

PENTECOSTALISM: A SPACE FOR DALIT EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the Dalit's space for empowerment in Pentecostalism. The article highlights Dalit's status in Hinduism and view conversion as process for empowerment, Christianity's hope for Dalit empowerment and its failure and at the end highlights Pentecostalism's space for Dalit Empowerment from the study from V.V.Thomas in Kerala.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Dalit, Caste, Empowerment.

Introduction

Dalits are the people from the lower section of the caste system and lacked educational facility, professional and technical skills for many centuries. Since independence of India, the constitution has made many facilities to educate and increase the status of Dalit in the society. But even after server years of constitutional provisions, the status of Dalits in many parts of India has not reached the expected level of achievement. The ever existing practice of caste could also be one of the factors which still affect the upward mobility of the Dalit community. Education and jobs would not alone increase the status of Dalits but along with it, their voice should also be heard in the socio-cultural, religious and political areas. According to theologian Felix Wilfred,

Empowerment is a process by which the Dalits will gain their legitimate space.... The empowerment of Dalits will consist in breaking loose of the present spatial restrictions to their lives and gaining where they have been traditionally kept out. It would be free entry into temples, presence in public places and traditional occupations and representation in cultural and political arenas.ⁱ

In line with Felix Wilfred's understanding of Dalit Empowerment, this article will highlight Dalit conversion as a search of empowerment and present how Pentecostalism offers such empowerment in view of the study presented by V.V. Thomas in the state of Kerala.

Dalit: The Name

The term Dalit means ground down, downtrodden, broken or oppressed. Whom were called by others as Untouchables, Depressed Classes, Harijans (Children of God) or Scheduled Caste.ⁱⁱ The term Dalit is not just the label for a group of people but it refers to the subjugation and brokenness of the oppressed people. The term is highly loaded with political, cultural and social connotations.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hinduism and Dalit

Hinduism, the mother of caste system, is the cause for the oppression and humiliation faced by humble humans, the Dalits. Hindu sacred texts are used to justify the hierarchy of caste and the Dalit's lower position within that hierarchy. The hierarchy of caste is depicted in the *rig veda* as an act of order of creation; from the mouth of the primordial human being originated the Brahmins (Priests), from his arms the Kshatriyas (Warriors), from his thighs the Vaishyas (Businessmen) and from his feet the Shudras (servants). Dalits were excluded in this list, as if; there is no space in the primordial human being for the Dalits to origin. The origins of the Dalit caste came into existence due to an alliance between a Brahmin women and a Shudra man, the most unacceptable alliance of all. Manu also ordered that Dalits were not only to live in a segregation and most degraded state but also to be excluded from all considerations of *dharma*. It is also insisted that everyone marry within their own caste to maintain purity.

The Dalits were always associated with the "impure" tasks such as cleaning out waste, skinning cattle, working in leather, butchery, fishing and supervising cremations.^{iv} Leather workers, washer men, scavengers, undertakers, toilet cleaners, toddy tappers, sweepers and rural laborers were polluted because of their work.^v To make a note here, Dalits are always victims of their situation where these impure works are enforced by the upper caste.

Discrimination of Dalits in Religious and Public Space

The root problem for the subordination of Dalits is that the space of their everyday life is controlled and regulated by people from upper caste.^{vi} The Dalits are economically dependent on the upper caste and are in a situation to obey to their words. The public space is excluded to them where they have neither presence nor voice. They are absent in forum where important decisions are made which are vital to them and to their lives.^{vii} In many villages Dalits were not permitted to walk through certain roads in the village. Dalit women were not allowed to wear upper cloth.

