

Dalits into Dalit Christians; Antagonism of Purity versus Pollution and Caste Dynamics in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper attempts to expose the caste dynamics in 19th-century Kerala on the grounds of the missionary movement and religious conversion. With available literature on this field, the paper unravels the lacuna in representing the caste issues involved in religious conversion in colonial India, especially concerning the conversion of Dalits into Dalit Christians and the unchanged social positionality of Dalit Christians. Suppose the conversion was a real escape from the caste discrimination experienced by the Dalits from the caste Hindus; in that case, Christianity should have treated them differently and equally among other church communities within the religion. Nonetheless, the social position of converted Dalit Christians remains at the bottom of the hierarchy within Christianity, with the underlying ideas of purity and pollution in both caste and religion.

Keywords: Dalit Christians, Conversion, purity, pollution, missionary movement, caste slavery

There have been attempts to claim constitutional reservation privileges by the Supreme Court - converted Dalit Christians, yet they are unable to attain any of those affirmative provisions till date. This is because "the Constitution speaks of SC{Scheduled Castes} as a social category in Articles 330, 332, 334, 335, 338 and 341. In these articles there is no mention of religious background of scheduled caste communities" (Louis, 2007). Thus, at present, Indian Christians who are schedule castes cannot avail any constitutional benefits of reservation and this accentuates their experience of social backwardness and discrimination both within and outside Christianity. The plight of Dalit Christians experience a condition of double jeopardy where they are at once, betrayed by the State as well as the Church, where the antagonism of purity versus pollution strongly persists.

This paper is an inquiry into the antagonism of purity versus pollution and caste dynamics in the state of Kerala during the nineteenth century concerning the conversion of Dalits into Dalit Christians. A seminal work in this field is P. Sanal Mohan's *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (2015). This text is a significant source for unleashing the historical context of Dalit conversion in Kerala as it approaches the missionary archives and memories of Dalit settlements with ethnographic historiography. The enslavement of untouchable castes in Kerala was a breeding ground for the Christian missionaries to sow their modernization project in the land. In this book, P. Sanal Mohan coined the term "caste slavery" to define a unique form of social oppression and exploitation that existed in Kerala since the early medieval period, which included transaction of untouchable men, women, and children (Mohan, 2015).

Until 1956, Kerala constituted three provinces; Malabar (part of the Madras presidency), Kochi, and Travancore princely states. It is imperative to have an idea of Kerala's geopolitics and demographic condition during the mid-nineteenth century regarding the

upheavals of slave castes and the campaign of Anglican missionaries to abolish caste slavery. The Pulayas, the Kuravas, and the Parayas were the significant slave caste population in Travancore province. The Thanda Pulayas and the Pulayas constituted the slave caste population of the princely state of Cochin. Malabar province had the single largest slave caste population of Cherumas, who were treated as equivalent to the status of Pulayas in Travancore province. Irrespective of their names, the untouchable slave caste population in Kerala experienced severe discrimination, violence, and torture from the upper castes. They were restricted to an outer dwelling far from the upper caste dwellings. They were not permitted to worship in the same place as the upper caste people. Even the untouchable caste groups could not fetch water from a common well used by the upper caste people. The slave caste population was not allowed to walk through the same footpath the upper caste people also walked. The untouchable caste groups were far from accessing education and upward social mobility. To put this more precisely, they were treated as polluted, and the upper castes created a commonsensical notion that if the slave castes accessed any space within the mainstream terrain, then that would ultimately void the purity of the upper castes. In the late nineteenth century, Samuel Mateer, a missionary scholar, commented that "the Pulayan was, therefore, in an infinitely worse condition than ever the American slave was" (Mateer, 1893). This comparison of the experience of slave castes in Kerala and the Atlantic slavery got replicated in most of the missionary archives. "It is necessary to ask why the protestant missionaries considered the problems of slave castes in Kerala as a significant issue that demanded their intervention and not something else" (Mohan, 2015). The primary reason for this is that the protestant missionaries wanted to propagate the Gospel's truth, the highness of Christianity, and also to bring equality and the religious notions surrounding salvation by intervening in everyday life of the slave caste population.



Sketch Courtesy: W.S. Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore & Cochin*, 1816– 1916: Operations of the Church Missionary Society in South-West India. (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1920).

Caste slavery was not a new phenomenon that emerged alongside colonialism as evidenced by the missionary writings of the period. It was already prevalent in its worst form of social inequality before the advent of colonialism. ~~The first and foremost thing the missionaries did was to provide education for oppressed social groups in Kerala.~~ P. Sanal Mohan says;

“The missionaries attempted to expose the gruesome cruelties that were perpetrated on the person of the slave. They provided a different understanding of slaves as human beings, with bodies and souls distinct from the perception of the dominant castes that considered slaves only as instruments of toil. In the missionary representations, there is recognition of the pain and suffering of the slaves as they appear as human beings with feelings and emotions. To the missionaries, liberation from caste slavery was intimately connected with the liberation that the Gospel truths were supposed to offer to the slave castes” (Mohan, 2015).

The missionary enterprise's motives and results were challenged by indigenous leaders of the period as well. There comes the dynamics of Dalit social movements such as Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) that problematized the notion of liberation and salvation put forward by the Anglican missionaries and their modernization project. Poykayil Kumara Guru or as he was affectionately referred to by his followers, *Appachen* (father), was the founder of this social movement which focused on asserting the agency and social identity of the untouchable slave castes. "The PRDS movement had imaginatively deployed and reinterpreted the cultural resources of Dalits to develop their worldview simultaneously drawing from colonial and missionary worldviews and transcending them" (Mohan, 2015).

