

Dalit Movement in the Telugu Region : A Critique From Christian Dalit Perspective

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Abstract :

The present article critiques the contemporary Dalit Movement in the Telugu region of South India from a Christian Dalit perspective. Dalits were historically disadvantaged and discriminated section by the caste-ridden society. Since Dalit is a heterogeneous section, uniform discriminatory practices are not observable across South Asia. For instance, discrimination against the Dalits is more heinous in North India than in South India. To escape caste rigidity, Dalits have been experimenting with various options. One prominent option is to convert from Hinduism to other religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. However, even after conversion from Hinduism, Dalits were unable to escape discriminatory practices against them. In this scenario, the present article throws light into the Dalit movement in Telugu region, how and why it lacks a Christian Dalit dimension.

Keywords : Dalits, Christian Dalits, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana State, South India, Telugu region.

Dalits were part of various spiritualistic traditions throughout history. However, a common thread connecting and observable in them is the pan-Indian discriminatory attitude against them by the society. There is no universally accepted formula and principle on how and why the ex-Untouchable category emerged by deviating from the rest of the four

Varna orders. Since the Constitution of India prohibited 'untouchability practice in any form', the word ex-Untouchables is coined to refer to the Dalits/SC. Thus, the term 'ex-Untouchables' is a synonymous expression in some sense to the 'Dalit and Scheduled Caste (SC)'. Scholars proposed various discerning dimensions to construct how and why the ex-Untouchable category emerged as the fifth Varna! For instance, Ambedkar observed that the erstwhile Buddhist section was recognised as an ex-Untouchable section by the Brahmanic ordered and dominated society. Further, Ambedkar observed Buddhism committed a 'revolution' against Brahmanic social order. However, the re-triumph of Brahmanism over Buddhism took place as a 'counter revolution'. (Ambedkar, 2010) (Mani, 2007)

To escape the Brahmanic dominated societal discrimination, especially the downtrodden ex-Untouchables have been trying to convert to religions like Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, etc. (Ahmed, 2018) (Rowena Robinson, 2011) (Webster, 2012) However, the Dalits conversion to religions like Parsi is highly negligible. There are historical, sociological and regional dynamic factors observable in converting masses into other religions. For instance, tribal's conversion into religions like Islam is not much observed. Same time, Christianity is highly spread across the South Indian zone than in other parts of India. Same way, Islam is relati-

vely more spread across the North Indian region than South India.

When considered erstwhile regions of undivided India, i.e., Pakistan and Bangladesh, Islam spread and succeeded much in the North Indian zone. However, caste as an inherent ethnic and social phenomenon is very much present in Indian Islam, though it is not well recognised, except by a few academic scholars. On the contrary, caste as an inherent social criterion in Indian Christianity as transferred from the previous Hindu conversion position is recognised and acknowledged by various sections of society and academicians alike. Christian Dalits are much unique within Christianity or among different caste converts to Christianity, especially in the South Indian context.

When considered the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) and Protestant denominations on a broad scale, in the South Indian zone, then the Protestant denomination is highly visible and successful even among the Dalits. And Christian Dalits are numerous in various Protestant Church Congregations. In a way, the RCM failed in South India to have the vast presence of Christian Dalit devotees in its fold, though historically the RCM had a long presence than the Protestant sects. In modern times, the Protestant sect became a successful broad denomination in attracting Dalits on a massive scale. There is a prominent observation made in this respect, why RCM failed, and Protestantism succeeded? It was prominently observed and noted that the RCM attempted to focus much on the upper castes, assuming that upper castes conversion into Christianity might automatically lead to the conversion of other

lower castes of the society. But, such an expected assumption failed, and the RCM is recognised for the presence of the upper caste Christians. However, when the Protestants entered India, they almost exclusively concentrated on the lower sections, like the Dalits. As a result, they were highly successful in having Dalits mass conversion than the upper castes conversion. (Varikoti-Jetty, 2019)

For instance, it was noted that congregations like the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC) and Telugu Baptist Church (TBC) were exclusively dominated by the Mala and Madiga castes, respectively in the Telugu region due to some of the founding missionaries' exclusive focus on them. (Rajapramukh, 2008) As a result, even after the foreign Christian missionaries left India, these two congregations continued to be dominated by these two caste sects. That is the peculiarity of Indian Christianity. This kind of dynamics can also be observed in certain parts of India, like Syrian Christians in the Kerala context. Also, some tribes in North East India have an exclusive inclination towards some Christian denominations.

