

DALIT CHRISTIANS: THE DUAL ALIENATED PEOPLE IN INDIA

Article Particulars: Received: 10.02.2018 Accepted: 23.03.2018 Published: 28.04.2018

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Abstract

In India, Dalits are placed at the bottom of the Caste Pyramid. Over the last four centuries, thousands of Dalits joined Christianity in various Indian states particularly in southern states to escape from the social oppressions. The large scale conversion of Dalits took place mainly during the 19th century and early 20th century and chiefly in the protestant churches, and these are characterized as ‘mass conversions’. The mass conversion of Dalits meant exodus of Dalits to Christianity and rejection of caste in response to Gospel received from new faith. Dalit conversions were a religious and political decision of the community. Still, they suffer from same untouchability and remain part and parcel of the Dalit community and continue to live along with other dalits in the same segregated situations. Basically, it is a problem intrinsically related to human rights and violation of constitutional rights. The primary objective of the study is to find out whether their aspiration, dream for justice, equality, freedom, dignity and solace, was realized after joining the Christian fold. It is also aimed to trace out the types of social oppression, restriction, degradation and disabilities that the Dalit converts undergo.

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit Christians, Upper Castes, Constitution, Reservation, Syrian Christians, Discrimination

Introduction

The leaders of the Christian Dalits stated their condition before the Simon Commission in 1929 as follows “we remain today what we were before Christians- untouchables, degraded by the laws of social position obtaining in the land, rejected by caste Christians, despised by caste Hindus, and excluded by our own Hindu depressed class brethren”. Even after 90 years, their actual condition is not better; instead it is going from bad to worse. They have been facing severe discriminations at both secular and religious levels. The Christians constitute 2.3% of the total Indian population and nearly comprising 29 million. Nearly 70% of Christians in India are from Dalit and tribal communities. It is estimated that they constitute nearly 19 million people.¹ It shows that the majority of the Christians are converted from the scheduled castes and class.

Socio-Economic Status

They are generally found along with the other Dalit communities in the outskirts of the villages. Majority of them live in small huts with one- room structure made out of mud, stone and wood They haven’t toilets, kitchens or even proper drinking water facilities. Their sex ratio is lower than the national level. In Karnataka, it is 883 female for 1000 male.² 75% of them are totally illiterate. 87% of the total women are fully illiterate. Children are compulsorily sent to different works at the age of 10. Majority of the children drop out at class 2 or 3. The condition of most of their school is inexplicably pathetic. Many schools are like dilapidated structures or like cattle sheds with no benches, tables, black boards, toilets and so on. Most of the schools lack sufficient teachers. Still, caste discriminations are seen in this schools.³ It reveals that even though they converted to Christianity, their social status is not improved. They also lack cultivable lands. Majority of them are agricultural coolies. A smaller number work as cowherds, shepherds and housemaids and some in other skilled or unskilled works like drivers, mechanics, masons, painters etc. Persisting poverty and illiteracy appear to be the main cause of occupational immobility. 65% of them remain in utter poverty in India while that of Dalit Hindus is just 13%.

Though the constitution of India prohibits caste system and untouchability, they have been suffered undeclared restrictions. There are socially boycotted from many social spaces. They have been humiliated with verbal abuses. Their spiritual leaders as well as their worship centers are being insulted by the upper castes. ⁴ They are forced to do some traditional jobs like drum-beating, skinning, scavenging, removal of dead animals, cleaning cattle sheds, etc. Dalit women have been molested and they have seldom opportunity to get justice. ⁵ Very often police officials take decisions in favor of the culprits belong to the upper castes. The victims are forced to accept the decisions by threat or nominal compensation.

Discrimination by the State

The Government of India had recognized the need for lifting up the underprivileged and has constitutionally provided ‘protective discrimination’ for the Dalits and Adivasis. However, it is paradoxical that while Hindu Dalits, Sikh Dalits and Buddhist Dalits were granted this protective discrimination or SC status, Dalits converts to Christianity are being denied of this provision. As per Article 15.1 of the Indian constitution, the state shall not impose any kind of discrimination on its citizens on the basis of their religion, caste, race or region. Yet the Presidential order in 1950 explicitly states that “no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu or Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of a scheduled caste”.⁶ The amendments of 1956 and 1990 included the Sikhs and the Buddhists into the scheduled list. As a result, The Dalits who are converted to Christianity cannot enjoy any benefits of the Scheduled Castes, because they cease to be Hindus. They are deprived of the constitutional advantages enjoyed by other Dalits in the field of employment and higher education.⁷ It adversely affected them like the denial of freedom of religion, a blow to Dalit unity, Dual identity and problem of undercounting.⁸

Discrimination in the Church

There was a large scale conversion from the Scheduled Castes into Christianity since the 18th century. They believed the concepts of salvation, equality, brotherhood etc. put forwarded by the gospels and the missionaries. But in actual life, they confronted the age old discriminations. The Syrian Christians did not accept them as equal due to their strong caste sense. Thus they became the dual alienated community in Indian society.⁹

