (D'Souza, 2004). George (2012) in a working paper at the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies has systematically documented this development gap, which shows that Dalit Christians have lower educational attainment and higher school dropout rates than Hindu SCs of similar socioeconomic profiles, and explicitly attributes this gap to the lack of SC scholarship provisions. There is no specific financial mechanism for Dalit Christian students to avail educational support under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, which includes pre-matriculation and post-matriculation scholarships, hostel grants, and coaching subsidies.

Studies in Kerala reveal that Dalit Christian families in rural and semi-urban areas have educational investment patterns similar to those of non-SC Backward Class families compared to SC families who benefit from reservation (Rajesh, 2009; Zachariah, 2016). These findings are also supported by a study conducted at the parish level in Kottayam district (Tiji, 2023), which revealed that the enrolment rate in post-secondary education and professional qualification among Dalit Christian youth was significantly lower than that of non-Dalit Christian youth in the same parish. Even when Dalit Christians achieve similar levels of education, there

is some evidence that the returns to education may be less than for non-Dalit Christians because of caste-based hiring discrimination, as found in audit studies of the private sector in India (Thorat & Attewell, 2007). This discrepancy between investment in education and returns on labor market participation is a serious institutional failure, reducing the net return on human capital accumulation for Dalit Christian households. Similar trends can be seen in the larger body of recent research on caste and labor market outcomes in Tamil Nadu and other southern states, where educated SC and Dalit-origin workers still face systematic obstacles in accessing regular salaried work (Thorat, Madheswaran, & Vani, 2023).

Labour Market Segmentation

The situation of Dalit Christians in the labor market has three interrelated characteristics: occupational clustering in low-paid and informal jobs, under-representation in formal public and private sector jobs, and high vulnerability to income volatility and employment insecurity. The term ‘occupational crowding’ is used to describe the tendency of a social group to be over-represented in a limited number of occupational categories due to structural mobility barriers, not revealed preference (Bergmann, 1974). Occupational crowding is seen in Dalit Christians in terms of their over-representation in low-paid, non-benefit, low-skill, and non-construction occupations such as manual labor, domestic work, casual agricultural work, and low-skill construction work.

The lack of representation of Dalit Christians in the public sector is especially notable because of the significance of public sector jobs in terms of stable income, pension rights, and social recognition. SC reservation in government jobs, which is 15% for central government jobs, is one of the key mechanisms through which educational attainment is translated into formal employment for SC communities. The omission of Dalit Christians from this instrument is not symbolic but a real and quantifiable loss of opportunity structure (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998). The employment survey data from Tamil Nadu and Kerala show that Dalit Christians are more likely to be engaged in the informal sector, less likely to have regular wage

employment, and, when employed, less likely to be paid a wage similar to that of Hindu Dalits protected by SC reservation (John, 2015). Raju John (2017) makes this comparison at the national level and finds that Dalit Christians in all states have lower income, higher unemployment, and are more dependent on daily wage labor than the SC Hindus and upper-caste Christians. Pinto (2010) reports on the situation of Dalit Christians in Bangalore, where they are underrepresented in professional and managerial roles and overrepresented in sanitation, construction, and domestic service. These trends are also supported by recent econometric evidence, which shows that occupational crowding and wage discrimination against SC workers continue to exist in both the public and private sectors, and that a significant proportion of the wage gap is attributable to occupational discrimination (Thorat, Madheswaran, & Vani, 2023). Together, these findings suggest that the absence of reservation constitutes a measurable disadvantage and that reservation functions as a meaningful equalizing instrument. The causal interpretation of these associations is, however, confounded by the effects of education, household wealth, and regional labor market conditions—factors that future primary research designs should systematically address.

The National Dalit Christian Watch (2022) report to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review presents a detailed civil society account of labor market inequalities at the national level, encompassing discriminatory hiring practices, exclusion from church-based employment structures and under-representation in formal sector jobs. A recent scholarly re-examination of the constitutional and legal origins of the 1950 Order argues that the continued exclusion of Dalit Christians from SC protection is inconsistent with the redistributive purpose of Articles 15 and 16 (Kumar, 2023). Benjamin and Sunitha (2025) frame these labor market outcomes as a matter of constitutional justice, arguing that the exclusion of Dalit Christians from positive discrimination constitutes a constitutional anomaly with material consequences that accumulate over generations.

Asset Deprivation

Household resilience, access to credit, and intergenerational wealth transmission depend on asset ownership, including agricultural land, residential property, financial assets, and durable goods. Asset inequality among Dalit Christians reflects both historical dispossession and contemporary constraints on income generation and access to state-mediated asset-building programs. Historically, Dalit communities in India have been systematically deprived of land and productive assets through debt bondage, eviction from common resources, and discriminatory enforcement of land tenure (Guérin, Morvant-Roux, & Villarreal, 2013).