The modern emancipatory movements and struggles of the Dalits across various regional locations in India are varied. These movements are by and large recognised under human rights. Dalit rights and assertion for dignified life is recognised as 'Dalit rights are equal to human rights'. (Bob, 2008) (Rodrigues, 2008) Thus, in a way, it indicates that the Dalits, by and large, were succumbed to undignified life, humiliation and torture. With slight regional variations, the Dalits across Indian Sub-Continent were meted humiliating discrimination. During the modern British India

governance regime, due to the uprise of the social renaissance movement among various sections, even Dalits also started to get exposed to modernity. (Gail Omvedt, 2007) Exposure to modernity in the Indian context opened multiple vistas.

Though British India was exclusively concerned with the governance aspects, it followed by and large non-interference to a possible extent in native people's customs and traditions. However, in reality, due to Indians encounter with modernity – mainly due to the establishment of modern administrative mechanisms like modern law and courts of justice; the caste rigidity started to get exposed to entirely new dynamics. Same time, caste as a unique social reality never lost its relevance and grip. Caste started to modify and operate according to the evolving societal dynamics in almost every region and religion. (Panikkar, 2004) (Jodhka, 2013)

Even though various trajectories and discourses to the modern Dalit emancipatory movements and struggles were constructed, the most contemporary Dalit movement's wave in Andhra Pradesh (AP) were seen and constructed since the Karamchedu massacre. (Hardtmann, 2013) (K Satyanarayana, 2013) AP in the present context refers to the united AP, which existed from 1956 to 2014, i.e., before formation of the Telangana State (TS). Both AP and TS refers to wider Telugu region. But, the article's wider focus is related to before and after formation of the TS. At the Karamchedu village, the Kamma landlords massacred Madiga's. Madiga is one of the significant SC groups. However, in reality, it was later observed that though the Madiga's were the

victims, another dominant SC section, i.e., Mala's, were the prime leaders who led the Karamchedu movement. Thus, politically and socially within the two significant SC Madiga and Mala sections in the Telugu region, the latter is recognised as relatively advanced and inherited Ambedkarite consciousness much ahead. The Karamchedu massacre took place in the year 1985. Though massacres against the SC was a regular phenomenon, the Karamchedu incident's highlight was read in many dimensions; like the increasing level of educational standards among SC's led to open assertion, etc. (Murali, 1995) (Ratnam, 2008)

The AP Dalit movement exhibits a peculiar phenomenon. Though the Dalit converts to Christianity are more in proportion, in reality, they have been continuing under the SC Hindu fold for reasons of practical relevance. The original Constitution of India, which came into existence on 26 January 1950, was neutral towards the SC religious dimension. However, on 10 August 1950, the Government of India (GoI), under the Prime Minister-ship of Jawaharlal Nehru, released a Presidential Order declaring all those SC except those in the Hindu fold as ineligible for entitlements of state affirmative policies like reservations. As a result, Dalit converts to other religions, like Sikhism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, lost an opportunity to utilise state affirmative entitlements. However, due to pressure from the Sikh Dalits, the 1950 Presidential Order was once again amended by the GoI. As a result, in addition to SC Hindus, state entitlements were extended to Sikh Dalits since 1956. (Parke, 2007) (Louis, 2007a).

Again, when India grandly marked the birth centenary celebrations of Ambedkar in 1991, the GoI once again amended the Presidential Order of 1950. And the GoI included the Buddhist Dalits to utilise SC status for benefits of state entitlements like reservations. As of now, two significant religious sects, which were excluded from the SC fold, includes Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits. However, instead of extending SC status to Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits, in reality, the GoI should withdraw the 1950 Presidential Order and restore the original position of the Constitution of India, which recognised ex-untouchables as SC's only, devoid of any religious affiliation. But, in reality, there are demands to extend SC status to Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits (and bring equality) on par with SC Hindus, SC Sikhs and SC Buddhists. This demand indicates that the demanding sections have failed to imbibe and understand the spirit of the original Constitution of India. Even Justice Ranganath Misra Commission, in its final report and recommendation, has suggested to the GoI to extend SC status to the Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits and make SC list religious neutral. In other words, the Justice Ranganath Misra Commission has suggested restoring the original constitutional position, which recognised Dalits as a religious neutral section. (Misra, 2008)

As per the official statistical census data, there has been stagnation in the Telugu region's Christian population. Such stagnation is assumed due to the lack of new claims by the Christian Dalits, who are unwilling to claim Christian Dalit status for fears of losing reservation under the SC fold. As a result, the official Christian statistical data is assumed to

be wrong and also the official SC Hindu census data is also expected to be false. Thus, most of the SC Hindus personally belong to the Christian Dalit category on an adherent personal faith basis, but not as per government's statistical reports.

