
**CASTE BEYOND CONVERSION: AN AMBEDKARITE STUDY OF
DALIT CHRISTIANS IN INDIA**

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Article Received: 6 May 2026, Article Revised: 26 May 2026, Published on: 16 June 2026

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.7292>

ABSTRACT

“Speak up for those who cannot speak” (Proverbs 31.8). This study examines the persistence of caste-based discrimination among Dalit Christians in India, challenging the assumption that religious conversion ensures social equality. Drawing on the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, particularly his critique of caste as a deeply entrenched social system rather than merely a religious construct, the paper explores how caste identities continue to shape the lived experiences of converted communities. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines theoretical analysis, textual interpretation, and sociological insights, the study investigates the structural and cultural continuities of caste within Christian institutions and practices. It highlights how Dalit Christians often face segregation in churches, exclusion from leadership roles, and denial of equal social status, thereby reproducing caste hierarchies in a new religious context.

The central argument of this paper is that conversion, while offering spiritual transformation, does not necessarily lead to the annihilation of caste, as envisioned by Ambedkar. Instead, caste persists through social practices, institutional structures, and community attitudes. The study concludes that addressing caste among Dalit Christians requires not only theological reform but also a broader socio-political commitment to equality and justice, in line with Ambedkarite thought.

KEYWORDS: Ambedkarite thought, Dalit Christians, Caste, Conversion, Social exclusion, Religion and inequality.

INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India has historically functioned as a rigid and hierarchical social order, deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and economic structures. Rooted in the traditional *varna* and *jati* divisions, it has systematically regulated social relations, occupational roles, and access to resources. Despite constitutional safeguards and modern democratic values, caste continues to shape everyday life, particularly for marginalised communities such as Dalits. Thinkers like B. R. Ambedkar have argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, sustained by social practices and ideological conditioning. Within this context, religious conversion has often been perceived as a pathway to liberation, a means of escaping caste oppression and achieving dignity, equality, and social mobility. Dalits have historically embraced conversion to religions such as Christianity and Buddhism as an act of resistance against entrenched social hierarchies. “The caste system or the varna system in India is a comprehensive socio-cultural system, traditionally stratified and hierarchical and governed by the concept of 'pollution' and 'untouchability' that developed in ancient India” (Melanchthon).

The emergence of Dalit Christianity complicates this narrative of liberation. While Christianity, in principle, advocates equality and brotherhood, the lived experiences of Dalit converts reveal the persistence of caste-based distinctions even within the Church. Monica says “...many Dalits, although Christians are hesitant to acknowledge their Christian identity publicly and instead continue to maintain their Dalit status, at least on paper” (22). Dalit Christians often encounter segregation in worship spaces, discrimination in burial grounds, and exclusion from ecclesiastical authority, reflecting the continued influence of caste identities. This paradox highlights a critical tension between religious ideals and social realities. As Ambedkar emphasised, the annihilation of caste requires more than a change in religious identity; it demands a radical transformation of social consciousness and institutional structures. Thus, the study of Dalit Christianity becomes essential in understanding how caste adapts and survives beyond conversion, reinforcing the need for deeper structural reform.

The core research problem addressed in this study is the persistence of caste even after religious conversion, particularly among Dalit Christians in India. While conversion to Christianity is often perceived as a pathway to escape the rigid hierarchies of the Hindu caste system, lived realities suggest otherwise. Caste identities and practices continue to shape social interactions, access to resources, and community belonging. This enduring presence of caste reveals that religious transformation does not automatically translate into social

equality, thereby raising critical questions about the limits of conversion as a tool for emancipation. “The concepts of pollution, poverty, and powerlessness are chosen recognising the dual nature of the caste system status and dominance” (Nirmal 3).

This paper employs the theoretical framework of B. R. Ambedkar, whose incisive critique of caste underscores its deeply embedded socio-cultural and economic foundations. Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a religious construct but a system of graded inequality sustained through social practices and institutional mechanisms. Drawing on this perspective, the study examines how Dalit Christians continue to experience discrimination in various forms, including social humiliation, exclusion within church hierarchies, and unequal access to institutional power. These experiences highlight the reproduction of caste within Christian communities, challenging the notion of Christianity as an egalitarian faith in the Indian context.

The paper explores the structural dimensions of inequality affecting Dalit Christians, particularly their exclusion from the Scheduled Caste (SC) status under Indian law, which limits their access to affirmative action benefits. It also engages with broader policy frameworks such as the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) and debates surrounding minority rights, which intersect with issues of representation and resource allocation. The central argument of this study is that while conversion may offer partial relief from overt forms of caste oppression, it does not annihilate caste. Instead, caste adapts and persists in new forms, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of social justice and equality beyond the act of religious conversion.