Dalit Conversion

In the earlier stages, Buddhism and Jainism led by Buddha and Mahavira came out as alternative movements for ritually bound and caste dominated Hinduism. They both sought to create egalitarian faith based on compassion and simplicity.^{viii} And these efforts were carried out by 14th and 15th century Bhakti movements but were unable to change the functioning of the caste system.^{ix}

In the 19th and 20th century came leaders like Jotirao Phule, E.V. Ramaswami Naicker, and Ambedkar to protest against caste domination and fought for the equality and dignity of Dalits. EVR founded Self Respect Movement and advocated attacks on caste by forcibly entering temples and burning of the *Manusmriti* and so on.^x Ambedkar fought for the acceptance of Dalit community and the demanded equality and dignity, which he could not achieve in the course of time. Finally he and his movement denounced Hinduism and the caste system^{xi} and embraced Buddhism. During the course of 19th and 20th century, Dalits in many part of India made the option of turning their caste movements into conversion movements.^{xii} For Dalits, religious change functioned as the mode of upward mobility. To the converts, it was not mere a religious event but also a search for equality, security and dignity.^{xiii}

Conversion to Christianity

The works of Christian Missionaries functioned as a fundamental challenge to traditional caste-based practices.^{xiv} As a result, Dalits converted to Christianity in mass groups from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.^{xv} These mass conversions took place as Dalits perceived Christianity is preaching equality.^{xvi} Those Dalits who were converted to Christianity was glad to receive of the new identity. They received dignity, self-confidence, self-respect and the ability to choose their own destiny for themselves and their social group. There was a growing restlessness among them to have a fuller life of dignity for themselves and their children. In response to the Dalit's search for dignity, Christian missionaries took initiatives to provide education to the Dalits which would empower them. Missionaries with the coloration with British opened the first special school for Dalits (Untouchables) in the year 1840.^{xvii} Ghose claim that first generation of Dalit writers, activists and politicians came from these schools started by the missionaries.^{xviii}

At this outset, it is important to consider the questions posed by Wilfred, "To what extent Dalit Christians are really empowered? And has their conversion to Christianity really changed their social position?"^{xix}

Discrimination of Dalits in Christianity

The gladness of Dalits did not last long. Soon they began to realize that the core problem of caste division and practice still exist in the Christian Community.^{xx} They began to face discrimination from the hand of converts from upper caste Hinduism which hindered the possibility of equality to Dalits. For instance, in the states like Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh where the 18th century sudra converts had moved upward and filled the church^{xxi}, with whom Dalits again has to face problems.

Walter points out various studies to claim that mass conversion took place out of social liberation or empowerment which Dalits were looking for and the missionaries did not always understand their aspiration.^{xxii} In the words of Wilfred,

Within many churches, excessive importance was given to the religious doctrines and rituals, laws and regulations. The identity of being Christian was made to depend chiefly on these factors. This however did not really address the situation of an oppressed people, whose crucial concern was liberation, dignity and freedom from social exclusion. The general orientation of the churches with their vision of Christian identity presents a contrast to the real expectation of the Dalits.^{xxiii}

The discrimination against Dalit Christians has manifested in different forms: segregation in the churches during worship, separate burial places, refusals of membership in various church-bodies which are controlled by the

upper caste Christians, lack of involvement on the part of the upper caste in the struggle for the cause of Dalits, subtle forms exclusion of Dalit vocations to priesthood, religious life and so on. Analysis of these different factors will expose the actual situation suffered by the Dalits within the Christian Churches.^{xxiv}

S.M. Michael identifies Fivefold discrimination faced by Dalit Christians as follows

- i. Discrimination by the Government
- ii. By the caste Hindus
- iii. By fellow Hindu Dalits
- iv. By the Upper Caste Christian Community
- v. By the subgroups of the Dalit Christians themselves.^{xxv}

Louis says that the issue faced by Dalits Christians is that the social problems faced by the dalit Christians was seen by state from the point of view of conversion and not really on the discrimination faced by them in society.^{xxvi} Even the so-called upper caste leadership within the church projected the issue of the Dalit Christian 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. The church, the state and the society, does not recognize the discrimination suffered by the Dalit Christians.^{xxvii}

Louis again points out the Mandal Commission report which stated that,

The change of religion did not always succeed in eliminating castes. The converts carried with them their castes and occupations to the new religion. The result has been that even among Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, Casteism prevails in varying degrees in Practice, their preaching is notwithstanding. Casteism has thus been the bane of entire Indian society, its difference is its rigidity being of a degree varying from religion to religion.^{xxviii}