Though the Christian Dalit population is significant in South India and even in the Telugu region, there is no visible Christian Dalit movement. The Dalit movement is well recognised in the Telugu region under the SC (Hindu) category. Thus, though most of the cadre and leaders of the mainstream Dalit movement in the Telugu region hails from a Christian background, in reality, they have been maintaining SC Hindu status legally. Instead of leading the campaign to acquire SC status to the Christian Dalits, who silently practice Christianity and legally continue under SC Hindu status, the mainstream Dalit leaders are silent on this most pertinent social issue. As a result, only a few voices are demanding the extension of SC reservation to the Christian Dalits. However, this demanding category is invisible and not much heard in the regular day to day civil society articulations.

Even the Madiga Reservation Poratha Samithi (MRPS) and Malamahanadu organisations, which are wide platforms for the Madiga and Mala castes, fail to voice their version concerning the Christian Dalit reservation issue. They are comfortable in fighting their democratic battles 'in support and against' AP SC reservation sub-categorisation. However, though most of them continue under the SC Hindu fold legally and practice Christianity adherently in the private realm, they are silent towards the meted injustice to them under the

1950 Constitutional Order. The Telugu region's Dalit movement is widely considered under the dominant and (historically) segregated platforms of Madiga and Mala organisations, i.e., MRPS and Malamahanadu. The ruling political sections also consider these two platforms and leaders, at some level, whenever required. Thus, even after enjoying certain political clout among the mainstream ruling sections, these platforms have failed to voice their demand and concern about the Christian Dalit reservation.

After implementing the 1950 Presidential Order, the formally declared Dalit converts to Christianity were placed under the Backward Classes (BC) category at respective states level, as per the direction of the GoI, and as per the recommendations of respective state-level BC Commissions and Committee reports. In this regard, in the Telugu region, the formally declared Dalit converts to Christianity were placed under BC sub-category 'C'. However, the existing BC-C category, i.e., the official Dalit converts to Christianity, cannot utilise reservation much, as they were offered a mere one percent reservation. Due to the governments increased tilt towards liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation – the filling of employees' vacancies permanently has come down drastically over the years. As a result, and due to other factors, like coupled with discontent for failing to secure proper employment opportunities, most Dalits, who are practising Christianity, prefer not to seek official Christian status, i.e., BC-C in the Telugu region. As a result, Dalits continue to seek SC Hindu certificates, though they practice Christianity ardently in the private family realm.

The former AP Chief Minister, Kiran Kumar Reddy (KKR), made it clear to the revenue department officials that the Dalits should not be harassed without offering them SC Hindu certificates. Because mostly the Dalits, when applied for SC certificates, were harassed by the Mandal revenue officials by pointing that they belong to the Christian fold. Further, Mandal revenue officials used to either reject or delay in issuing SC Hindu certificates. However, KKR made it clear that based on existing caste certificates criteria from family lineage background and the caste and religious claims made under the application by the applicants, the Dalits should be offered caste certificates (without any delay and harassment). As a result, the revenue department officials' harassment in issuing (or denying) caste certificates under the SC (Hindu) fold has come down from then onwards, on a relative basis.

Additionally, the computerised application process system and time-based sort out of applications under E-Governance are also paying a relatively hassle-free process in issue of SC (Hindu) caste certificates. There is a certain level of inherent logic in this process; how the Mandal revenue officials cannot deny SC Hindu status and certificates. Unless and otherwise the Baptism offered by the Church priest to the Dalits is established over documentary evidence, then the Dalits cannot be denied SC Hindu status by the Mandal revenue department officials. Previously, most Dalits were denied or harassed without offering SC (Hindu) certificates based on mere Christian elements appearances either in their houses or on personal resemblance. As a result, KKR's direction has resulted in paving smooth transit

over issuing SC Hindu certificates to the eligible Dalit applicants.

Though Dalits belong to various religious backgrounds, due to the high level of historic religious conversion mostly into Christianity, in the Telugu region, they are considered as Christians, by and large by the mainstream society. As a result, at times, either intentionally or otherwise, even stunt Hindu Dalits were viewed and treated as Christian Dalits. Towards this end, one can observe Mahesh Kathi (Mahesh) incidence in the recent past in the Telugu region. Mahesh was a noted professional film critic in Tollywood. The word 'Tollywood' refers to the 'Telugu film sector'. Mahesh used to review professionally newly released Telugu movies for popular television news channels and online portals. His social credentials lay in SC Hindu Madiga background from the Rayalaseema region's Chittoor district. He was academically well qualified and professionally well talented and recognised among his professional circles. In due course of time, all those sections and persons, who were disgruntled with his movies criticism in the mainstream media, started to brand him as a 'paid professional film review critic'.