In most instances, conversion to Christianity did not restore lost assets; in some cases, it created additional obstacles through the loss of SC status and consequent ineligibility for land redistribution under state Dalit welfare schemes. Recent evidence indicates that Dalit Christian households hold substantially less agricultural land and residential property than upper-caste Christian households and lower asset holdings than Hindu SC households supported by state land allocation programmes. Dalit Christians in Kerala are more likely to be poor than the general Christian population, with poverty incidence estimated at approximately 30% (Rajesh, 2009; Satyanarayana, 2008). These findings are further corroborated by the religion-disaggregated Census of India (2011) data cross-referenced with occupational and housing quality indicators, which reveal a substantial subgroup of Christians in the southern states with a socioeconomic profile analogous to that of Dalit Christians—characterized by kuccha housing, absence of durable goods, and reliance on manual labor. The most recent authoritative assessment of the socioeconomic status of Dalit Christians in Kerala is the Justice J. B. Koshy Commission Report (2023), which concluded that Dalit Christians remain asset-poor and recommended specific welfare interventions that have not yet been fully implemented.

Low asset ownership leads to credit constraints, which limit investment in enterprise, education, and housing improvement. The lack of titled land or registered property among Dalit Christian households directly affects their ability to access

bank finance, as most credit products are collateral dependent. This liquidity constraint further contributes to intergenerational asset inequality: asset-owning households build assets more quickly than households that cannot invest in productive capital or home improvements, and the resulting asset gap grows over time. Comparative studies on caste and affirmative action describe this compound disadvantage as a structural consequence of the interplay between caste, religion, and state policy, positing that even if Dalit Christians succeed in their individual education or employment, they will continue to be stuck in cycles of poverty if there is no targeted asset-building intervention (Behera & Kumar, 2025).

Intra-Group Heterogeneity

One of the major drawbacks of much scholarship on Dalit Christians is the assumption that the Dalit community is a homogeneous social group. In fact, there are significant differences in the socioeconomic status of Dalit Christians along the lines of Christian denomination, geographic region, rural-urban location, gender, and household wealth. This internal diversity is explicitly recognized by George (2012), who warns against analyses that are too aggregate, which mask significant differences between denominations and districts.

In the Indian context, denominational differences are significant analytically because each Christian tradition – Catholic, Church of South India (CSI), Church of North India (CNI), and various Pentecostal and independent denominations – has a different institutional history, access to church welfare resources, and relationship with caste communities. For example, Catholic Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu and Kerala have traditionally had better access to church-run educational institutions and welfare programs than those of smaller and independent denominations (Clarke, 1998). Using data from the Kerala Migration Survey, Zachariah (2016) shows that the educational attainment, government employment, and emigration rates of Dalit Christians in the Latin Catholic and CSI traditions differ from those of more recent independent evangelical churches. Regional variations are also significant.

In Kerala, socio-economic conditions are very different from those in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, where Dalit Christians may be more severely deprived, because of the comparatively high literacy rates, well-developed public health systems, and relatively progressive land reform record in Kerala. Thus, the results of Kerala should not be generalized to the national population without proper qualification. Gender is also linked to caste and religious identity, creating compounded disadvantage for Dalit Christian women, who are discriminated against in education, marriage markets, and employment. The compounded disadvantages can be conceptualized using the intersectionality framework developed by Crenshaw (1991) in a different national context, but analytically transferable. Similarly, De and Pathak (2018), using labor market statistics, demonstrate that Dalit women, regardless of their religious affiliation, have far worse employment prospects than Dalit men, and that the gap is even greater for those who are not recognized as Dalit by the government. These sources of heterogeneity should be systematically considered in future empirical research, both to produce more precise causal estimates and to facilitate more targeted welfare interventions.

Limitations

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, this study is a secondary study and does not provide independent causal estimates. The observed relationships between SC exclusion and socioeconomic disadvantage are consistent with the proposed causal mechanism but could also be explained by confounding factors such as parental education, rural–urban location, historical trends of land ownership, and access to church institutional resources.

Second, a large proportion of the empirical literature available is micro-level and region-specific, especially from Kerala and Tamilnadu. This geographic concentration could be different from the patterns of disadvantage nationally, and there could be very different patterns of disadvantage in the northern, eastern, and central states of India. The extrapolation to the national level from a literature

that is predominantly from the southern Indian context should be done with caution. Third, the Indian administrative data system is well known for the lack of nationally representative, religion-disaggregated, and caste-specific data, which limits the possibilities for systematic quantitative analysis. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 and the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) do not consistently identify Dalit Christians as a distinct subgroup of the population, making it difficult to obtain reliable estimates at the national level. Fourth, as a conceptual review, the study does not account for selection effects or trends over time, nor does it assess whether the observed differences have increased or decreased over time as a result of economic development, educational expansion, or administrative changes brought about by the judiciary.

