

THE PROBLEM OF CASTE WITHIN THE CHURCH

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The Problem

Has conversion to Christianity decastified the converts? Theoretically it has to. The Christian tenets militate against persons professing Christian faith being divided or discriminated on the basis of any such classification as the caste system. But *de facto*, the Christian churches, be it Catholic or Protestant, are known for their discrimination against the Dalit Christians. In a memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission in 1930 the converts from the Untouchable Community have expressed their disappointment with the Christian Churches, "Though the operation of several factors, the more important of them being the strong caste retaining Hindu mentality of the converts to Christianity, and the indifference powerlessness and apathy of the Missionaries, we remain today what we were before we become 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 Hindu deprsseed Class brethren".

Many sociological studies observe that the plight of the Dalit Christians has not changed very profoundly. Louis Domont in his book '*Homo Hierarhicus*' writes, "It is beyond doubt that the Untouchables, in accepting conversion, were often responding to the appeal of an egalitarian religion preached by the powerful; but in actual fact their social situation was not improved by it, either in the Hindu milieu, nor even, as we shall see in the Christian milieu." Now the question is why Christianity with its strong egalitarian bent is not able to break the structured inequality which is another name for caste? Fr. Antony Raj S.J. in his study on "Discrimination against Dalit Christian in Tamilnadu" (1992) contends that as long as the social bases remain the same in both the Hindu and Christian social

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order, the practice of untouchability will continue to exist in both the social orders. And it is sad to read that the Christian Churches have been compromising or surrendering to the hierarchical values of castes rather than challenging them.

The Indian Christians have learned to compromise with the two obvious contradictions: being Christian and being casteist. The Church, which claims its roots from the life, actions and values of Jesus, has aligned itself with the upper castes and for centuries, has created policies that justify and maintain the unjust caste hierarchical system. Have we not perpetuated an unchristian culture that has poisoned the very root of the Church? Is it not against the Christian understanding of a just and humane social order? What are the steps the Church has taken to eradicate the caste mentality which is very deeply ingrained in the psyche of an Indian Christian? Is the Church in India capable of becoming a dynamic force to destroy caste culture within and without?

Prisoners of Social Structures

Caste, poverty and religiosity are the three main factors which play a vital role in affecting the life of the people in India and in determining the role and function of each Indian. Among us, caste has a prime role to play in specifying the status of each person by one's very birth. The brahminical tradition designates the minority, powerful high caste people to rule over the majority, powerless low caste through its caste hierarchical system.

Dalits are the people who struggle for a real and decent human life within a lifelong imprisonment of the caste hierarchical society. They painfully experience impoverishment, lack of freedom and recognition as human person, bondage, always watched, controlled, used, tortured, threatened and treated as animals. Their life is always at stake. All through their life, they are kept in physical and mental agony due to the oppression and exploitation by the powerful caste groups. In short, dalits are a typical marginalised group of India, characterized by convergence of multiple marginalities and cumulative inequalities.

The laws of Manu reveal the caste arrogance of a high caste over the lowest castes. Such laws are religiously coloured and imposed on the oppressed. Hinduism helps to create an understanding that "untouchability is a notion of defilement, pollution, contamination and ways and means of getting rid of that defilement"¹ The theory of pollution has a highly religiously flavored caste character created by brahminism.

The imposed rigid caste system in India divided the people hierarchically into high and low, pure and impure, powerful and powerless. The vast majority of people were being discriminated against and thrown out to the periphery of the society, and were reduced to the status of outcastes and untouchables! Such an unjust social institution was legitimately sanctioned and justified by Hinduism in India.

The Church and Casteism

The Church had accepted the same unjust hierarchical caste system and was able to tolerate it without seriously questioning the insidious practice against the dignity and equality of men. The Indian Church consists of 24 million Christians. This includes 3 million tribals and 15 million Adi Tamils, Adi Andhras, Adi Karnatakas, and this fifteen million Christian dalits forms part of the 155 million dalits of India.² Out of the total number of Catholics in Tamil Nadu (26,78,640), 65% are dalits (17,41,116) according to the TNBC, 1988.³ Today dalit Christians experience a five-fold oppression: i. by the state, ii. by the Caste Hindus, iii. by the Church authorities iv. by the Caste Christians and v. by the Hindu dalits.