In the subsequent duration, due to the range of trolling and antagonistic propaganda carried forward against his professional integrity, Mahesh became a socio-political commentator too. Specifically, he was seen and propagated as anti to actor Pawan Kalyan; hence he was regarded as antagonistic to the Kapu community by certain sections, especially by the Kapus, as observed majorly by Mahesh. (Social Media, 2017) Mahesh was propagated as belonging to a Christian Dalit background

and against the Hindu identity and religion; when he critiqued from specific vantage points Ramayana and Lord Rama. As a result, Mahesh repeatedly proved his SC Hindu credentials throughout the rest of his life. In addition to this, Mahesh used to now and then expressed his opinions against (other) religious beliefs and God. Mahesh instance clarifies how Dalits, either in the SC Hindu fold or in different religious sections, succumb to discrimination solely based on historically inherited Dalit caste identity. (Filter Kaapi, 2019) (Teltumbde, 2008)

The Christians in the Telugu region have a fundamental problem related to the burial grounds. The Christian burial grounds, mainly in the urban areas, are filled with covered corpses and build on cement structures. It is the culture of the Christian religion to bury the beloved dead family members, and as a mark of respect, cement construction is laid by placing a commemorative plaque. As a result of the unofficial and uncounted Christian population in the Telugu region, who mostly belonged to the Christian Dalit background, the burial grounds are filled over the years. Moreover, governments have been failing to allot new burial ground spaces. Having the right to a dignified death and subsequent ceremonial practices to be performed like honourable burial is a fundamental right of every citizen and covers under civil rights discourse. However, in reality, the Christian Dalits are unable to have dignified burial opportunities also after death. Thus, from birth to death, the Christian Dalits cannot have a proper dignified life. There is a mutual failure on the part of the Christian Dalits and governments in resolving this issue. Though

the Dalit movement in the Telugu region is widely popular, in reality, the Dalits fundamental rights, like those related to honourable cremation ceremonies, is curtailed due to caste discrimination. Thus, both the SC Hindus and Christian Dalits face certain standard discriminatory practices from birth to death. In a few notable instances, the SC Hindus could not have dignified burial opportunities due to objections levelled by the Hindu upper caste sections, primarily at village levels. (BBC News Telugu, 2021) (Ghanshyam Shah, 2008)

At another level, there is a romanticised version of propagation that there is unity among all the sections of Dalits, without recognising the historical background of the Dalits, based on inherited factors like social and cultural aspects. As a result, AP Dalits' romanticised homogeneous social construction was forged, primarily to oppose AP SC reservation sub-categorisation issues raised and demanded by the Madigas. Overall, while the Madiga's attempted to establish and make recognise others the heterogeneous background of the Dalits; on the other side, Mala's tried to compose and construct a forceful homogenous identity for Dalits. However, in reality, Mala's attempts to pose homogenous background to the Dalit identity failed. Moreover, on the other side, though the Madiga's were unable to achieve their AP SC reservation sub-categorisation, they succeeded to establish on the broader society the heterogeneous composition of the Dalits, historically, culturally and socially. (Sekhar, 2006) (P Muthaiah, 2008) The same case applies even to the Christian Madiga and Mala sections. Thus upon conversion, Madiga and Mala Christian's - historical,

social and cultural factors will not undergo drastic variation, subject to a certain level of degree of variation. (Louis, 2007b; Wilson, 1982)

Finally, to summarise and conclude, the whole article provided a vivid glimpse into the Dalits historical conversion background into other religions like Christianity. Moreover, how even after conversion to Christianity, Dalit identity continues and perpetuates was highlighted. Most significantly, the article also highlighted the Indian State's discriminatory attitude against the Dalits, who converted to non-Indic religions like Christianity. The 1950 Constitutional Order issued by the President of India is undemocratic, illegal and unconstitutional. However, the Indian political class and judiciary are unable to rectify this mistake so far. The whole case also establishes specific points about how the Dalit movement on a pan-India basis is weak, as they fail to engage with the Christian Dalit reservation issue.

At last, towards the end, the article also posed contemporary problems of Christian Dalits, like related to burial grounds and how they lack dignified burial even after death. Most significantly, the thrust focus of this article is aimed at exposing the shallow nature of the AP Dalit movement, which is failing to recognise and fight for their cause of achieving SC reservation to the Christian Dalits without acquiring dubious SC (Hindu) caste certificates; though they practice Christianity ardently in their private realm. Thus, the article exposes the specific shallow nature of the contemporary Dalit movement in AP, how it cannot recognise its problem to the fullest extent. But the contempo-

rary AP Dalit leaders wage another democratic fight for 'favouring and opposing' the AP SC (Hindu) reservation sub-categorisation.

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