

AN OVERVIEW OF FACTORS CAUSING THE PROBLEMS FACED BY DALIT CHRISTIANS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

The socio-cultural aspect, economic-political condition and personal community struggle of Dalit Christians themselves have to be taken together to understand their reality. The problems faced by Dalit Christians can be classified broadly as having objective and subjective factors. The objective factors are social occupational status, absence of political support, legal disabilities, and discrimination in the Church, etc. The subjective factors are divisions and discriminations among the Dalit Christians, low self-image such as the unwillingness to change their social approach, superiority complex, indifference to Dalit-problems, etc. The above factors raise the questions of inequality, oppression and exploitation of Dalit Christians, as well as the aspect of justice, human right and human dignity. It is the responsibility and the call of the Church to work for the non-people and to give equal opportunities in the Christian community. Socio-cultural, economic-political, personal and spiritual transformations are needed for Dalits. This transformation can be done with legitimate liberative thinking, planning and acting together by Dalits and non- Dalits.

Index Terms: *oppression, inequality, discrimination ,Untouchables, segregated.*

I.Introduction

According to the Caste system that prevailed in Indian society throughout these last three thousand years, Dalits have been considered to be so low that they were kept outside all castes. Even in these modern times the elite as well as the ordinary people treat them as Untouchables. Having undergone three thousand years of slavery and discrimination, Dalits find it nearly impossible to get out of this terrible trauma. The general situation of Untouchables is miserable but it is all the more wretched in the case of those Untouchables who have become Christians because they now suffer severe discrimination in two ways – in the Society and in the Church. In spite of their conversion the Dalit Christians still bear the stigma of un touchability.

II. The Plight of Dalit Population

More than 85% of Dalit Christians continue to live in the same segregated place, in the same “*Cheri, Colony or Slum*”, even two generations after becoming Christians. A Dalit is not given the luxury of a new environment. Dalits continue to work in the villages for low wages for their masters, enduring tyranny, abuses, beatings and killings. Their wives and daughters face molestation, rape and burning of huts and killing of their children. A Dalit always remains a Dalit in every sense of the word: ethically, lineally, racially, socially, economically, culturally, vocationally, geographically, relationally, contextually, and emotionally.

Actually, a Dalit encounters more torture and persecution now because he or she is a Christian Dalit. His masters do not accept the idea of a Dalit rising into anything that can attempt to end their eternal slavery. Dalits as well as Dalit Christians are being attacked by upper caste without any difference.

Murder of Dalit Christians like Mr. Emmanuel, (1951), and others in Neerukonda Saukarankulam (July 76), Villupuram (11 Dec. 1980), Karamchedu (March 1985), T. Sundur (1993) Kodiangulam (Oct. 1995), Sankaralingapuram (2001) and in hundreds of other Dalit villages where almost all victims were Christian Dalits are irrefutable evidences, that these Dalits were even denied constitutional safeguards against inhuman atrocities of the members of the higher castes. It is evident that though Dalit Christians suffer the same social, educational and economic disabilities as the Dalits of other religions but they are not protected like them. The reality of discrimination of Dalit Christians has been studied by various commissions on the Backward Classes appointed by the Government of India and by judgments of the High Courts and the Supreme Court. There are many proofs by Government commissions of disabilities and discriminations. For instance, Mandal Case Judgment stated “centuries-long caste oppression would not disappear by a mere change of religion.”

Even among other religious groups in this country, the division of society between the high and low castes is only to be expected. Almost all followers of the non-Hindu religions, apart from those of the Zoroastrians, are converts from Hindu religion. They have carried their caste with them into their new religions. It is hardly to be expected that the social prejudices and biases, the notions and feelings of superiority and inferiority, nurtured for centuries together would disappear by a mere change of religion.

“...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.”

While the majority of Dalit Christians (57.5%) are able to have three meals a day, over 37.6% have it only twice a day. More than 25% of the families have clothes valued at Rs. 100 or less for the whole family, and over 65% have clothes worth less than Rs.200. hence, 65% of Dalit Christians have clothes value less than Rs.39 per head. 19% of Dalit Christians do not own homes.

III. Denial of Rights and Dignity

Dalitness has material and psychological dimensions. Economically Dalits are deprived and socially ostracized. At the level of consciousness, generally, a Dalit Christian feels he is not wanted in society and in his own Church, because he/she is denied rights, which are due as a baptized Christian. This sense of 'not-wanted' is a serious problem. As it is, Dalits suffer from a low self-image. This is due to generation of exploitation and oppression resulting in a domestication to their plight, even accepting dehumanization as unchangeable, and legitimizing their own existence according to the myths and beliefs foisted on them by the dominant caste culture. It leads Dalits to a lack of self-understanding and self-respect of themselves.