The London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) provided education to the slave castes, which was in terms of religious morals to transform the living condition of the slave castes and to spread the Gospel truths among them. Colonial modernity had a crucial role in transforming the everyday life of slave castes in Kerala. According to Sanal Mohan, "modernity refers to the socioeconomic and intellectual transformation that the Western world has undergone. Nevertheless, over the centuries, it has become so universal that today it is possible to speak of modernity in non-European societies that have undergone colonial experience often referred to as colonial modernity" (Mohan, 2015).

Thus, religious conversion was also a significant prospect of colonial modernity practised in the colonies. In Kerala, the conversion movement was much easier for the missionaries because the rooted caste inequalities designed a fertile land for colonial proselytization.

The protestant missionaries and colonial administration introduced two kinds of modernization projects. One was societal modernization, and the other one was cultural modernization.

"Societal modernization is related to a variety of factors such as the rise of the nation states, new forms of economic and social organisation that are referred to as capitalism, deepening of urbanisation, and the transnational movements of human beings and materials. Following this, there were fundamental changes in how time and space were perceived. There was a transformation in the organisation of space as distinct from the place in the previous ages of history, leading to the reconstitution of place as space. It was not something that was limited to European societies alone, as modernity spread in its various versions in the non-European world"

(Giddens 1990: Habermas 1993).

In this regard, the reconstruction of space based on caste demarcations was a significant concern for the Anglican missionaries to apply their cultural ideals in terms of spiritual and religious realms. However, in the context of Kerala, the lower social positions attributed to the slave castes nurtured the protestant missionaries' aim of propagating Christianity in the land. For the slave caste population, it was more of an escape from the polluted social status, discrimination, violence, and torture of everyday experience.

In the 19th century Kerala, there was a "transformation of a unique Dalit settlement in Manchadikkari in Kerala's Kottayam district from c. 1869 onwards, which was later supported by the Church Mission Society (CMS)" (Paul, 2021). While looking at the process of religious conversion of Dalits into Dalit Christians, "in the CMS' mission field in the central Travancore area of Kerala, we come across individuals such as Thewatthan, who were baptised and christened as Abel in 1854, remaining steadfast in their faith despite repeated oppression and all forms of aggression by upper castes Hindus and Christians" (Hunt, 1920). Similarly, Hunt recalls the memory of the first baptised woman from the slave castes named Kali. He says, "we have here the first individual from the slave castes to have been baptised. This was a woman named Kali, who was purchased by a European gentleman in 1827 and was supposed

to accompany him and his family to Java. She pleaded to the missionaries Rev. Samuel Ridsdale and Mrs. Juliana Marshall in Cochin to let her into the mission compound she had reached from her hideout since she did not want to leave her land forever. After giving the matter some thought, the missionaries accepted her. She was then baptised as Lucy in 1828, who according to the missionaries' continued to grow in grace" (Hunt, 1920). The historical event of conversion became an escaping vehicle for the slave caste population to free their lives from the experience of slavery and the purity versus pollution binaries. The conversion was considered to be their agency to assert and claim social equality. The Dalit experience of colonial modernity can be viewed from a different perspective scrutinising the missionary archives that preserve the memory of their everyday lives.

However, eventually, the Dalits who were converted to Christianity started facing another kind of social inequality and oppression within the hierarchy of Christian churches. A complex relationship has emerged between the converted Dalit Christians and the Syrian Christian churches. The exclusion of Dalit Christians was based on the modalities of social status and the grid of purity and pollution. Even though the Dalits converted to Christianity, their social identity is still restricted to the prefix 'Dalit' in Dalit Christians. They are either way treated as untouchables within Christianity and among caste Hindus. Within Christianity, Dalit Christians are still considered the Other and is often excluded from the mainstream positions and opportunities. The caste structure has always remained a dehumanising institution. It has further rigidified after the demise of colonialism. The current Indian social structure still maintains this caste slavery in different forms. Attributing specific default jobs to particular caste groups exposes new forms of caste slavery, explicitly visible in how manual scavengers and cleaning workers are treated, manifesting a modern form of caste slavery.

To take a point of departure, there have been remarkable mobilizations and resurgence in terms of asserting the agency of the most oppressed social groups in India. G. Kalyan Rao's seminal literary work *Untouchable Spring 2010* can be considered an archive of the resistance and resilience of Dalit Christians against the violence and torture done by the caste Hindus and Christian churches in Andhra Pradesh. The intervention of protestant missionaries and colonial modernity in this region differed from what we see in the Kerala context. Even though it is a literary piece, this book well reiterates the historical background of missionary interventions into their land with prerequisite agendas of colonial modernity, both societal and cultural modernization projects. It talks about the violence and atrocities faced by the converted Dalit Christians in the hands of both the caste Hindus and the catholic churches. It brings the arena of resistance against these caste-based discriminations based on purity versus pollution dichotomies that still exist in the context of Andhra Pradesh even after India's independence. Asserting rights, claiming space, and reconfiguring the boundaries of caste shows India's bold phase of caste politics.

In the new global geopolitics, caste-based discrimination is considered a human rights issue that does not find a solution. The discussion on reservation categories shows the intricate relationship between Dalit Christians and government apparatuses. The Dalit Christians, especially the Scheduled Caste Converted Christians (SCCC), are far too distant from accessing any affirmative measures like reservation in its just way (Paul, 201). They have been cast out from the mainstream sphere of both Christianity and the State. Dalit Christians still face untouchability, caste atrocities, and discrimination within Christianity, similar to Dalits and lower castes in India. Dalit Christians have achieved no social mobility, although they have gone through religious conversion to escape from the caste hierarchy in Hinduism. The plight of the Dalits and other lower castes remain constant as if they are secondary citizens. Moreover, the antagonism between purity and pollution is still prevalent in India in various forms,

including the deeply rooted caste system and how it is restructured under different temporal and spatial peculiarities.

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