The degree of prejudice varies from religion to religion, but the caste is stigmatized as Untouchables has remained so strong that there will be Dalits as long as the caste system and caste hierarchy remain. Thus the brokenness and oppression experienced by Dalits is something they inherit by accident of birth and must somehow live with all their days.^{xxix}

Dalit Christian Empowerment

Out of these atrocities came out the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) which gave voice for Dalit Christians for equality, justice, rights, for their empowerment within the Church and non-discrimination to become a reality.^{xxx} The catholic Bishops of Tamilnadu who met in 1990 analyzed and acknowledged caste discrimination within the Church as violation of human rights. They came forth with some proposals like Catholic SC should be treated equally without being rejected in place of worship and in cemeteries, increase in vocation to the priesthood and to the religious orders from the catholic SC in the diocese be promoted, responsibilities and rights of members be offered to catholic SC in catholic educational institutions and diocesan institutions, SC and ST commissions be instituted in each diocese immediately, continuous efforts be made to obtain rights for the Christian SC from the center and state governments and etc.^{xxxi} It is good to see the Catholic and Protestant Churches responding to Dalit Christian issues and working for their empowerment but there are yet lot more distance to march.

As caste has infiltrated into the catholic and protestant Christianity, the Dalit search of empowerment is still on the search and now they have turned towards Pentecostalism, a revival movement within Christianity which place much attention on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostalism

As of Christianity in the Indian reality, Pentecostalism is also the religion of the poor. Right from the beginning, Pentecostalism has been strongly appealing to the poor and marginalized in society.^{xxxii} Abraham points out the words of Julio de Santa Ana at the Ecumenical Association of Third-World Theologians (EATWOT) conference in Bossey as “Liberation theology has called for an option for the poor, but the poor have opted for Pentecostalism.”^{xxxiii}

V.V Thomas in his study on Pentecostalism in Kerala has identified some of the characteristics of Dalitness Pentecostalism in Kerala as follows,

1. Dalit Pentecostalism as a Movement of the Poor
2. The influence of the pre-Christian culture on Dalit Pentecostalism
3. The Participatory nature of Dalits and their church structure

4. The nature of its oral liturgy
5. The narrative theology and witness of Dalits
6. Maximum participation of its members in all activities of the church
7. The place of dreams and visions in their personal^{xxxiv}

Following are some of the observations of V.V Thomas from his study.

- The independent groups or churches will reveal that most of them are centered around one main person on whose charisma the movement evolves. At the same time the leader does not become a dictator. It is not a destructive domination by the leader. Therefore submission to the leadership by the followers is not out of fear, but in due respect. In most cases since the leader is from the same community the members of the church do not find it difficult to relate to him. Thus leadership roles also contribute to the establishment and division of the churches.^{xxxv}
- Dalit churches have become a meeting place where the Dalits are able to express their emotions in worship. There is no restriction of any kind for one to express his or her abilities and gifts.^{xxxvi}
- Salvation: Dalits primary objective was to find the salvation experience. However it may be said that this salvation experience was not something that only related to the life after death. It was very much related to the life in the here and now. Their concern included the need for physical healing and financial and economic problems related to marriage, various needs in the family, deliverance from the habit of drunkenness, need for a house, deliverance from demonic attack, desire for social mobility etc. These were the day-to-day needs if the people irrespective of their age... they have received solutions to many of their problems on embracing the Pentecostal Faith. Therefore for the Dalits in Kerala their “Born Again” experience is part and parcel of the life in the here and now and it cannot be divorced from existential needs. Therefore Dalit Pentecostals had a dual-faceted conception of salvation incorporating “this worldliness” and “Other worldliness”.^{xxxvii}