The caste system in India has historically structured social relations through rigid hierarchies based on birth, deeply influencing access to resources, dignity, and power. While religion has often functioned as a site of oppression by legitimising such hierarchies, it has also simultaneously offered possibilities for resistance and liberation. In this context, the emergence of Dalit Christianity during the colonial and postcolonial periods can be understood as both a spiritual and socio-political response to caste-based exclusion. Conversion to Christianity was seen by many Dalits as a means to escape the dehumanising practices embedded within caste society. However, despite its egalitarian theological foundations, Christianity in India has not remained untouched by caste dynamics, raising critical concerns about the persistence of caste identities even within converted communities. This study addresses the central research problem: why does caste persist even after conversion? Focusing on regions such as Vellore in South India, where Dalit Christian populations are significant, the paper adopts a sociological approach combined with the

theoretical insights of B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's critique helps frame caste as a deeply entrenched social system that transcends religious boundaries and continues through cultural practices and institutional structures. By examining lived experiences, social relations, and institutional patterns, this study seeks to understand how caste adapts within new religious contexts, thereby highlighting the limitations of conversion as a complete pathway to social equality.

Historical Context of Conversion to Christianity

B. R. Ambedkar conceptualises caste as a system of graded inequality and critiques the Hindu social order. While he viewed conversion as a path to dignity, he argued religion alone cannot dismantle caste, evident in persistent inequalities among Dalit Christians. Colonial missionary interventions in India played a significant role in the emergence of Dalit Christianity by providing access to education, healthcare, and limited avenues for social mobility. Missionaries established schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions that opened new possibilities for marginalised communities who had long been excluded from such resources under caste-based discrimination. "In the past, the Missionary was primarily concerned with the numerical growth of the Christian community rather than its growth on sound biblical foundations. This has led to the origins of several unhealthy Tendencies in the church" (Joseph 91). These interventions, though embedded within colonial frameworks, created alternative social spaces where Dalits could assert a sense of dignity and self-worth. As a result, conversion to Christianity became intertwined with aspirations for a more egalitarian social order.

Two broad features characterised the early mission to the Dalits throughout India. In the first place, it provided them with a new self-understanding of themselves and of the society around them, with a new set of faith concepts, religious symbols and practices which contrasted with their traditional self images as some sort of inferior human beings. Secondly, there was an element of social empowerment as many missionaries stood by the untouchables in resisting their traditional oppressors and asserting their civil rights. It is not necessary here to narrate the innumerable cases spread all over the country and their circumstances. They were adequate in some ways and inadequate in many other respects (Ayrookuzhiel 154).

At the same time, conversion functioned as a form of resistance against the oppressive structures of caste, particularly untouchability and caste-based violence. For many Dalits, embracing Christianity was not merely driven by material incentives, as often misrepresented in the "rice bag" narrative, but by a profound search for dignity, equality, and basic human

rights. Conversion symbolised a rejection of caste humiliation and an assertion of human agency. However, while it offered a pathway toward social and spiritual liberation, the persistence of caste practices even after conversion complicates this narrative of resistance.

Debunking the “Rice Bag Conversion” Narrative

The term “rice bag converts” is a derogatory expression used to suggest that Dalits converted to Christianity merely for material benefits such as food, money, or aid provided by missionaries. This label has gained traction in social media spaces, where Dalit Christians are often subjected to humiliation, stereotyping, and ridicule. Such narratives flatten complex histories into simplistic accusations of opportunism, ignoring the structural violence and social exclusion that historically shaped conversion movements.

A critical analysis reveals that this discourse reduces deeply rooted socio-historical realities to economic motives, thereby delegitimising the agency of Dalit converts. In reality, conversion was largely driven by the search for dignity, equality, and freedom from caste oppression and untouchability. The persistence of this narrative in digital spaces also reflects emerging forms of digital casteism, where online harassment reproduces caste hierarchies and reinforces stigma against Dalit Christians, further marginalising their identities in contemporary society.

