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Silencing Caste: A Kerala Experience

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ABSTRACT: This Paper examines how the traditional and modern forms of caste power determine the social and ecclesiastical spaces of institutionalized church in the post-independence period in Kerala. The analysis is based on the historical experience and everyday life of two Dalit Christian congregations and some of the notable incidents related to Dalit Christians from elsewhere in Kerala. This inquiry is aimed at flagging the larger question of the significance of Christianity among Dalits in Kerala in the post-independence period. The analysis focuses on the institutional dimensions of the church.

KEYWORDS: Silencing Caste, Dalits, Christianity, Institutionalization of Caste

I. INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of Dalit conversion to Christianity in Kerala, India, there existed the problem of joint worship of Dalits and 'upper caste' Christians, the caste oppressors of Dalits, in the same Church. Slaves joining missions and receiving Christianity made the slave holders angry. Masters tortured slaves for joining Christianity but became happy when Christian slaves worked hard enhancing the riches for their masters, proving their trustworthiness (Kawashima: 2000, 157). Notable historian of slavery in Kerala Sanal Mohan points out that,"In spite of the enslaved castes joining the missions, everybody above them in the caste hierarchy would disassociate from them. The missionary had observed that 'not only are their owners accuse to their learning anything which would tend to cultivate their character, but the natives generally would object to meet with them in an act of public worship" (Mohan: 2015, 61-62).

Mohan further explains that the missionaries have noted that 'those who received the missionaries and the agents with 'apparent delight' would probably renounce the profession of Christianity altogether, if promiscuous communion was introduced into their locality. He says it shows the power of the entrenched notions of caste and segregation based on them existing within the congregations (Mohan: 2015, 62). The traditional Christians, the Syrian Christian community, which included a large number of slave holders, did not respect the slave Christians at par as co- religionists and continued their oppression. They also started to address the slave Christian's *puthu-kristhyanikal* (Neo-Christians). This term is used in a derogatory sense and it marks the traditional Christians keeping away from the slave Christians who newly joined in Christianity, during colonial period. The traditional Christians also started the practice of addressing the slave Christians prefixing caste to their Christian names. Thus, from the beginning, the 'conversion' of slave castes was accompanied by discrimination and oppression and it continued into late 20th century. This conflict resulted, over the decades, in the formation of some separate churches, and separate congregations for Dalit Christians in Kerala. There are dioceses in Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal Churches in which predominantly Dalit Christians are members but headed by higher caste Christian. For example, the Vijayapuram diocese and Kannur diocese of Latin Catholic Church in Kerala are dominated by Dalit Christians. Dalit Christians have been raising the demand for a separate diocese in Church of South India for many decades (See Yesudasan: 2016, 104). But in all the shared spaces of Dalit Christians and the traditional Christians, caste appeared to be the central social force that determined the spiritual and material affairs of the Church.

Archbishop of Chennai, Dr. M Chinnappa, SVD in 2009, made a historic statement on the caste question in Christian churches, "the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu should make a public confession for the sin of caste committed historically. We have done this injustice to thousands and thousands of our own people…We have damaged a community." (Quoted in Moss: 2012, 1). This was a revolutionary call by an Indian Archbishop because in India we hardly come across such a call for acknowledging caste in the Churches and subsequently rejecting caste as a sin. Conversely, we have witnessed the official, rhetorical stand taken by the Churches that there is no caste in Indian Churches and all Christians are one in Jesus. The most important among this underplaying of caste that singularly determined the Dalit Christian life and politics in the independent India was made by the Christian representatives in the constituent assembly. The Christian representatives in the Constituent Assembly were non-Dalit, elite Christians