The caste distinctions in society are carried over and are exercised in the daily practice of the ministers of the church and the upper caste Christians. The discrimination against Dalit Christians has manifested in many different forms: segregation in the churches during worship, separate burial places,¹⁰ refusal of membership in various church bodies which are controlled by the upper caste Christians, lack of involvement on the part of the upper castes in the struggle for the cause of the Dalits, subtle forms of exclusion of Dalit vocations to priesthood, religious life, and so on. In some denominations, they are given separate churches and even separate cemeteries.¹¹ Formation of PRDS (Pratyksha Raksha Daiva Sabha) by Poikayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan was a response to the discrimination faced by the lower castes in Christian denominations.¹²

The upper castes dominate the educational and other institutions run by the churches and it is these upper and middle caste people who take advantages for themselves in the provision of minority rights.¹³ The Syrian Christian would not like to treat them as equal because of several factors. The urbanized and upper caste cultural background of the church leaders, hierarchical order of the church, changes in priorities etc. resulted in the total negligence of them. They had a nominal share in the administrative and power of the church though they consist the 70% of the population. They have also little representation in clergy. The superiority complex and the caste feelings of the church authority is the basic reason for the discrimination towards the Dalits in Christian community.¹⁴

Discrimination by Other Dalits

The Dalit Hindus also show intolerance towards their Christian counterpart. They are in forefront of the agitations against the reservation of Dalit Christians. There is a false but strong propaganda that the Scheduled caste Christians have been received large scale aid from the church and foreign countries. They apprehend that the reservation of the Dalit Christians would curtail their chances and rights. Some people feared that it may accelerate more conversions to Christianity.¹⁵

Atrocities on Dalit Christians

Modern economic policies and programmes hinder the life of the Dalits in many states such as Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat etc. Many of them had lost their houses and lands in the name of development projects. The major political parties, mainstream medias, activists etc. ignored their plights. On the other hand, the government machinery tries to suppress their movements by alleging Naxalism. Many churches and houses were attacked and destroyed by the dominant castes.¹⁶ The atrocities made by the upper castes with the support of the communal groups and government machineries in Kandamal in Orissa give a clear picture of it. Thousands of them still live in forests and could not return to their original living area because of the threat from the fanatic groups. Many of them were forced to perform Ghar Wappasi.

State Vs Dalit Christians

The presidential order of 1950 is against to the fundamental principles of our constitution. Though reservation is envisaged on the basis of caste, this order says that it is based on religion and is quite contradictory to the constitutional principles. By the amendments in 1956 and 1990 the government has granted reservation to Dalit Sikhs and Dalit Buddhists respectively. The supreme court of India also rejected the plea of the Dalit Christians in the famous case of Soosai Vs the Union of India. Soosai argued that he has the right of caste reservation since he has changed only his religious faith and did not change his caste. But the court dismissed the petition on the plea that the petitioner had not proved his case.¹⁷ Protection and Civil Rights Act 1976, the Untouchability Act 1955 and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 were some constitutional proceedings and measures taken by the Government of India to safe guard the interests of the Scheduled Castes. Unfortunately, the government is not ready to accept the Dalit Christians under the purview of these measures. Presently, the writ petition filed in the Supreme Court by Franklin Caesar is delayed in spite of National Commission for Schedule Caste (NCSC)'s recommendation to extend reservation to them.

Constitutional Demands

From time to time Central and State governments appointed commissions to look into the problems of Dalit Christians. Kaka Kalekar Commission, Kumara Pillai Commission, Elaya Perumal Commission, Sathanathan Commission, Chidambaram Report, Nittur Commission etc. recommended Scheduled Caste status to them. The Union government brought a bill in Parliament in 1996 for granting SC status to them on the ground that the change of religion has not altered the social and economic status of the Dalit Christians and Muslims. The National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities declared that the exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from the reservation is a discrimination based on religion and goes against the Article 14, 15, and 25 of the Constitution of India.¹⁸ Legislatures of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal demanded the government to grant reservation and other rights to them. The meeting of the National Council for Dalit Christians held in August 2010 asked the government to provide reservation and other benefits. They felt that they are eligible for the educational and economic benefits as per the article 46, protection from caste violence under article 17, reservation in educational institutions under article 15(4), reservation in legislative bodies under articles 330- 334,

reservation in employment opportunities and protection along with other scheduled Castes as per the articles 16(4), 335 and 320(4).¹⁹

Conclusion

Dalit Christians have been humiliated and deprived out from both their castes and religion. They have no role in decision making either in their religion or politics. They are dual alienated. They suffer caste discrimination in Christian. They are politically or religiously unorganized and can't become a pressure group. They are deprived from both the power and wealth of the land. Dalit converts to Christian faith are in a way caught up in a triangle of oppression. Firstly, society at large, where caste still dictates terms, is yet to accord dignity to Dalits as human beings. Secondly, the state, which instead of supporting and protecting those historically marginalized people discriminates against them; and thirdly, the church, which has lost its concern and vision for these people and turned increasingly apathic to their cries, struggles and aspirations.

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