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**DALIT CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY
AND THEIR MORAL RESPONSIBILITY
TOWARDS HUMAN DIGNITY**

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Introduction

Human dignity consciousness is very vibrant today. They are often inevitably linked to human rights. Fortunately, human rights are developed as an *instrument of criticism*, and an *instrument of legitimation* of all political and social institutions internationally. Subsequently, we also see growing social resentment and disapproval for those who aggressively violate the human rights and human dignity of others, in the name of caste, creed, colour, sex, ethnicity, language, nationality, etc. This shows that we live in an interdependent world, where we need to recognize, respect and appreciate 'other' peoples, in order that our moral life is meaningfully lived.

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The more intriguing phenomenon is that the erstwhile and present-day oppressed themselves have begun to reclaim their rights and assert their dignity in an organized manner, where and when these are undermined, even today. Dalits in India are clearly one among many who are actively involved in reclaiming their deprived human rights and human dignity. This study centres on the Dalits, the pathetic victims of the Caste system, who are converted to Christianity, and their human dignity.

I venture into this study to know and understand objectively the root and the life situation of the Dalit Christians, and to propose some moral arguments to strengthen their responsible moral efforts towards affirming their human dignity, based on Catholic Social Teachings (CSTs). These teachings are morally and theologically sound to analyze, understand, and respond to any social problem, since they are predominantly based on the Spirit and Wisdom of Jesus Christ.

Synthesis

The first part of the thesis deals with Dalit history and their conversion to Christianity. Chapter one studies the origin, atrocities and response of the Dalits to the atrocities heaped upon them, to give a general idea about the Dalits. With the help of the analytical approach, we investigate various theories of their origin. We delineate the various atrocities heaped upon the Dalits which damage or deprive their human dignity. For example, segregation in residence, no entry into temple, compelling them to do hazardous work (manual scavengers), unjust wages, looking at Dalits as inherent criminals, treating them as mere vote banks. Finally, their responses toward these atrocities to reclaim their human dignity are viewed from three angles: religious conversion which I develop in my work, Sanskritization (emulation of High Castes) which I criticize, and self-affirmation which I promote.

Chapter two deals with the conversion of Dalits to Christianity, as their response to reclaim their human dignity in the context of caste discrimination and oppression, in and from Hindu religion and society. Although Christianity claims its apostolic origin in India with the arrival of St Thomas in 52 A.D., there was during that time no considerable Dalit conversion to Christianity. Until the end of the 19th century we have conversions to Christianity only from high caste and low caste people. Only from the late 19th century do we have Dalit conversion to Christianity in enormous number. We have analyzed a

threefold motive — religious appeal, sociological dignity, economic poverty — for Dalits' conversion to Christianity. Sociological scholars and theologians, for example, Rudolf Heredia, James Massey, John B. Webster, Sebastian C.H. Kim, Jose Kananaikil, Felix Wilfred, Walter Fernandes, etc. contend that Dalits' conversion to Christianity is above all for the sociological motive of human dignity.

The second part of the thesis treats the Catholic concepts of human dignity, and how Dalit Christians could implement them in daily life to affirm their human dignity. Chapter three studies the Catholic concept of human dignity. The biblical idea of *Imago Dei* in humankind, and the philosophical concept of 'person' are chosen to develop the Catholic concept of human dignity of all peoples in general, and the despised ones, like Dalits, in particular. Basing on the biblical foundation, theological interpretation, and philosophical contribution to human dignity, we pinpointed five major principles of the CSTs on human dignity: 1. The human person is the absolute criterion for any social system, 2. Equality in the context of any discrimination, 3. The need of human rights for the realization of human dignity, 4. Solidarity emerging from fraternity, and 5. Preferential option for the poor.

The final and fourth chapter deals with the moral responsibility of the Dalit Christians towards human dignity. In this chapter, I have attempted to implement the five major principles of the CSTs on human dignity that we treated in the previous chapter, as ethical norms that a Dalit Christian should follow in affirming his/her human dignity. In the context of India, where Dalits' human dignity is not sufficiently recognized, they themselves are primarily invited to take up the responsibility to affirm it. This is the principal moral responsibility entrusted upon them. If Dalit Christians do not do that, nobody can do that satisfactorily; this is the firm belief of my research. So along with CSTs, I use partly Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a model how the oppressed themselves can be subjects of their destiny, conscientized through their critical encounter with social realities.

We categorize individually-oriented responsibilities broadly into three. First, at the *faith level*, Dalits need to cultivate a strong faith in a God of liberation. Second, at the *intellectual level*, Dalits need to acquire critical consciousness through the formation of conscience and education. And third, at the *volitional level*, Dalit needs to possess strong determination to struggle for social justice and integral progress. The community-oriented responsibilities of the Dalits

towards affirming their human dignity, I suggest, could be: 1. To respect other fellow-Dalits, 2. To participate in human rights organizations, 3. To feel solidarity among Dalits themselves, and 4. To renounce totally the graded inequality that has crept in among Dalits themselves.

Concluding Remarks

The entire study principally centres on the “human dignity” of the Dalits. Why is human dignity given such preponderance? Because only by affirmation and concern about one’s own and others’ human dignity can we live a good and meaningful human life. In this framework, I propose that Dalit Christians focus their moral responsibility towards human dignity from the view of 1. Identity, 2. Conversion, 3. Education and 4. Solidarity.