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and they maintained that caste does not exist in Christianity, and it eventually led to disavowal of caste in Christianity and Dalit Christians getting denied the benefits of affirmative action in India and protection from caste atrocities (Robinson: 2014, 83). As Rowena Robinson notes, the elite Christian members did not raise the issue of caste within Christian community at any point during the discussions in the constituent assembly (Robinson: 2014, 83). On another occasion, in 2019, neglecting caste discrimination in his church, Bishop of Marthoma Syrian Church Adoor diocese made a notable comment in connection with the pending burial of a Dalit Christian woman for thirty days. He said it was not caste that creates troubles but Dalit Christians in the Church are asserting their identity as the sons and daughters of the soil, and that too with pride. (NDCW: 2019) These rhetorical and seemingly convincing claims are part of the ongoing discourse of silencing caste in Christianity, beyond temporal restrictions. Silencing of caste is a discourse and a set of practices of the dominant Syrian Christians for covering up caste domination by reformulating the traditional caste practices. This is how the dominant Syrian Christian community and the Church leadership put forward arguments and post explanations to deny the claims of Dalit Christians about caste-based discrimination within the Church. It is in this context, that the Supreme Court of India asked in 2007 if there is caste in Christian churches while considering the plea for extending Scheduled Caste reservation to Dalit Christians (Do Christians: Times of India: 2020). The following sections discuss how the silencing of caste is made possible by the higher caste Christians by reformulating caste in Christianity.

II. SILENCING CASTE IN CHRISTIANITY

During the "liberation struggle" of 1959, the right-wing insurgence against the first elected communist party led government of Kerala, Syrian Christians in the St Thomas Syrian Church in the migrant village Karikkottakkari called for Dalit Christian solidarity proclaiming that "we all are Christians" (PM Salim: 2013). This call for solidarity grossed over the caste-based discriminations that prevailed in the congregation as a continuation of the practices prevailing in, Travancore in Southern Kerala (Mathew: 2018). But Dalit Christians refused to join the 'higher caste' mobilization against the government and this resulted in violent caste oppression against Dalit Christians who were accused of being 'communists' and 'anti- church'. It is against this background that the statement of the members of the Syrian Catholic Church in this village gains importance. Antony Giddens paraphrases Talcott Parsons's short work *On the Concept of Power* in these words: "Power may be at its most alarming, and quiet often it's most horrifying, when applied as a sanction of force. But it is typically at its most intense and durable when running silently through the repetition of institutionalized practices." (Giddens: 2012, 278-79). This postulate is indicative of the invasiveness of caste power when it is reformulated as silenced institutionalized power. Silencing of caste and related practices are not a recent construct. It was already there and routinely adopted by many upper castes mainly in the context of the constitutional democracy and Christian values. But there are specific reasons and the right kind of environment for the emergence of such practices. The analysis of these reasons and the specific environment at minute levels is important for explaining the contemporary life of Dalit Christian community in Kerala. It will also facilitate the affirmation of their politics of resistance, inside the Church space and in the society. Concealing caste oppression and silencing resistance constitute a form of domination derived from the hegemonic power of caste that transcends the limits of Christianity. This study, however, focuses on the phenomenon as it is practiced within the Church. We are familiar with never ending violent forms of caste oppression including genocide, murder, rape torture etc. in various parts of India. Though Dalit Christians in Kerala are not totally exempt from the several forms of violent oppression, this analysis focuses on the reworked formulation of caste that predominates in the Kerala Churches. On analysing caste in Kerala's Christianity, we see that hegemonic caste power has been pervasive in reformulated forms and practices of the dominant Syrian Christians. These serve to conceal caste discrimination and silence the critics.

It is the violent forms of caste oppression, as Giddens paraphrases of power as 'sanction of force' that is mainly applied against the Dalits with a little or no power of resistance. But silencing of caste is the form of caste practice used for dominating Dalits who have the power of resistance. It is also used for camouflaging caste interests from the learned, enlightened, and critical public. This strategic release of caste power makes the entire discourse complex and uneasy to capture. In this context the value system of Christianity and Dalits as potential beneficiaries of these values become targets of higher castes for creating intricacies for their caste domination. Thus, one major challenge to caste domination arises from the Christian values of love and theological interpretations of equality and democracy. In this context Syrian Christians rework the Christian notions of love and doctrines that advocate equality and democracy excluding caste discrimination from the notion of sin. They also find some other modes to avoid integration and co-operation with Dalit Christians. It may be noted that institutional arrangements in the church and church administered educational and other institutions are central to this. It is in this institutionalized church where Dalits worship jointly

