

Will the Subaltern Christian in Kerala Ever Speak?

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Abstract

Spivak's definition of subaltern most suitably resonates with the life experience of Dalit Christians. They are so sidelined that they are without any access to the lines of upward social mobility. Fate has made them Christians converts. Though it was a springboard for social mobility initially, it turns out to be a harrowing choice. Though the Church has taken some decisive initiatives the subaltern condition of the Dalit Christians have not improved much. They are battling poverty, debt and social stigma. The negative attitudes towards the cause of subaltern Christian by some sections of the society have adverse impact on Dalit Christians. Abandoned by all, they are stuck in the dungeon of suffering. Locating the position of the Dalit Christians in the society, and among the Syrian Christians, the paper tries to trace the history of caste system among the Christians and its fault lines and the unsuccessful efforts by the Church to cast aside the caste garb to accommodate the oppressed. The paper also recommends some solutions to the predicament. The most important of them is the necessity of the Dalit's own sincere efforts to discover their own capacity to speak and act.

Key Words: Subaltern, Nazranization, Dalit Christian, Social mobility

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Spivak in her, 'Can the Subaltern speak?' asks, "Can the subaltern speak?---The question of 'woman' seems to be most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways" (Spivak 90). According to her subaltern cannot speak and among them the women are the most oppressed as they get it in three ways. In the same way, for a Dalit Christian the oppression is in four ways. A Dalit belongs to slave caste. He is rejected by caste Christians. He is rejected by the state and his own brethren in Hindu religion when they try to make a claim for reservation. True to the definition of Spivak about subaltern, a dalit Christian has become, "a position without identity"--- "without access to the lines of social mobility" (Spivak, The Trajectory of the Subaltern in my Work, 9.45). The voice of the Dalit Christians is not heard. They do not speak. Their access to the life lines of progress is cut and they are eternally damned to perish. They have failed to form a class with common interest. Scattered do they lie continuing their life as 'still sad music'. The rising for Dalit Christians from the dungeon of hopelessness is nowhere in the vicinity. They lie helpless and crucified on the cross set by the society.

Nazranization or the Emergence of Nazrani as a Caste

Caste in Christianity is an interesting topic. Christ who was born in a manger, without any access to comfort and who later rejected it wandering and teaching poverty in spirit and died naked on cross may stand diametrically opposite to caste Christianity in Kerala. Christ has identified himself as someone hungry, thirsty, naked and sick and as prisoner and stranger (Matthew 25), which makes Christ a perfect Dalit or Subaltern. Hungry, naked, sick Christ was Nazranized in Kerala. This makes us think about casteism among Christians in Kerala. The early converts to Christianity in Kerala should have been the natives and probably the Dravidians. Some Christians claim to have Brahminic origin. This itself pinpoints to a deeply ingrained caste conscience in some Christians. When they write the family history, they often begin their history claiming to have originated from family like Pakalomattam which is believed to be an ancient Brahmin family that converted to Christianity, baptized by St Thomas, the apostle. Interestingly, such family historians stop tracing their origin with the Brahmin family and don't go beyond and trace the origin to God who according to Christian faith is Father to everyone who created everyone and therefore, all equal.

Is there any truth behind the claim of Brahminic origin of Christians? The noted historian, A Sreedhara Menon writes, "The Aryans who began to enter Kerala two or three centuries before the Christian era completed the present racial composition of the population of the State" (Menon 55) or before, let us say, the strongly believed visit of St Thomas, the disciple of Jesus in AD 52. He affirms, "In the 8th century AD, the

Aryanisation of Kerala reached its climax with a major batch of Brahmin immigrants coming here and strengthening the already existing forces of Brahminism” (Menon 89). Naboothiri Aryans came in the 8 Century AD. Did St Thomas baptize Namboothiris? - Not a possibility. Conversion of Brahmins settled in Kerala before the influx of Brahmins in 8 century AD was not an impossible fact. Kancha Ilaiah in an interview about Dalits in India during Kerala Literature Festival in 2018 held at Kottayam, hinted at the possibility of the younger sons of Brahmin families joining Christianity due to the Brahminical practice of marriage limited to the elder son in the family (Ilaiah, Kerala Literature Festival 2018, 15.10)- a possibility. To assert Brahminic origin to show superiority over others is an unchristian practice contrary to the Bible. But when it comes to boasting of one’s high caste origin Christ is usually forgotten.

Christian converts in the initial period must have been an assortment of people from different groups mainly Dravidian groups settled in Kerala. Some authors deny completely the Brahminic origin. “Authors like Dalit Bandhu and Kadankavil, who refute the Brahminic conversion tradition, suggest that initial converts should have been of some other castes, in all likelihood lower. Bandhu asserts that the Christians were converts of the fisher folk as evidenced by the edicts Tarisppally, (848AD) Thazhakkattupally (mid 11th century) and Veeraraghava Pattayam (1225)” (Palackapilly 104). Claim of Brahminic origin of all the Syrian Christians in Kerala is a myth. How did then caste system creep into Syrian Christian fold which was a communion of several groups including migrants from foreign lands? Even today among the Syrian Christians there are internal gradations on the basis of family history, wealth, fairness etc. The Dalit Christian, with the burden of the history of suppression has no such claims among the Syrian Christians other than as slave caste, though in truth they have their own unsung heroic histories.