Pentecostalism offers a space in which Dalits create their own new identity and constructs their own religious space where they engage with emotions and empowered to face their day-to-day struggles. The experience of baptism of the Holy Spirit transforms one’s previous identity, thus it can wipe out divisions based on language, regions and color, and so on.^{xxxviii} Pentecostalism offers a space which was refused in Hinduism and Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the Dalit’s search for empowerment through legitimate space in the areas where they have been refused for many centuries. Have dissatisfied to gain respect and space in Hinduism, Dalits viewed conversion could liberate them and converted to Buddhism, Christianity and so on. Though Dalits enjoyed new found identity and education in Christianity, soon they found that caste has also been infiltrated Christianity (Both Catholic and Protestant Christianity). Now they have found Pentecostalism and convert in masses in search of dignity and Pentecostalism has offered space for Dalits to express themselves. But Pentecostalism is just a new phenomenon with 114 years since its emergence. Hence Pentecostalism’s encounter with Dalit should be observed in different regional and social context in India.

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ENDNOTE

ⁱ Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 5.

ⁱⁱ Cf. John C.B Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (Manohar Publications, 2002), 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 9.

^{iv} Cf. Sagarika Ghose, "The Dalit in India," *Pariah Minorities* 70 (1) (Spring 2003): 89.

^v Cf. Ibid., 89.

^{vi} Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 4.

^{vii} Cf. Ibid., 5.

^{viii} Cf. Sagarika Ghose, "The Dalit in India," *Pariah Minorities* 70 (1) (Spring 2003): 91

^{ix} Cf. Ibid., 91.

^x Cf. Ibid., 91.

^{xi} Cf. Ibid., 96.

^{xii} Cf. Walter Fernandes, "Attacks on Minorities and a National Debate on Conversion," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (Jan 1999):82.

^{xiii} Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 145; Walter Fernandes, "Attacks on Minorities and a National Debate on Conversion", *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (Jan 1999), 82.

^{xiv} Cf. Sagarika Ghose, "The Dalit in India," *Pariah Minorities* 70 (1) (Spring 2003): 93.

^{xv} Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 145.

^{xvi} Cf. Walter Fernandes, "Attacks on Minorities and a National Debate on Conversion," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (Jan 1999):82.

^{xvii} Cf. Sagarika Ghose, "The Dalit in India," *Pariah Minorities* 70 (1) (Spring 2003): 93.

^{xviii} Cf. Ibid., 93.

^{xix} Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007),149.

^{xx} Cf. S.M. Michael SVD, *Dalits' Encounter with Christianity: A Case Study of Mahars in Maharashtra* (ISPCK, Tercentenary Publications, Pune, 2010), 46.

^{xxi} Cf. Walter Fernandes, "Attacks on Minorities and a National Debate on Conversion," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (Jan 1999):82.

^{xxii} Cf. Ibid., 82.

^{xxiii} Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 152.

- ^{xxiv} Cf. Cf. S.M. Michael SVD, *Dalits' Encounter with Christianity: A Case Study of Mahars in Maharashtra* (ISPCK, Tercentenary Publications, Pune, 2010), 112; Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007), 152.
- ^{xxv} Cf. S.M. Michael SVD, *Dalits' Encounter with Christianity: A Case Study of Mahars in Maharashtra* (ISPCK, Tercentenary Publications, Pune, 2010), 43.
- ^{xxvi} Cf. Prakash Louis, "Dalit Christians: Betrayed by the State and Church," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (16) (April 2007):1410.
- ^{xxvii} C.f Ibid., 1410.
- ^{xxviii} Ibid., 1413.
- ^{xxix} Cf. John C.B Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (Manohar Publications, 2002), 11.
- ^{xxx} Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (ISPCK, 2007),152.
- ^{xxxi} Cf. Prakash Louis, "Dalit Christians: Betrayed by the State and Church," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (16) (April 2007):1413.
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- ^{xxxiii} Shaibu Abraham, *Pentecostal Theology of Liberation: Holy Spirit and Holiness in the Society* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2014), 7.
- ^{xxxiv} Cf. V.V. Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism: Spirituality of the Empowered Poor* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008), 348.
- ^{xxxv} Ibid., 345.
- ^{xxxvi} Ibid., 346.
- ^{xxxvii} Ibid., 349.
- ^{xxxviii} Cf. Ibid., 351.