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with the Syrian Christians and the church as a social space becomes a potential space for the domination by Syrian Christians. Avasi Margalit in *The Decent Society* Philosophize various aspects of humiliation and oppression that are institutionally initiated. According to him "governing institutions do not necessarily humiliate people, but they are able to do so[14]. This is to be seen in post-independence Kerala, the Syrian Christian led institutionalized church creates conditions to humiliate, discriminate, and oppress Dalit Christians. But what the institutionalized church necessarily does is that, they silence caste discrimination within the church. This is because, the desire to perpetuate caste privileges are challenged with powerful theological interpretations of democracy in the Church including liberation theology, and Dalit theology. The hegemonic power of caste, the reformulation of its fundamentals in Christianity and practices of silencing caste in Syrian Christian consciousness is developed by the intersection of caste education and secular education in the developmental stages of children.

III. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of Dalit Christianity in Kerala exposes the deeply entangled relationship between caste and religion, one that has persisted well into the post-independence period despite claims of Christian egalitarianism. The examination of caste power within the institutionalized church demonstrates how traditional hierarchies were neither abolished through conversion nor diluted by modern political democracy. Instead, caste was reformulated and reinscribed within ecclesiastical structures, producing a silencing of caste that continues to structure the social and spiritual lives of Dalit Christians. The experiences of congregations such as Kottukappara and Parakkappara, as well as other notable cases across Kerala, reveal the persistence of exclusion, humiliation, and denial, even in spaces that are ostensibly governed by theological notions of equality, fraternity, and divine love.

From the colonial period onward, Dalit conversion to Christianity was accompanied by structural ambivalence. While missions provided a route out of slavery, illiteracy, and social invisibility, the very act of conversion destabilized the existing social hierarchy, provoking resistance from upper-caste Christians who sought to preserve their dominance. The emergence of terms like *puthu-kristhyanikal*, used derogatorily to mark Dalit converts as "neo-Christians", demonstrates how conversion did not erase caste boundaries but rather reconstituted them within a new religious idiom. The persistence of practices such as prefixing caste identifiers to Dalit Christian names reveals the depth of these hierarchies. Thus, Christian modernity in Kerala, instead of being an avenue of emancipation, frequently became a terrain in which caste power adapted, reorganized, and solidified itself.

The post-independence period further illustrates how this entrenched caste logic was concealed and institutionalized. At a time when India was reimagining itself as a constitutional democracy committed to equality and social justice, the refusal of Christian representatives in the Constituent Assembly to acknowledge caste among Christians proved decisive. Their silence not only erased the lived realities of Dalit Christians but also ensured their exclusion from the ambit of state-sponsored affirmative action and protective legal mechanisms. This disavowal became the cornerstone of a broader discursive strategy through which the church and dominant Christian communities continue to deny the persistence of caste. Official rhetoric frequently asserts that all Christians are "one in Jesus," while simultaneously maintaining the structural divisions of caste in ecclesiastical leadership, sacramental participation, and access to church-administered institutions.

The significance of Archbishop M. Chinnappa's 2009 call for the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu to confess the sin of caste lies precisely in its rarity. By acknowledging the injustice historically committed against Dalit Christians, he disrupted the dominant narrative of denial. Yet such interventions remain exceptional, overshadowed by the prevailing strategies of silencing caste. Instances such as the denial of burial rights to Dalit Christians, followed by dismissive responses from church leaders, reveal how caste oppression is rearticulated through institutional discourse. These responses shift the blame from systemic discrimination to Dalit assertion, framing the demand for dignity and equality as disruptive rather than as legitimate claims to justice.