Policy Implications

Constitutional and Legal Reform

Policymakers should either extend the recognition of SC to Dalit Christians, as recommended by the Sachar Committee Report (2006) and the National Commission for Minorities, or create functionally equivalent affirmative action measures that would tackle the issue of religion-contingent exclusion without violating constitutional and judicial limits. A system for caste-based disadvantage that is accessible to judicial review, based on documented evidence of social stigma and economic deprivation and not on religious affiliation, would be constitutionally sound in addressing this structural disadvantage.

Educational Equity

Existing minority welfare and access to higher education programmes should be linked with targeted scholarships, residential coaching programmes, and retention mechanisms to enhance the educational outcomes of Dalit Christian students. These interventions should focus on the direct financial costs of schooling and the opportunity cost pressures that lead to early school leaving and should be assessed through longitudinal tracking of enrolment, completion, and labor market outcomes.

Labour Market Inclusion

Anti-discrimination monitoring, clear selection processes, and outreach to Dalit Christians should be integrated into public recruitment systems to increase the representation of Dalit Christians in formal employment. In the private sector, voluntary codes of conduct, diversity reporting obligations, and affirmative hiring policies can be complementary measures. These measures should be compared with the outcome measures of occupational attainment and wage trends.

Asset-Building Programmes

Collateral constraints could be lowered and long-term household wealth accumulation enhanced through land titling, subsidized housing schemes, and tenure regularization programs for historically dispossessed Dalit communities, irrespective of religious affiliation. Eligibility should be based on the evidence of caste origin and historical dispossession, and not on the basis of present religious affiliation.

Credit Inclusion

The extension of priority-sector lending mandates, loan guarantee schemes, and low-interest enterprise finance programs to Dalit Christian households would ease liquidity constraints and facilitate self-employment. Financial inclusion interventions need to be complemented by business development services and market linkage support to enhance enterprise viability and income sustainability.

Data and Monitoring

Religion-disaggregated, caste-specific administrative data systems are essential for evidence-based policy targeting. Future national censuses and large-scale surveys should incorporate tools that can capture Dalit Christians as a population subgroup so that the educational, employment, and asset outcomes of this group can be tracked over time. A separate periodic report on the socio-economic status of Dalit religious minorities, similar to the Sachar Committee framework, would be a major boost to the evidence base for policy.

Institutional Reform in Churches

Inclusion and fair representation of Dalit Christians in the governance committees of mainline churches, such as parish councils, diocesan committees, and educational management boards, can help to minimize internal institutional exclusion and enhance the accountability of church welfare resources. Denominational bodies should be encouraged to conduct an audit of the caste composition of their institutional leadership and make explicit commitments to inclusion.

Future Research Directions

The evidence base gathered for this review is adequate to support the analytical account developed here, but is limited by the predominantly observational and geographically localized nature of the existing scholarship. The following priorities should be the focus of a coherent programme of future research. First, primary data collection must be nationally representative, religion-disaggregated, and caste-specific to allow for the robust estimation of the magnitude of the disadvantage faced by Dalit Christians and to provide reliable comparisons between states, denominations, and rural-urban settings. Second, longitudinal and panel designs are required to go beyond associational evidence to credible identification of causal effects, especially as it relates to the transmission of disadvantage from parents to children. Third, empirical research needs to be expanded beyond Kerala and Tamil Nadu to include the northern, eastern, and central Indian states, where the socio-economic situation of Dalit Christian households could be very different from what has been reported in the South. Fourth, intersectional analyses that model caste, denomination, gender, and region simultaneously are needed to break down the compounded disadvantage of Dalit Christian women and those who follow smaller and independent denominations. Fifth, comparative studies that place the Indian case in the larger South Asian and post-colonial literature on religion-contingent exclusion and affirmative action would enhance the theoretical output of this research area. Lastly, if alternative institutional instruments are being piloted where equivalent affirmative action mechanisms are in place, then a robust impact assessment study, based

on quasi-experimental or randomized designs, would yield policy-relevant evidence of the effectiveness of the different institutional instruments.

Conclusion

This review argues that the exclusion of Dalit Christians from the protection of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, is a state-mediated mechanism of socio-economic stratification. The evidence across the three domains studied—education, labor market participation, and asset ownership—is consistent: disadvantage vis-à-vis caste-Hindu Scheduled Castes, and disadvantage within and across generations, as a result of the interplay of constitutional exclusion, market-based discrimination, and intra-community hierarchy.

The main contribution of this study is to bring together a scattered and discipline-specific literature in a unified social exclusion framework and theorize the denial of SC recognition as a cumulative causal pathway, rather than a legal fact. The findings have implications for social policy, constitutional interpretation of the definition of caste-based disadvantage that is religion-neutral, and comparative research on affirmative action in societies. Achieving them will require institutional change that is feasible and a stronger evidence base, in particular, nationally representative, religion-disaggregated, longitudinal research that can quantify the disadvantage described here and identify the mechanisms by which it occurs. Thus, the marginalization of Dalit Christians is not just a policy and justice problem, but also a potential field for further research on institutional exclusion.

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