IV. Educational Backwardness

The lack of economic resources for Dalit Christians is one of the main reasons for their poor literacy. The upper caste attitude towards Dalit Christians and the low self-image of themselves are also reasons for their poor education. The report of the Backward Class Commission of Tamilnadu (1970) says thus on Dalit converts to Christianity;-

“while there may be progress in the field of elementary education, the converts have not made much progress in the field of high school or college education as did their Hindu brothers. The same spirit or renaissance which animates the Hindu Scheduled Castes has not spread to the Christian sections and that due to the absence of employment opportunities similar to those reserved for Scheduled Castes, there was no great temptation for the converts to go into higher education. It is claimed that they have not been able to make any headway to government and they stand now where the Scheduled Castes were 20 years ago.”

Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution guarantee special protection to Christians under 'minority rights'. These rights are given to establish educational institutions and to maintain cultural freedom. Dalit leaders allege that the dominant caste Christians have taken advantage of these rights and they occupy the seat of power and control the administration of these institutions which have been established on the pretext of preserving and furthering the rights of Christian minority. It is seen that the dominant castes control Church related institutions.

V. Political Struggles and Problems

For centuries Dalit Christians have been carrying the burden of oppression in common with other Dalits. But the Indian Government started to distinguish Dalit of one religion from another. The rights and privileges, given to Dalits in other religions are denied to Dalits in Christianity on the basis of religion. The Indian Constitution grants to the President of India power to enlist the Scheduled Castes, eligible for reservation and other privileges. The Indian Government refused to include Christian Dalits in this list of the Scheduled Castes, thus denying the Christians the basic rights guaranteed in the Constitution. The fact that the Government has designated Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits among the Scheduled Castes, and refused to do the same for Christian Dalits, shows that Christian Dalits are being penalized for becoming Christians.

VI. The Catholic Church and Dalits

Christianity was brought to India by one of the Apostles of Jesus, St Thomas in 52 AD and later by the Missionaries in the 15th century. Due to page limitations, we restrict the history of the Catholic Church in India and the entry of Caste system in the Church with the conditions of Dalits in the Church.

VII. Entry of Caste System in the Church

The diocese of Goa was established in 1534. The Portuguese missionaries focused on upper caste conversions believing that inferior castes would follow later. Jesuit Francis Xavier arrived in Goa in 1542 and preached in the coastal areas. Mass conversions occurred on Coromoundel coast. Large number of Paravas and Mukkuvas were converted in 1535-44. These Roman Catholics followed Latin Rite. This was opening for Dalit Conversions. Jesuit Robert De Nobili came to India in 1602 and established Roman Catholic Madurai Mission and he was followed by the great missionaries John De Britto and Joseph Constantine Beschi who contributed a lot for the growth of the Church in the seventeen and eighteen centuries in India. Jesuit missionary Robert De Nobili changed this missionary policy and followed *Malabar Rite* with Hindu upper caste symbols. It included acceptance of the smearing of ash or sandal wood paste on forehead and use of Brahminical sacred thread etc. He restricted his evangelization only to Brahmins and believed in top to bottom conversion. He was the cause for entry of caste system into the Church. He accepted Caste system of upper caste converts. He not only introduced distinction between high caste and low caste but also encouraged separate churches. He went to the extent of dividing missionaries into Brahmin Sanyasis who ministered high caste and Pandara Swamis who ministered Dalits. They were following the policy of adaptation and viewing caste not as religious factor but as social factor. Thus Caste System entered the Church from the time of early Madurai Mission.

VIII. Dalit Conversion

The Society of Jesus was abolished in 1773 by Pope Clement XIV. Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation of the Evangelization of People) offered the Malabar Mission (South India) to Missionary

Society of Paris (Missions Etageres de Paris) in short form, MEP, in 1776. Later the name of Malabar Mission was changed into Pondicherry Mission. It was affected by French Revolution. Msgr. Hebert the first bishop of Pondicherry, Msgr. Bonnard, and Msgr. Laouchan contributed a lot for Dalit conversions in 19th century. Mass conversion of Dalits happened in 19th and 20th century. Motifs of Dalit conversion were such as

- To regain dignity and equality
- To follow God of love and compassion
- To gain upward mobility by getting education and economic privileges
- To find solidarity in times of sufferings
- To liberate themselves from oppression
- Above all the motive was to realize life of happiness here and now and eternal happiness promised by Lord Jesus. The struggle for realizing the above mentioned visions is found in the shortage of Church history in India.

IX. Caste Practices and Customs in the Church

Historically the converts from Hinduism to Christianity brought with them their symbols and caste practices to their new religion. The Bull of Pope Gregory XV, “Bulla Romance Sedis Antistetes”, dated 31st January 1623, accedes to the requests of the missionaries to accommodate themselves to certain caste practices and customs of the new converts. The Pope was granting this permission only as a provisional and conditional measure. It was given to Madurai Mission as response to the demand of Robert De Nobili. The Bull agreed to tolerate continuance of certain traditional customs considering the difficulties encountered by the Brahmin converts if they were obliged to abandon external signs (such as sacred thread, sandal, ablutions). The Bull agreed to tolerate them since these external rites could be interpreted as signs of nobility and function and also to express that Church was empathetic towards human sensibilities. However, the Bull put a condition and showed real charity and respect towards people of obscure conditions, which presumably was a reference to Dalits. This document shows the prevalence of the caste mentality among the converts. The Pope warns the high caste Christians about their caste pride.