The framework of "silencing caste," as developed in this study, is useful for understanding these dynamics. Caste power today does not always manifest as overt violence; rather, it is often embedded in the repetition of institutional practices that normalize inequality. Following Giddens's insight that power is most durable when it operates silently through institutionalized routines, one can see how Syrian Christian dominance is perpetuated not by explicit assertion but by the quiet naturalization of caste privilege. This silence is strategic: it allows the church to project an image of unity and modernity while simultaneously safeguarding entrenched hierarchies. It also prevents caste-based injustices

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from entering public debate, thereby maintaining the moral legitimacy of the church as a progressive institution.

At the same time, silencing caste is not merely a passive phenomenon but an active mode of domination. It functions as a response to the potential resistance of Dalit Christians, particularly those who mobilize theological interpretations of liberation, democracy, and equality. Dalit theology and liberation theology challenge the theological legitimacy of caste by foregrounding the gospel's radical call to justice. In this sense, silencing caste is a tactic designed to neutralize these challenges—by excluding caste from the definition of sin, by compartmentalizing equality as a purely spiritual matter, or by framing Dalit resistance as unnecessary confrontation. This illustrates how the church becomes a site of both theological promise and political struggle, where competing visions of Christianity are contested.

The institutional structures of the church—its dioceses, parishes, schools, and hospitals—are central to the perpetuation of caste power. As Avasi Margalit argues, institutions have the capacity to humiliate, even if not every act is overtly humiliating. In the Kerala context, the institutionalized church provides the setting where Dalit Christians are simultaneously included and excluded, recognized as members yet denied equal dignity. Historically, the very act of joint worship has become a contested space where the promise of Christian fellowship collided with the reality of caste exclusion. Similarly, access to leadership positions, educational opportunities, and decision-making roles within the church remains constrained by caste. Thus, Dalit Christians are not only denied material benefits but are symbolically humiliated by being rendered perpetual outsiders within their own religious community.

This study also emphasizes the broader socio-political implications of these ecclesiastical dynamics. The silence on caste in Christianity has significant consequences for Dalit Christian mobilization in civil society and politics. By denying the existence of caste, the dominant church discourse undermines claims for constitutional recognition and state support. It further weakens the moral authority of Dalit Christian movements by portraying them as divisive or illegitimate. Yet history also shows that Dalit Christians have repeatedly resisted these narratives, whether by refusing to join upper-caste mobilizations such as the 1959 liberation struggle or by organizing for separate dioceses and burial rights. These acts of resistance underscore the agency of Dalit Christians, who continue to contest both the external denial of caste and the internalization of oppression.

In reflecting on these dynamics, it is crucial to recognize that caste in Christianity cannot be dismissed as a contradiction or anomaly. Rather, it must be understood as a structural reality that has been reformulated within Christian modernity. The persistence of caste among Christians is not a mere residue of the past but an active, evolving system that adapts to new contexts—whether constitutional democracy, secular education, or theological discourse. The challenge, therefore, is not only to document instances of discrimination but to analyze the mechanisms by which caste is silenced, concealed, and normalized.

The experiences of Dalit Christians in Kerala remind us of the broader theoretical question of how oppressed communities negotiate spaces of inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. Conversion to Christianity promised liberation but produced new forms of subjugation; constitutional democracy promised equality but institutionalized exclusions through denial. The contradiction between Christian values of love and equality and the persistent practices of caste discrimination reveals the deep resilience of caste as a system of power. Yet within this contradiction also lies the potential for resistance. Dalit Christian theology, community mobilization, and political assertion represent attempts to reclaim Christianity as a site of emancipation rather than subjugation.

In conclusion, this study underscores that the story of Dalit Christianity in Kerala is not simply one of victimhood but of struggle, resistance, and reimagination. The institutionalized church, dominated by Syrian Christians, continues to reproduce caste hierarchies while denying their existence. But Dalit Christians, through their lived experiences and theological interventions, continue to expose the silences and challenge the denials. The future of Christianity in Kerala—and indeed in India—depends on whether the church can confront this history honestly and embrace a vision of radical equality. Without such confrontation, the church risks perpetuating the very structures of oppression it claims to transcend. By centering the voices and experiences of Dalit Christians, scholarship and activism can contribute to dismantling the silences of caste and opening new possibilities for justice, dignity, and true fellowship.

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