Persistence of Caste After Conversion:

Despite conversion to Christianity, caste continues to persist in both overt and subtle forms, demonstrating its deep entrenchment in Indian society. One of the most visible manifestations is social segregation, where Dalit Christians are often confined to separate settlements or “colonies,” spatially distanced from dominant caste groups, a pattern evident in both rural and increasingly in urban landscapes. These segregated living conditions reflect not only historical exclusion but also the ongoing reproduction of caste boundaries within new religious contexts. Alongside spatial separation, the cultural continuity of caste remains strong, as practices such as endogamous marriages, restrictions on inter-dining, and even segregation in burial grounds continue to be observed within Christian communities. Such practices reveal how caste identities are preserved through everyday social and cultural interactions, despite the formal rejection of caste in Christian doctrine. Furthermore, migration to urban areas, often assumed to offer anonymity and social mobility, does not necessarily dismantle caste identity; instead, caste reappears in more subtle and structural forms, influencing access to housing, employment opportunities, and social networks. Discrimination in urban spaces may be less visible but remains deeply embedded in

institutional practices and social attitudes. Therefore, the persistence of caste after conversion highlights its adaptive nature, showing that it transcends religious boundaries and continues to shape the lived experiences of Dalit Christians in complex and enduring ways.

They [Dalits] are forced to lead a life of contradiction and estrangement in the land of their birth. They are discriminated against, socially, religiously, politically, economically and above all, ideologically. They are treated as polluted people, destined to be poor and perpetually made to remain powerless; all of these factors are man-made. Thus, suffering is the marked character of Dalits' existence(Sugirtharajah152).

Caste Within Christianity in India

Caste continues to operate within Christian institutions in India, particularly through unequal church hierarchies that mirror broader social structures. Despite the egalitarian ideals of Christianity, Dalits remain underrepresented in positions of authority such as priests, pastors, and bishops, while dominant caste Christians often occupy leadership roles. This imbalance reflects entrenched social privilege rather than purely theological criteria, leading to institutional marginalisation of Dalit Christians. Even within ecclesiastical spaces meant to promote equality and fraternity, caste-based distinctions influence decision-making power, access to resources, and recognition within the church. "The concern for the weaker and neglected sections within the church cannot be construed as being communal or selfish. Rather, the church has a duty to discern and identify those sections within its fold who are victims of injustice and discrimination" (Masilamani 116).

Denominational structures further reveal the persistence of caste, as seen in institutions like the Church of South India, where internal caste dynamics continue to shape community interactions and leadership patterns. However, these inequalities have also given rise to resistance and assertion from within Dalit Christian communities. Dalit theologians, activists, and progressive bishops have increasingly challenged caste discrimination, articulating a theology rooted in justice, dignity, and liberation. This has led to the emergence of a distinct Dalit Christian consciousness that seeks not only inclusion within the church but also a radical transformation of its structures and practices.

Legal and Constitutional Dimensions

The legal and constitutional dimensions of caste among Dalit Christians reveal a persistent framework of exclusion rooted in the Presidential Order (1950), which restricts Scheduled Caste (SC) status to Hindus, later extended to Sikhs in 1956 and Buddhists in 1990, but

continues to exclude Christians. This exclusion results in structural discrimination, as Dalits who convert to Christianity lose access to reservation benefits in education, employment, and political representation, effectively rendering caste-based disadvantage legally invisible despite its continued social reality. The denial of SC status ignores the persistence of caste oppression across religious boundaries and reinforces systemic inequality. For over 75 years, Dalit Christians have persistently demanded recognition within the SC category, highlighting the contradiction between constitutional guarantees of equality and the ongoing marginalisation embedded within legal frameworks. B. R. Ambedkar says, “Caste is not merely an attitude of neutrality, but is an attitude of armed neutrality” (57). He means that caste is not passive or harmless. It is an active, defensive system where each caste group protects its own privileges and boundaries, almost like being “armed” to resist equality or social mixing. Former Madras Bishop Rt. Rev. Masilamani Azariah states that, The SC Christians are thus discriminated against and oppressed by the fellow Christians within the very church for no fault of their own but the accident of birth; even when they are 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation Christians. The high-caste Christians who are in a minority in the church carry their caste prejudice even after generations. Unaffected by the Christian belief and practice. Ironically, even the oppressed SC Christians carry their inferiority complex, resignedly accepting their inherited servility from the Hindu background, having internalised the legitimising myths and beliefs in 'fate and Karma' that domesticate them into a *f* Culture of Silence (Azariah 10).