1. Identity: In order to affirm human dignity, the pre-eminent task of the Dalits is to give importance to their Identity: “Who are we?” Unless they find a right, true, and good answer to this question, they probably will not succeed to affirm their human dignity morally. For identity and dignity are closely intertwined. Obviously, Dalits cannot dare, or rather have less chance, to affirm their human dignity as long as they have interiorized the identity imposed and ascribed by the Caste system which brands them as ‘Untouchable’, ‘ugly’, ‘abominable’, ‘immoral’, ‘unclean’, ‘cursed’, ‘sub-human’, etc. All these uncharitable and vituperative words have profoundly damaged the human dignity of the Dalits. Therefore, today, Dalits need to be more conscious of their self-understanding. In order to develop a new, as well as a right, identity, Dalit Christians urgently and confidently have to do two things. First, they have to strongly believe in the Christian doctrine that they are also created in the “image and likeness of God.” Second, they have to undertake the duty of tracing their history, which plausibly and favourably says that they are allegedly the original people of the land, reputed for their developed culture, which is non-violent, peace-loving, and hospitable. These values are indispensable for the emphasis of CSTs on ‘culture of life’ and ‘civilization of love’. Thus, the new identity that is built on these two pillars will urge more likely and enthusiastically each Dalit to demand and be concerned responsibly about human dignity. Importantly, this new identity describes them as ‘human’, ‘children of God’, ‘inheritors of advanced culture’, ‘potentially capable of anything worthy of the human’ etc.

2. Conversions: It is true that there were great numbers of Dalit Conversions to Christianity, to reclaim their human dignity at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The mass conversion has brought immense and positive social reformation and rethinking in India. Today there are fewer new conversions to Christianity, for various reasons, which could be another topic for research. However, there was some disenchantment among the Dalits who converted to Christianity, since there are analogically similar kinds of discrimination against them by non-Dalit Christians as by Hinduism. In this context, some might question the validity of conversion from the motive of human dignity. They are right to do that. But as for us, we feel that we can accept religious conversions for the motive of human dignity. Why? It is because behind the Dalits' sociological motive (of human dignity) to lead them to embrace Christianity, there is a religious motive of a God who embraces and dignifies the despised ones, like the Dalits. In other words, since the Christian understanding of God is one who does not show discrimination, perhaps He is more kind and merciful towards the least in society, and He does not want these to be oppressed and exploited. Moreover the Christian God is not someone outside the human world; this world is the object of His love and concern. He intervenes in different and mysterious ways in the life-struggles of the people. Therefore, the conversions that occurred among the Dalits to Christianity in large numbers, only bear witness to the appreciation the Dalits have for Jesus Christ, and his genuine followers. Hence, we have no difficulty to promote or accept religious conversions from the motive of human dignity. After all, if we seriously analyze, we easily see that our 'lived-experience' and our 'basic human needs' determine or play a very significant role in the choices we make.

3. Education: One of the main causes for Dalits to helplessly accept many inhuman treatments from the hands of the dominant castes is the denial of their right to education. So admittedly, Dalits' ignorance and illiteracy are prominent causes for their misery and backwardness. In this Indian context, besides getting university qualifications, Dalits have every advantage to implement Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', which sees education as an act of liberation, helping people to emerge as people of critical and creative thinking, through questioning and problematizing the social elements that enslave and impoverish humanity. With this approach to education, we can mend the historical faults caused by unethical and

superstitious casteism. Patently, this education should clearly include subjects related to human rights and human dignity, and simultaneously, as the well-known Asian theologian Felix Wilfred says, the school or university curriculum should include scientific study related to the origin, and practice of casteism among Indians. We believe such education will pave the way for the development of 'social conscience' and 'social justice' among Dalits, and others who are open to truth and good-will.

4. Solidarity: As we saw, the Caste system is a social structure that has survived in India for thousands of years, taking different avatars. Since it is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the Indians, no individual person can challenge and defeat it easily. All the forces that are inimical to casteism should come together in solidarity to propose and practice a new culture. This new culture should necessarily include the values of the Kingdom of God. Thereby the task of solidarity is to consider everyone as a human person, and to give due respect to them, and show 'special' concern to the weak, marginalized, and voiceless members of the human family. With this understanding, solidarity among Dalits could be realized through how much each Dalit respects and cares for his/her own Dalit brother and sister. It is also appropriate to mention that non-Dalits need to extend their solidarity to Dalits. If they do that, then they are the ones who are spearheading the 'culture of love' and 'culture of life' in the Indian context. In sum, we believe 'solidarity among Dalits', and in the case of non-Dalits, 'solidarity with the Dalits', are the most effective instruments we have to promote Dalit human dignity.

Finally, through my research, I propose humbly to Dalit Christians to grow in 'filial' existence with God, 'fraternal' existence with human persons, and 'subjective' (i.e., subjects with critical consciousness) existence with themselves. The more knowingly, freely and lovingly they do that *through, with, and in Christ*, I hope firmly, the more concretely they will experience and feel their human dignity.