There is a much quoted statement among Christian historians that Syrian Christian groups were endogamous and they were not missionary in nature. This might have happened after the Nazranization of Syrian Christians at some point in the history fashioned after the Aryanization of Kerala. By this process the Syrian Christians became a caste. I call the process Nazranisation. It must be a gradual process and the enjoyment of social position along with all the evils of the system, gave the Syrian Christian community upper hand. How could one be a Christian and at the same time be a slave master and a task master; probably an aporia. They were approved as a high caste. Several factors might have contributed to it, namely, the presence of foreign migrants, the economic advancement and influence through trade, fairness in appearance, the wide acceptance of teachings of Jesus Christ etc... Initial converts to Christianity were an assortment of people from Dravidians, the inhabitants in Kerala, which included almost all the groups found in Kerala and also the possibility of some converts from Aryans cannot be ruled out. The church then was caste free and missionary in nature. The Nazrani after becoming a caste followed the ritual practice related to purification and imitated several Hindu practices, some of such practices are clearly mentioned in the Decrees of Synod of Diamper in 1599. We read, “The synod being informed that in some parts when anyone of the baser sort do but touch the cisterns of Christians, that Christians ... purify them, by performing certain ceremonies after the manner of heathens” (Zacharia 203).

Dalits among Syrian Christians

A decisive intervention was made in the form of a decree by the Diamper Synod against caste and purification practices and encouraged conversion of the lower castes and it was made obligatory for the Christians to convert their slaves or servants to Christianity. In places where they cannot be accommodated in the same Church due to the social condition, namely, loss of trade and commerce, the Synod asks to build separate Church. It also speaks, “If any poorer sort of the people shall desire to turn to Christians that they be received to and the prelate shall be advised thereof, that they may give order for the building of distinct churches for them and may appoint priests” (Zacharia 199). This initiative of the synod must have faced with stiff challenges from the Syrian Christians. This must have added fuel to the fire which resulted in Coonan Cross oath in 1653. How effective was the directive of Synod of Diamper is yet to be studied. Serious efforts we find only in the 19th century by people like Fr Joseph Palakunnel and St Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Even in the 19th century when converted Christians attended churches, Syrian Christians kept themselves away from the Church. “A Pioneer in work among dalit like Fr Palakunnel had to erect separate structure for the Dalit converts” (Palackapilly 107). Separate Churches, later, came to be known as *Pulayapalli*, a church attended only by the Dalits. It may shock everyone today but this was sanctioned to welcome the poor people to the Church fold and where it was not possible to accommodate them in the same churches along with the old Christians. Have such churches served any purpose? Sanal P Mohan observes, “Stuck in places where they lived, in most cases on the banks of rice fields or the borders of the landlord’s farms the immutability of the space was the experience of the slaves---the slave castes could not conceive of physical space of the interaction except agricultural land” (Mohan.43- 44). The church provided them a new space for interaction; sharing and community feeling arose among them gradually.

The initiative from the part of the synod was in fact a great turning point. Enlightened people could not ignore the directive of the Synod. The conversion of the lower castes and the churches separate for them was offering them a space to have reflection on their life. It was a new situation. The prayers, the Bible Reading, the sermons and church itself, and the catechism would definitely have made them reflect on their life. They could see themselves as children of God and earn some self respect amidst the ineffable suffering, slavery, and subjugation. The Church celebrations and gathering and the saints must have been new experiences, which were entirely different from their previous existences. For those who converted, the initial euphoria like, "If we join Margam (Christianity) the master and us will become one caste" (Thakazhi 48) vanished. The church life of the Dalit Christians as mentioned by Paul Chirakarode in *Pulayathara* becomes one of degradation and discrimination. The Dalit Christians sat on the floor and sang prayer hymns in their sweet voice and the old Christians sat on the benches. They were treated as second class citizens with no significant voice in church committees. The Church custodians ruled them like masters. But the community decides to stand together and demand their fair share towards the end of the novel. The realization of their positions in the church is reflected by a character named Paulose, "We can pray and sing and make speeches. All that is meaningless that is how I feel each time I go to Church---Listen, Pathrochaya, don't we sing a song in Church? (For all of us to sit together / Heaven is the same) That too is hollow, false" (Chirakarode 134).