X. Discriminatory Practices in the Church

The caste discrimination within the Catholic communities and parish churches was a historical reality as is evident from a letter of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. It wrote in 1779, “...separation within the Church and at the entrance of the Church, also the discrimination of cemeteries may actually be tolerated for fear of greater evil.”

The Cathedral at Tiruchirapalli, built between 1839 and 1841 was provided with customary caste bar. In some places Dalits had their own churches; in other places they attended, mass standing outside the

Church. In common churches they were seated in the side naves or at the back and could take communion only after the caste Christians. The results of the research conducted by Antony Raj SJ, the President of DCLM reveal the following discriminatory practices in the Catholic and Protestant churches in Tamilnadu as existing in some parishes.

1. The construction of two chapels, one is for the non-Dalits and other for Dalits. In some parishes liturgical services are conducted separately.
2. Separate seating arrangements are made within the same chapel. Dalits are usually seated in the two aisles of the Church. Even if there are benches or chairs, Dalits are asked to take their seats on the floor.
3. The existence of two separate cemeteries, two separate hearses to carry the dead bodies are found.
4. Two separate queues are formed to receive the Sacred Body of Christ. In some places Dalits are asked to receive communion only after the non-Dalits.
5. A Dalit is forbidden to be an altar boy at sacred liturgy.
6. The non-Dalits restrict the Corpus Christi procession, Palm Sunday procession, and other processions only to their streets.
7. Dalits are not invited to participate in the washing of feet ceremony during Maundy Thursdays.
8. For fear of equal participation in the celebration of the Parish Patron Saint, the parish council decides not to ask any contribution from Dalits.
9. The feast of the village patron saint is celebrated separately.

There is abundance of officially documented Church records and police records on cases of discrimination. There are so many cases to cite that took place throughout India. But we shall highlight a few and take cues for our arguments for the need for Dalit Theology and the ministry of Dalit empowerment.

10.1 Discrimination at K.K. Pudur, Chengalpattu

K.K.Pudur a village in Maduranthagam Taluk, Chengalpattu district, 60 km away from Madras has a Christian population of 2500 and among them 1500 are Dalit Christians and the rest belong to Reddy and Naidu upper caste. Dalit Christians have been oppressed by upper caste Christians for the past 200 years who did not give them their due place in the Church and in the graveyard. Caste clash among Christians occurred on 7.5.94 at K.K.Pudur as they were preparing for the celebration of the patron feast of St Joseph. Police case was filed at Maduranthagam under PCR 687/94.147.15 148, 374,323, 336, 452 and 307 – IPC:84. People from both the sides were imprisoned and the Church remained closed for 6 months.

10.2 Discrimination at Eraiyur Parish, Pondicherry

On 15th Feb., 1999 the funeral of the mother of a Dalit priest Fr A. C. Irudayanathan was not allowed to go through the main street to the Church. In Eraiyur of Pondicherry Archdiocese' separate graveyards for Dalits and caste people. Since the funeral, of victimized and deprived Dalit mother, led by Archbishop Michael Augustine was prevented to go through the main street there was turmoil in Eraiyur of Pondicherry diocese.

10.3 Discrimination at Thatchoor, Chengalpattu

Thatchoor village is located in Maduranthagam Taluk, Kancheepuram District. Tamil and Telugu Catholics are residing in the same village. In the year of 1997 there was caste clash between Telugu Reddiyar Catholics and Dalit Catholics due to deprivation of the equal rights to Dalit Christians concerning different places in the Church, participation in the feast preparation, car procession to Dalit areas etc., and the Church was closed. Cases were filed (O.S. 214/95, O.S. 66/96, O.S. 108/97, O.S. 473/97, O.S. 410/99) in Maduranthagam sessions Court. Then Dalit Christians appealed against the judgment of Sessions' Court to High court of Chennai. And that was challenged by Reddiyars (S.A. No. 1059/2005). The Reddiyars are demanding to open the Church and appoint a Telugu speaking priest and not willing to share the responsibilities with Dalit Christians. On 02.05.2005 there was a peace committee meeting in the presence of District Collector but the Church was closed due to caste issue.

Though caste discrimination is prevalent among Christian community the official Church has been constantly appealing to the community for brotherhood and equality in the Church.

XI. Conclusion

Dalits are broken, oppressed, exploited and driven to "no people" status. They include 85% SC/ST/BC population in India but normally the term Dalit is used to denote only Scheduled Caste who are powerless. Scheduled Castes alone constitute 16% of Indian Christian population. Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity form 65% (16 million) of total population (24 millions). Though Dalits adopted the 'culture of silence', there have been many liberative forces to break up this 'culture of silence'. As we have seen in the second chapter, the liberative efforts continued in the history and reached its milestones with efforts of Dr B. R. Ambedkar and there are some leaders who continue with their liberative efforts.

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