¹. Max muller (ed.), *The Sacred Books of the East*. vol.1, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998, p.249

². "Hear the Downtrodden Speak" – Reports of PCR team visits in Asia, World Council of Churches programme to combat racism 1990, No 27, p.27

³. Statement on the Marian Year, 1998.

Christian Dalit women undergo another additional oppression, namely, male domination!

Moreover, one cannot deny the fact that unfortunately the Church in India too is polarised along caste lines. The caste phenomenon did not become a problem to the church, till recently simply because those in power, the policy makers and the theologians belonged to the dominant castes, and they imposed a spirituality of subservience in the guise of virtue on the unsuspecting, simple and credulous dalits.

Safeguarding the Caste Pride

Caste identity gives the 'high castes' a sense of pride, inherited privilege, power and status.

"Contemplating the scenario that the Indian Church presents today, one notices that the caste factor still plays an important role in the choice of marriage partners, the conservation of ancestral and acquired properties within the family and caste, the choice of neighborhood to live in, the choice of social circles in which one "moves and the like".

"In ecclesiastical circles caste influences the recruitment pattern of candidates to the priesthood and religious life, in the appointment of pastors to parishes and religious superiors and the allotment of plum posts in administration and financial institutions. Among our laity caste plays a part in the running and control of parish and diocesan associations and bodies in parish activities and in the formation of apostolic groups"⁴.

In the rural areas the dalit Christians are dependent upon the same kind of landowners, suffer the same kind of disabilities and atrocities and experience the same kind of untouchable practices like their Hindu counterparts undergo.

⁴ Leslie J. Almeida, "The Indian Church and the invincible virus of Casteism", in *Caste Culture in Indian Church*, edited by Sebastia, L.Raj and G.F. Xavier Raj, New Delhi: ISI, 1993, P.32

The Hellish Discrimination

A study in a Catholic village in Karnataka by Japher in 1986 has revealed that the social segregation between dalits and other Catholics is very vivid and rigid, on the use of caste names when addressing dalits, in the denial of the services of the village barber as well as in keeping for dalits separate eating and drinking utensils in hotels and tea shops. In fact dalit Christians reported receiving better treatment from caste Hindus in neighboring villages than from caste Christians in their own village.⁵

In Kerala dalit Christians were given separate places of worship in the dioceses of the Catholic Church, Mar Thoma Church and the Church of South India at least until the late 1960's.⁶ In the Oriental Churches there appears to be a linkage between caste and rite, manifested by the tensions that exist between the Syro-Malabar and the Latin Rite Christians; similar tension also exists in Churches elsewhere, such as in TN, Andhra and Goa.⁷

Findings of a study

The findings of a study on "Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu"⁸ expose the truth of the practice of untouchability existing in various places and in various forms in the Catholic Church. Some of these findings are:

- * The construction of two chapels, one for non-dalits and the other for dalits. In some parishes liturgical services are conducted separately.
- * Separate seating arrangement within the same chapel.

⁵. S. Japhet, D "Christian Dalits: A Sociological study on the Problem of Gaining a New Identity", *Religion and Society*, XXXIV (Sep. 1987), pp.73-76.

⁶. Ninan Koshy, *Caste in the Kerala Churches*, Bangalore, 1968, pp.48-49

⁷. Leslie. J. Almeida, op.cit., p.32

⁸. Antonyraj, *Children of Lesser God* (Dalit Christians), Madurai: DCLM, 1992, pp.10-11

- * Dalits are usually seated at the two aisles. Even if there are benches or chairs, the dalits are required to be seated on the floor.
- * The existence of two separate cemeteries and two separate hearses to carry the dead.
- * The operation of two separate queues to receive the Sacred Body of Christ. In some places the dalits are required to receive communion only after the non-dalits have done so.
- * The dalit boys are not allowed to be altar boys and lectors at the sacred liturgy.
- * The non-dalits restrict the Corpus Christi procession, Palm Sunday procession and other processions only to the limits of their streets; dalits are not invited to participate in the washing of feet ceremony on Maundy Thursday.
- * For fear of dalits claiming equal participation in the celebration of the parish feast of the patron saint, the parish council decides not to collect financial contributions from them.
- * By and large the feast of the village patron saint is celebrated separately.

On the wake of dalit consciousness, in some places, some of these discriminations have been removed and corrective measures have been undertaken.