Minority Rights and State Policies

As a religious minority in India, Christians are constitutionally recognised but continue to face multiple forms of marginalisation and social hostility, particularly in regions marked by communal tensions. While minority status offers certain protections, it does not fully safeguard Dalit Christians from layered discrimination based on both religion and caste. Incidents of violence, social exclusion, and restricted access to resources highlight the fragile nature of minority rights in practice. Furthermore, state policies such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and its amendments have significantly impacted churches, NGOs, and faith-based social initiatives by tightening regulations on foreign funding. These restrictions have led to a reduction in international financial support, affecting education, healthcare, and welfare programmes that primarily serve marginalised communities, including Dalit Christians. Consequently, the intersection of minority status and

regulatory frameworks creates additional challenges, limiting both institutional capacity and avenues for social upliftment.

Social Media, Caste, and Contemporary Humiliation

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become a significant site for the reproduction of caste, giving rise to what can be termed digital casteism. Dalit Christians are frequently subjected to stereotyping, ridicule, and symbolic violence through derogatory narratives such as “rice bag converts,” which circulate widely across online platforms. These narratives not only delegitimise their historical experiences of oppression but also reduce their identity to false notions of economic opportunism. Social media platforms, instead of functioning as neutral spaces, often amplify caste prejudice through viral content, anonymous trolling, and algorithm-driven visibility, thereby normalising everyday discrimination. As a result, online spaces increasingly mirror and intensify offline caste hierarchies, perpetuating humiliation and marginalisation in new and pervasive forms. “The marginalisation of the non-Brahmanical perspectives and experience in the institutionalised scholarship on caste has blurred our understanding of the relations between structural continuities and contemporary change in the social institution of caste” (Rege 15).

In Vellore District, the persistence of caste among Dalit Christians is evident through spatial, institutional, and everyday forms of discrimination. Many Dalit Christian families continue to reside in segregated “colony” settlements, physically separated from dominant caste groups, reflecting entrenched patterns of social exclusion. Within church institutions, discrimination manifests in unequal participation, limited access to leadership roles, and subtle practices of exclusion during worship and community activities. These experiences highlight how caste hierarchies are reproduced even within a religion that preaches equality. At the everyday level, Dalit Christians encounter marginalisation in education, employment, and social interactions, often shaped by both their caste and economic status. The intersection of caste, religion, and class thus creates layered inequalities that restrict upward mobility and social dignity. This case study underscores that conversion has not erased caste but has instead reshaped its expression within new socio-religious contexts.

Gendered Resistance and Dalit Christian Assertion

The gender dimension within Dalit Christianity reveals a profound layer of marginalisation, where Dalit Christian women experience a “triple burden” shaped by caste, class, and gender. Despite conversion, patriarchal norms continue to operate within both family and church

structures, limiting women's participation in decision-making and leadership roles. "The last word in Indian Christian Theology was not said by Brahma Bandhava, Appasamy, Chakkari and Chenchiah. There is no need to idolise the glorious past of Indian Christian Theology represented in the writings of these men" (Nirmal 81-2). In many cases, Dalit Christian women remain confined to subordinate positions, undertaking unpaid or undervalued labour in religious and domestic spaces while facing social discrimination outside. Their experiences highlight how caste oppression intersects with gender inequality, intensifying vulnerability and restricting access to education, economic independence, and dignity.

At the same time, resistance and assertion have emerged as powerful responses within Dalit Christian communities. Influenced by the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit Christian movements increasingly challenge both caste discrimination and institutional exclusion. Activists, theologians, and community leaders advocate for equality within church structures and demand legal recognition and rights from the state. Liberation theology, grassroots activism, and education have become key tools in articulating Dalit Christian identity and resistance. Through these efforts, Dalit Christians seek not only inclusion but also a transformation of oppressive structures, asserting dignity, justice, and equal participation in both religious and social spheres.

CONCLUSION

Rev. Dr. I.D. Babu Masilamani states that "No human being is inferior by birth. If it is true that we have God as our supreme Father, then all of humanity must live today as one family. Yet, in the name of caste, in the name of religion, in the name of culture and tradition, and in the name of political righteousness, people continue to be humiliated, excluded, oppressed, and subjected to suffering even today" (Masilamani 60). Conversion offers partial liberation by enabling escape from overt forms of untouchability, yet caste persists as a powerful social reality beyond religious boundaries, revealing contradictions within Christianity in India. This underscores the need for deeper structural transformation rather than mere religious change. As B. R. Ambedkar argues, caste must be annihilated at its roots. Legal reforms, including the inclusion of Dalit Christians under the Scheduled Caste status, alongside broader social transformation and institutional accountability, are urgently required. True liberation lies not in conversion alone, but in dismantling caste as an enduring system of inequality.

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