Renewed Initiatives for the Dalit Christians

With the coming of Anglican Missionaries to Kerala, the then existed scenario of discriminatory caste practices undergoes a sea change who initially preferred to work among the Syrians but failed, then, they turned to the lower castes and they became highly successful. People got converted to Christianity to escape the caste oppression. Following the Anglican Missionaries and the direction of the Synod of Diamper there are renewed efforts in the Catholic Church for the conversion of Dalits to Syrian Christian fold. The Chronicles kept in Mannanam cites efforts by the Monastery to start "a catechuminate around that time and young boys from around used to come to monastery and would remain there till evening. In order to promote their study, provision for meals was also made through the collection of *pitiyari* (a handful of rice kept to feed the poor) is found in Mannanam Chronicles Volume 3 p 30" (Palackapilly109). The efforts of these kinds were faced with stiff opposition from Syrian Catholic community. But the efforts went on. There is a parish now at Mannanam exclusively for Dalit today established in 1846. We find a few Dalit families in every parish of Syrian Christian Communities. There is no open separation among the members of the parishes as described in the novel *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirakarode. There are several initiatives in the Church for the progress of the Dalit community including legal fights and protests for the inclusion of the Dalit Christians on the list of Scheduled Castes. Educational efforts by the Church, especially, the directive to start a school close to every Church have benefitted the Dalit. Many socially inclined priests and nuns have tirelessly worked among the Dalits for the upliftment of the community. Some of the Dalit Christians are teachers due to the church policy of reserving certain teaching positions for them in the aided schools. My own favourite teacher, the only teacher I remember from my upper primary school days, whom I hold in high esteem, with whom I had an opportunity to teach in a school was from the Dalit Christian Community. When I went to teach in an aided school as a guest teacher, I found a few of them working as teachers. But they were silent in the staff room and very submissive. I felt bad.

The Wretched of Kerala

Despite the efforts put in by the Church and the Dalit themselves the status of the Dalit Christians remain pathetic. As it is mentioned in the introductory paragraphs their case is more pitiable than any other community. They bear the stamp of low caste and yet is thrown out of the line of upward social mobility, namely, reservation. Their Hindu brethren have made significant advancement on the road to upward social mobility mainly due to reservation in job sector and education field. There is ample scope for the next generation of the Scheduled Castes to achieve great success in life reaping the benefit of reservation.

The Dalit Christians are outside the special loving embrace of the caring Mother, their motherland despite being the most deserving. They are backward socially bearing the stamp of out-caste or slave caste. Unfortunately, they are not included in the Scheduled Castes Category. This denies them the access to the path of upward social mobility. Kerala Government considering the backwardness of Dalit converts gives OEC status which is insufficient to make very drastic change in the life situations of the Dalit Christians. A case study conducted by Dr Tiji P V and Dr Abhilash Babu among the members of the Parish of Mannanam who belong to Dalit Christian community, brings to light very dismal figures about the life of the Dalit Christians on all fronts (Tiji & Babu 2023, P 865). They are backward educationally, socially and economically. Their study shows poor educational status, poor housing facility, deeply-mired-in-debt condition, under employment etc...of the Dalit Christians. It is harrowing to read that they suffer discrimination at the hands of mainstream Christian community. They are snubbed, ignored and forgotten. Despite the establishment of the parish even after one and a half century the subaltern Dalits remain as utterly wretched Dalits without any access to the lines of upward

social mobility, this despite Mannanam being a hub of higher education and church activities. The case study will be definitely replicated if studies are conducted in other parishes too.

The Church has to specially plan and actively involve in the upliftment of the Dalit Christians who are part of them, going beyond the first mile. Christ always concentrated on the poor, sick, the abandoned and the lost. They were his target group. Christ said, “those who are well, have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matthew 9.12). The Church has to think of the second mile very seriously. The subaltern lot among them are far behind others. Their fight for Reservation has not reached anywhere. When most of the members of the Church have decent and happy life situations, the Dalit Christians are still an unhappy lot. Their life is stagnant. Their silent suffering is like the loud cry of blood of Abel before God. God is unlikely to be happy with the mere Justice Sunday observance.

The Hindu Dalit Brethren should be more considerate towards their Christian Dalit brethren who too have undergone several ages of slavery and subjugation like them and should work in unison in their struggle for access to the lines of upward social mobility. Rhetoric that clamours against the fight of the Dalit Christians for reservation is denying them chances of social mobility. Members of the oppressed community then become part of oppressors of the other Dalits when they object to the benefits enjoyed by them, just because their brethren believed in another religion.

The most decisive step to move up socially from subjugation in the present situation has to come from the Dalit Christians themselves. This realization should come from the understanding of indifference to their cause taken by all groups related to them. Education is the most decisive step. There is no dearth of talents in them. They are highly talented in art and music, in farming and very noble group with noble ideals . These fine qualities must be pooled to educate themselves and prove their mettle. They should be motivated to aspire for higher positions and stop being drop outs in schools and colleges. Their noble nature of hard work, sincerity, and superior intelligence which were exploited by the oppressors should be used for their own good. They should organize as a group and speak for themselves and make others acknowledge their presence.

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