Untouchability – the Original Sin

Being a high caste, having power and authority over the lowest castes give pride and pleasure. To continue their caste pride and to enjoy their caste pleasure, high castes continue to condemn dalits, keep them untouchable and make unwarranted judgements about them. "The bourgeoisie say the poor are poor because they are lazy and will not work. This judgement is an original sin. They would not accept that the poor are victims of a system whose benefits go to

those making this judgement.”⁹ I feel this understanding of the original sin of Enrique Dussel can be very well applied to our dehumanizing caste situation. Our caste hierarchical system directly exposes the pernicious message that the dalits are untouchables and it makes sure of the perpetuation of caste oppression throughout history. Caste discrimination, caste segregation, caste rigidity, caste tolerance, caste closedness and caste dependency.... all these collective evil practices and prejudices are institutionalized, made permanent and imposed on the dalits throughout history.

Christ versus Dalits

The Gospels reveal that Jesus becomes more and more aware of the inhuman situations of his own oppressed people, sinners, tax collectors and women (Mk 2:15-17, Lk 5:27, Mt. 9:9-10). He is fully conscious of the oppressive Roman empire and Jewish religion. And so, he proves by his rebellious acts to the hierarchy that the oppressed are also human persons. He touches the untouchables (Mt 8:3, Mk 1: 41, Lk 5: 12-13). He dines with the socially neglected, the sinners (Mt 9:9-10). “By his very meal with the sinners and the tax collectors, Jesus rejected the whole system of purities with its distinctions of clean and unclean food, holy and unholy places, pure and polluted people.”¹⁰ These are the acts of Jesus that proclaim his deep love and concern to the oppressed, at the same time, his protest against the existing unjust evil structures and institutions.

Jesus shares the insults which the powerless have experienced and suffered as a powerless, a nameless, a rejected, an outcaste, a slave, a friend of sinners and tax collectors. “Jesus belongs to the realm outside, He belongs to the region of carcasses and of defilement, which is a realistic description of the life of many an outcaste group.”¹¹ The Church which claims its roots from such a

⁹. Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis, 1978, p.42

¹⁰. Soares Prabhu, *The Table Fellowship of Jesus*, Jeevadhara, March, 1992, p.151

¹¹. Samuel Rayan, “Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult”, in *Leave the Temple*, ed. Felix Willfred, Orbis, 1992, p.139

historical person of Jesus needs to drastically change its life and mission in this caste-oppressive situation.

Castism – the Reality

Can charity, advocated by the Church towards dalits, lead to transformation of the evil social caste structures? Is the role of the Church in the socio-political life of the dalits unchristian? What is the hermeneutical understanding of the Church regarding Jesus and the people of God at this historical situation? We can reasonably assert that today the Church in India, just like any other organization, is organized around caste structures and caste identities. We have Vellala Catholics, Vanniyar Catholics, Reddiyar Catholics, Naidu Catholics Syrian Catholic, Nayar Catholics, D' Souza Catholics, D'Silva Catholics... etc. This is the reality of casteism in the Catholic Church of India.

RESPONSE

1. A meaningful struggle

The practice of Casteism is an outright denial of the presence of God in humanity and especially in the Church. As a result of social awakening, the Indian Church realised its rootedness in the caste hierarchical system. For the first time in 1969, the All India Seminar discussed the problem of caste in the Indian Catholic Church and Expressed that it should be eradicated, whereas the Protestant missionaries leegier to wage a relentless war on caste from 1847 onwards. When two native candidates for priestly ordination refused to renounce caste observances, the Methodist synod of the Nagapattinam and Trichinapalli Districts recommended their removal from the Church and declared; We unanimously agree: i. No person holding caste in any respect shall be employed as a paid agent in the Church. ii. No person holding caste in any respect shall be admitted as a member of our society. iii. No candidate for admission into the

Church shall be baptized until he has given satisfactory proof of having renounced caste.¹²

Though the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) had made statements against caste discriminations in 1970, it came out with the strongest ever statement in Trichy Meeting (1982). "We state categorically that caste with its consequent effects of discrimination and 'caste mentality' has no place in Christianity. It is, in fact, a denial of Christianity because it is inhuman. It violates the God-given dignity and equality of the human person. God created man in his own image. Thus human dignity and respect are due to every person and any denial of this is sin against God and Man.... Catholics in particular are called to reflect on whether they can meaningfully participate in the Eucharist without repudiating and seriously striving to root out caste prejudices and similar traditions and sentiments both within the Church and outside. It is intolerable that caste should be a determining factor in membership of pastoral or parish councils and other associations; and even worse, in ecclesiastical appointments and posts of responsibility in religious congregations."¹³

