

# Social Exclusion of Dalit Christians in Kerala: A Study Based on the Socio-Economic Status of Dalit Christians in Mannanam Parish in Kottayam, Kerala

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the socio-economic impact of social exclusion on Dalit Christians in Kerala, South India. The study analysed that 'The socio-economic status of Dalit Christians is far behind compared to other mainstream communities. The study also argued that State and the Caste in Christianity are equally responsible for the marginality of Dalit Christians. Dalit Christians developed a dual identity with the sustenance of caste practices among the converts; they always carried a dual identity, such as Dalit first and a converted Dalit Christian later. Syrian Christians practised untouchability against the lower caste Christians in India, especially regarding marriage and their traditional practice. The state also practices an exclusion approach to Dalit Christians in Kerala.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Syrian, Christians, Exclusion, marginalisation

## 1. Introduction

Dalit Christians are those who have converted to Christianity and find that not only are the benefit of reservation not extended to them in the conversion of constitutional provisions, but even the church and the non-Dalit Christian community are actively against them. Dalits who converted to Christianity were called the Christians of Scheduled caste origin (CSCO). This name became common after first national convention of Christian Leaders on the plight of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin in 1978 (NBCLC 1978). Christian circles began to use the term Dalit for Scheduled castes at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s. The concept and category of Dalit Christian and the slogan Dalit is dignified were formulated by the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement in 1985. Catholic Christians were adopted a little later. The National Convention of the All Indian Catholic Union (AICU) in 1989 decided to refer to Scheduled Caste Christians as Dalit Christians (Staisalus 1999). The Dalit community, which had been enslaved for centuries, adopted Christianity because of the missionaries and tried to overcome the caste system that existed in the society. This led to many revolutionary changes in society. Through this kind of conversion of the slave castes, they tried to free themselves from the caste system. The sense that mass conversion of the slave castes would threaten the existence of the Hindu religion created fear in the rulers, and the religious consciousness overcame the caste consciousness and brought the ruling society to social changes such as temple entry, freedom of movement and access to educational institutions. By the Presidential Order of 1950, all caste-based privileges were denied to converted Dalit Christians on the grounds of religion. While denying benefits to Christian Dalits under the discriminatory concept of being a foreign religion, Dalits of Sikhism and Buddhism were allowed the benefits of Scheduled Tribes overtime on the pretext of indigenous religion. Even today, this presidential order stands as a prime example of how the Indian Constitution, which rests on the bedrock of secularism, is being misinterpreted.

## Fivefold Discrimination

Today Dalit Christian Suffer from fivefold discrimination a) by the state, b) by the Hindu Caste, c) by fellow Hindus, d) by the upper caste Christian community e) by the subgroup of the Dalit Christians themselves.

Syrian Christians, the dominant Christian community in Kerala, were not willing to accept the Dalit Christians as much as them. Syrian Christians refused to make any marital relations with Dalit Christians. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century also, Dalit Christians had to build separate worship days and times, even separate tombs. Alexander (1977) pointed out the different treatments given to lower caste Christians, including access to community resources, access to worship, along with caste activities in Kerala.

## State and Legal Discrimination against Dalit Christians

Before the Independence of India, as a response to the demand from the untouchable's minority communities, (The scheduled caste) order 1936 brought about a list of 'Scheduled Caste'. Here the term Scheduled Caste included a news specification that 'no Indian Christian shall be deemed to be a member of a scheduled caste'. The implication of using a religious criterion for defining scheduled Caste was not immediately understood by Indian Christians. In the Constitution of India, Article 341 (1) empower the president to give a list of the scheduled Caste. In the scheduled caste order of 1950, paragraph2 says that no person who professes a religion different from Hindu shall be deemed to be a member of a scheduled caste. At this time, Christian leaders and politicians were quick to notice the discrepancy between the secular nature of the Indian Constitution and the Hindu religious bias with regard to Scheduled Castes converts to Christianity. Thus, the discrimination against Dalit Christians begins in the Constitution itself (Michael, 2010), The little tradition of the Dalit Christian open system. The making of this Christian community is somewhat distant from ideal Christianity', which the church functionaries strove to establish. The 'open system' wherein converts continue to live Christianity in their former Hindu neighbourhoods create a milieu different from the mission compound System

where converts live Christianity in less-open neighbourhoods. The degree of control comes patronage cum preceptor relationship of mission functionaries, which the converts seem to have been less in the open system. The making of this Christian community and the construction of its identity is conditioned by the context.

## 2. Case Study

A case study was conducted in the place of Mannanam parish in Kottayam district, where Dalits converted to Catholicism in the middle of the 19th century. Since 1846, this region has had a community of faith and education under the leadership of Saint Chavarayachan. St. Chavara should be ready to work for the common good and upliftment of the society, and thus to cite the groups like Cheramar and Sambavar who lived in Mannanam and its surrounding areas, who were outcastes, depraved, and lived like slaves, and bring them to the light of the Christian faith, a parish was founded in 1846 to foster faith, education and culture. St. Chavara should be ready to work for the common good and upliftment of society. Hence this place has a great historically important area for Dalit Conversion.

