

IDENTITY CRISIS OF DALIT CHRISTIANS IN KERALA

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Abstract: It is considered that Christianity originated in Kerala in 52AD, when St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus Christ came here and baptized the native people. The European Christian missionaries came here in 18th century and promoted conversion of Dalits into Christianity. When they got converted to Catholic Church, they were called Dalit Catholics.

The Catholic Church is doing much for the betterment of Dalit Catholics. Even then, they are struggling from socio-economic and religious problems. Dalit Catholic Maha Jana Sabha (DCMS), a Dalit Catholic organization is working for the upliftment of the Dalits in Syrian Catholic Church in Kerala. The activities of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Fr. Augustine Thevarparampil (Kunjachan) etc were remarkable in this direction. St. Chavara opened schools and encouraged Dalit education. Kunjachan also made social and religious awareness among Dalit Catholics.

In the present scenario, Dalit Christians are facing lot of problems. They expect equality, justice and brotherhood with Non-Dalit Christians. They won't get higher education and good social status. The basic discriminations still exist in the society. Now they suffer slavery in other forms – politically, socially and religiously.

Keywords: Dalits, Discriminations, Upliftment, Brotherhood

INTRODUCTION

The preamble of Indian constitution adequately empowers the central and state government to eliminate human rights violation in the country. In spite of these international and national declarations and resolutions, human rights are violated in different countries all over the world. In Indian society, due to the social barriers such as casteism, untouchability, patriarchy, disparity, religious exploitation, specific groups are becoming weaker and marginalized. In India there are about 250 million dalits. It is sure that there is a slight improvement in the socio – economic condition of dalits in the past 50 years, which is not enough when compared to non – dalits. They are still to be empowered to realize the dreams of Gandhiji and Ambedkar. They contemplated an India in which there shall be no high and low class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in harmony, they believed that “untouchables and touchable make no difference and both constitute the nation”¹.

Who is a Dalit?

Dalit is a broad concept which includes most deprived persons of the society. They have been called by different names as untouchables, out castes, avarnasetc as the oppressed and exploited sections of society. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation, prepared to call them Harijans – the children of God. The term scheduled caste was first used by the British in the Government of India Act 1935. Prior to that these sections of society were generally known as depressed classes. The present usage of the term dalit goes back to the 19th century, when the Marathi Social Reformer, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule used it to describe the outcaste and untouchables of society². At the same time, it is believed that the term was first coined by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar³.

Etymology

The word ‘Dalit’ has roots in Sanskrit which means ‘broken’, ‘downtrodden’, suppressed, crushed or broken to pieces. Dr. BR Ambedkar often described the ‘untouchables’ as broken people. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi coined the word ‘Harijan’ to identify the untouchables. The term ‘Dalit’ thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on grounds of their lowly birth. According to Victor Premasagar “the term expresses their weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian society”⁴.

Dalits in Indian Society

Dalits are one of the most unfortunate groups in India which suffer from numerous kinds of exploitative and oppressive practices of Indian Society. Psychological, social and cultural proscriptions have contributed lot of miseries and hardships to them. The attitude of higher caste people towards the Dalits even today has not changed much. In the recent past several restrictions were imposed on them like not allowing them to wear upper clothes, not to use ornament, to use only earthenware vessels at homes, and to keep a prescribed distance of steps from upper – caste people. They were totally alienated from the society.

Even after the independence, the situation of Dalits remains the same. They are one among the worst sufferers of socio - cultural, political and economic exploitation, injustice, oppression and violence. They are mainly employed in unorganized sector of the Indian economy as daily wagers and marginal workers. They do not enjoy any social security or any other kind of economic protection. They have been deprived from all kinds of human rights, education, income, dignity, social status, religious rights etc.

Who is Dalit Christians?

It is considered that Christians originated in Kerala in 52 AD, when St. Thomas the Apostle of Jesus Christ came here and baptized the native people. The European Christian missionaries came here in 18th century and promoted conversion of Dalits into Christianity. When they converted to Catholic church, they are called Dalit Christians.

Problems of Dalit Christians

Dalits have been subjected to numerous deprivations in India since time immemorial and have been marginalized in different spheres of life. They have been socially degraded, economically exploited, politically subordinated and educationally deprived by the dominant castes and classes. A favourable environment for the emergence of the protest of dalits in Kerala was created by the social reform movements in the state during the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. They awakened the consciousness of the dalit masses and taught them to become aware of their rights. Christian missionaries also awakened their minds and Christians influence and gospel teaching boosted their outlook, some of them converted to Christianity, Christian missionaries inculcated in them the values of obedience, discipline, hard work and cleanliness.

Dalit Christians form a big majority in the Catholic Church. Even though they are suppressed, they expect equality, justice and brotherhood with non – dalit Christians. They want to get higher education and good social status. The basic discrimination still exists in the other forms – politically, socially and religiously.

The Christian Dalits suffer three fold discriminations. One at the hands of members of the Indian society in general; two from the government of India, and three from Christians of upper class background⁵.

1. Discrimination by Fellow Beings

In the context of traditional societies, Dalit status has often being historically associated with occupations. They work as manual labourers. As a result, they are commonly segregated, banned from full participation in social life. It is true that most of the Dalit Catholics are poor, educationally backward, politically powerless. They are treated as with a kind of antagonism which made them feel like second class citizens.

2. Discrimination by the Government

The main issue here is that Christians Dalits are excluded from the Reservation system. The third paragraph of the Constitution order 1950, popularly known as the Presidential Order, stipulates that “No person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of scheduled caste. Later it was amended to include the Sikhs (1956) and Buddhists (1990) in the scheduled caste list. By restricting the benefits to a particular religion, the order has divided the entire Dalit community on the basis of religion. Article 15 says the state shall not discriminate against any citizen only on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. But here we see the state itself discriminating its Dalit Christians on the basis of religion. So it is the need of the Dalit Catholics to include them in the Scheduled Caste Category. A case is filed in the Supreme Court related to this issue.

3. Discrimination in the Church itself

Of course the church has been playing an important role in empowering Dalit Christians. “Out of about 180 Bishops in India 12 are from Dalit community, two in Tamil Nadu, five in Andhra Pradesh and Telungana, one in Gujarat, three in Odisha and one in Maharashtra. Among the major superiors 12 out of 822 are from Dalit Community. Priests from Dalit community are, 1,130 out of 27000 and religious are about 4500 (4.5%) out of 1,00,000”⁶. Even then, most of the literature reports that very little Dalits cover any positions in the church. It seems that the church is in the hands of the high castes. In some places it is still not possible to worship God together with the high castes. They have to sit separate from high castes in the church. Another form of discrimination is that inter-dining and inter - marriage, between Dalits and higher castes, is still a big taboo. Christians from Non - Dalit background are more likely to marry someone from the same caste than from the same religion. So a change in the attitude among the Christians is very essential to accommodate the Dalit Catholic as to uphold and strengthen the message of love and brotherhood.

Conclusion

God created all human beings and He live in the hearts of all. Gandhiji, the Father of Our Nation contemplated an India in which all communities shall live in harmony. Everybody should be enlightened to love his neighbours as himself and to develop respectful attitude. There is no doubt that the church has played an important role in educating the Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalized groups. However, it is the need of the hour to iron out the social inequality and remove injustice and there should be social, economic and political empowerment of the downtrodden people. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, dreamed of an age of equality. He realized that everybody was not physically, intellectually or spiritually equal or could be made so. Hence he found that it was necessary to provide special opportunities for educational, economic and cultural growth to backward classes so as to enable them to catch up to those who are ahead of them.

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