The general meeting of the CBCI proclaimed its stand in 1988. "The abolition of caste among Christians and the integration of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin is the mainstream as equals will be for us a top priority. The continuation of untouchability and discrimination based on caste is diametrically opposed to the Gospel message of love and brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind."¹⁴ In its statement on 'Justice Sunday', the TNBC declared. "There is no place in Christianity for the caste system and caste-mindedness

¹² S. Manickam, *Historical Aspect of Casteism in the Protestant Churches in Tamil Nadu*, Madurai: M.K. University, p.4.

¹³ *Catholic India*, January, 1982, No.1. pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ Report of GM of the CBCI, Kottayam, 1988, p.28.

which create division among the people. The merciless inhuman caste system denies the fundamental Christian principles.”¹⁵

2. Dalit Decade

The dalit Catholics have begun to demand their rights within the Church and from the state. The dalit Catholics in Madras – Mylapore Archdiocese boycotted the liturgy on Justice Sunday (20.08.1989). This began to spread all over Tamil Nadu. Again a group of dalits demonstrated before TNBC in Vellore on 28.01.1990. The Tamil Church was forced to take a stand. Sensing the emerging struggles of the people, the TNBC together with the Major Superiors of Religious congregations issued a Ten point programme for development of the dalits and declared the 1990's as Dalit Decade.¹⁶

A 1994 statement on the Church's Mission says, “It is sad that various forms of caste discriminations still persist within the Church. The dalit Christians are kept at the periphery of the Church life. They legitimately claim for a better participation in leadership with their Churches. Christian dalits like the rest of the dalit population are coming to a new awareness of their problems and potentialities. This challenges the Church to seriously examine her stand in the light of Christ's message of justice and liberation (Lk 4: 18-19).”¹⁷

In the recent CBCI Meeting at Varanasi, the Bishops declared, “The prevalence of caste-based practices, not only on society but also in some parts of the Church in India even at the close of the 20th Century, is a matter of shame and disgrace to all of us... discrimination against anybody on the basis of caste is a sin against God and humanity. This needs to be proclaimed from the house tops so that caste-based practices will be removed from the Christian

¹⁵ The Statement of TNBC on Justice Sunday 1986.

¹⁶ See Statement of TNBC and Major Superiors of Religious Congregations, 1990.

¹⁷ Extracts from the Statement of the National Consultation on Mission, held at Ishavani Kendra, Pune, quoted in “*Word & Worship*”, 1998, Nos.2 & 3, 124.

Community totally as part of our preparation for Yesu Krist Jayanti 2000.”¹⁸

3. To be free from ‘Shoes’

Yahweh tells Moses to remove his shoes when he comes near to see the burning bush, because that place is holy (Ex 3:5). The “burning” people are holy because God is with them and also being burnt in the burning problems of the dalits. Dalits are holy because with them God is present and is being crucified in their life-struggle.

This constant realization urges the Church to remove its “shoes”, namely, caste, selfish motives, wealth, institutions, power, pride, possessions etc. and to do justice to dalit Christians. Throughout history the oppressed dalits have always struggled for their ‘human lives’. Today the emerging dalit movements make the oppressed become more human through their liberative struggles. That makes them be awakened and have a strong determination to resist any sort of dehumanization. The process of humanization of dalits and the dalitization of non-dalits that is, to feel one with and to struggle with the dalits call for revolt.

The dalits have been challenging the Church and trying to make the Church be dalitized through their life struggle. “The Christian response cannot be that of a spectator, exhorting from the side lines. It may be the response of the committed participants involved in the struggle for justice and identified with her/his struggling brothers and sisters even as God is involved in history, as Jesus has identified himself with humankind.”¹⁹ Today the Church has to join hands with the emerging peoples’ movements like Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, Secular Dalit Movement etc., in order to realistically put its vision into practice.

¹⁸ The Statement of the CBCI General body Meeting 21-28 March, 1998, Vranasi.

¹⁹ George Soares, “The Christian Response to the Indian Situation”, in *Human Liberation in the Indian Context*, Pune: JDV, 1983, P. 157.

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