### Mannanam Parish

The establishment of an indigenous monastic order centred on Mannanam was an important and decisive event in the Kerala Church in the last decades of the early nineteenth century. *Porukkara ThomaMalpan, Palakal ThomaMalpan* and *Saint ChavaraKuriakos* Elias were the founders of CMI *SanyasaSabha*. In 1831, *Mannanam* Ashram was inaugurated by the pious *PorukkaraThomaMalpan*, who laid the foundation stone and began operations. *Mannanam* parish spread over *Arpukara, Athirampuzha, Neendoor, and Kumaranallur* panchayats has 1881 believers in 400 families. Although the spiritual needs of the parish, which has a tradition of 175 years, are being taken care of by the *Mannanam* Ashram (Monastery), they haven't received much assistance from the government for their educational, economic, social and cultural upliftment. The below data was obtained from a survey of 100 families of Dalit Catholic Christians in the Mannanam parish in Kottayam district.

### 1. Socio-economic status of the Dalit Christian in Mannanam

Based on the Survey of Dalit Christians in Mannanam reveals the socio-economic conditions and social exclusion in this community.

#### Demographic features of the respondents

According to the Survey, there are 35% Dalit Christian families with 4 members each, 23% of families of Dalit Christian with 5 members each, 18% of families with 6 members each, 14% of families with 2 and 3 members each and 9% of families with 7 to 8 members each. Accordingly, the Survey estimates that there are 1856 members in 400 families in Mannanam Parish. The Survey indicates that the highest number of people (33.9%) fall in the age group of 26-56 years. 23.7% of people fall within the age range of 16-25 years, 20.2% of people fall within the age range of 0-15 years, 13.7% of people fall within the age range of 58-75 years, 2.9% of people fall within the age range of 76-89 years, and 0.6% are above 90 years of age. The above data shows that underem-

ployment is the main reason for social backwardness because most of the population comes under the age group of 26-56. Even in this productive age, poverty and economic backwardness increased due to the underemployment situation. If the underemployment is not solved, it will affect the socio-economic growth of this community.

### Educational status of the family

Based on the primary data, 34% of the Dalit Christian families in the parish come under no students category and 35% of families have school students, 18% of families have Plus Two students, 15% of families have nursing (GNM/BSc) students, 6% of families have undergraduate (BA/BSc) students, and 4% of families have postgraduate courses (MA/MSc). In this parish 4% of the children are studying in the paramedical course, 4% of children in the respondent family are studying B. Ed, 3% of children in the families studying in ITI/Polytechnic, 1% of the Dalit Christian families children are studying in M. Phil/PhD, and 1% of the families have a student studying in MBBS and engineering. There are no children studying in LLB/IAS/IPS such dignitary category. The above data show that the educational status of this community is very low compared to the mainstream community. One hundred seventy years of Christian tradition has not made any significant changes in their educational status; 57% of the school students were studying in aided Malayalam medium schools. 22% of children are in government Malayalam medium school, and 6% are studying govt. English medium schools. 15% of children are in private English medium schools. The majority of the children are dependent on the government school for their study and opted Malayalam medium. In this parish, no one comes from the field of LLB/ IAS/IPS Sector. So, the data shows the low educational status of the Dalit Christian community in this region. 82% of the school students are studying in the state syllabus. Only 4% and 6% study CBSC/ICSE syllabus, respectively. This shows the fact that high fees, lack of knowledge and financial capacity to educate children keep this community away from English medium schools and CBSC/ICSE syllabus. Only 1% of students are studying in the engineering sector. The Survey revealed that only ten percent children received any kind of educational scholarship.

### Educational status

Among the people surveyed, 38.1% have studied up to SSLC, 20.7% have studied up to Higher Secondary, 10.1% have studied up to Degree, 3.4% have studied Nursing, 3% have completed B. Ed qualification, 4.6% have studied Alternative Diploma, ITI etc., 2.6% have done PG, 0.02% have done MBBS/PhD. Qualified, 0.86% have an engineering degree. Most people have education up to SSLC. 16.6% people are illiterate or have only LP and UP qualification. NET/ JRF pass 0.43%, SET/KTET 1.2%, MD/LLB/IAS/IPS qualification none at all shows their poor condition in the higher education sector. The number of applicants to join this scheme is also very few. Only one child takes medical engineering exam practice.

### Employment Status

In this parish 72 % of the families are working in agriculture and the allied sector. So, they don't have any regular income; Government employees are only 3 %. No one is working as

a teaching faculty in aided colleges or universities. Only one person is working as an Assistant Professor in a self-financing college. 7% of the members are working as teaching faculty in aided schools, and 4% people are working as non-teaching staff in colleges and schools. The Survey found 8.4% of people did not get a job according to their educational qualifications. They are degree holders and work in the unskilled sector. Only 7% of people are working abroad, and a high underemployment situation is seen in this community.

#### Land and housing facilities

According to the Survey, inadequate infrastructure is a major problem for Dalit Christians families. 59% of households live in houses less than 600 square feet. Most of the families live in three-cent (16%), and five-cent (39%) plots. 23% of households in this category are homeless. 6% of people live in Dalit colonies. 15% of families live in unfinished houses, and 3% of families live in temporary housing. 87% of households do not own agricultural land.

#### Debt conditions

The Survey found that 84% of Dalit Christian families are indebted. 53% of households with liabilities up to 5 lakhs and 31% of households with liabilities between 5 lakhs and 15 lakhs. But the Survey found that only 7% of people have any kind of investment. 40% of families have taken loans for house construction, followed by education loans (26%), marriage loans (22%), self-employment loans (18%) and car loans (13%) and medical loans (13%). Savings nature is very less in this community due to underemployment and unemployment, and they have to take high-interest loans for infrastructure development and use most of the money earned through daily wage labour for repayment. 34% of households live in their own finished houses. 29% of respondents live in a house with an area of 300 to 600 square feet. 18% percent of the families live on only three cents of land with unfurnished houses, and 39% of families living on five cents of the land. While 6% of the families live in Dalit colonies, and 87% of the families do not have any agricultural land. The study revealed that 13% of households do not have functional toilets either inside or adjacent to the houses (source-primary data)

#### Marital status of the community

The Survey shows that 93 % of marriages are endogamous, only 7 percentage marriages are outside the community, and most of these exogamous marriages are love marriages. Based on the data shows that other communities, especially Syrian Christians, did not show any interest in getting a marriage relationship with Dalit Christians. This shows that caste discrimination existed in the Syrian Christian community, and it allowed a separate position for Dalits within Christianity. (source-primary data).

#### Social discrimination

The data from the Survey shows that 51% of the people said that they experienced caste-based discrimination within the Syrian Christian community and on the side of the government, 21% of respondents faced discrimination from the side of priests and nuns, 15% said that they experienced discrimination from the side of Hindus, 13% people are not responded to the questions. So the data shows that Dalit Chris-

tians are experiencing marginalisation in the mainstream community. (source-primary data).

#### Digital Divide

This Survey found that 64% of households belong to the Below poverty line category (BPL), 22% of families do not have any television facility to watch online classes, 90% of students in families do not have a computer system, the Survey shows that 86% of the children do not have a study room at home, 70% of the children do not have a study table, 82% of the students do not have internet connection for online learning, and 23% of the children do not have an Android phone facility. The above data shows that a digital divide existing in this community.

#### Representation of political parties

The data shows that only four people are in the leadership of political parties; one is at the district level, one at the panchayat level and two at the ward level. Apart from being elected to the panchayath, there are no elected representatives or office holders (chairperson/member) at the level of block panchayath, Municipal corporation, the State Legislative Assembly or in the Parliament. This shows that the community has a low political representation. It is another reason for the low socio-economic condition of this community

#### Participation in minority project

The Survey gives the fact that only two (0.2%) persons have participated in the competitive examination training scheme conducted under the Minority Welfare Department. The number of people applying to join this scheme is also very low (0.2%). Only 10 children from 10% of families have applied for or received the minority department scholarship. The community does not receive any financial assistance from the Minority Finance Corporation. In the Survey, 90% of the people said that they are not getting any special help from the panchayat or any special schemes of the government to solve their problems.

#### Entrepreneurship

Only two percent of the people are running small businesses, and 32% of despondence are showing interest in starting new businesses and other are not showing any interest in starting new business, It also revealed that lack of favourable socio-economic conditions, skills and necessary guidance becomes a barrier to the realisation of their dreams.

#### Poverty Status

This Survey found that 64% of households belong to the Below poverty line category (BPL). Yellow card households are 16%, pink card households are 48%, blue card households are 14% and white card households are 21%. One family did not have a ration card. 61% of the families are included in Kudumbashree, the Kerala government's poverty alleviation scheme. But the Survey indicates that 24% of the families are enrolled in the Employment Guarantee Scheme. In the Survey, 90 % of people said that they did not get any kind of special assistance from the panchayat or special schemes of the government to solve their various problems.

**Family income**

Base on the data 36% of families with monthly income up to five thousand rupees, 26% of families with monthly income above five thousand to ten thousand, 9% of families with a monthly income of ten thousand to fifteen thousand, 12% of families with income of fifteen thousand to twenty thousand, 8% of families with income of twenty thousand to thirty thousand, 4% families with income between 30 thousand to 40 thousand and 5% families with income above 40 thousand participated in the Survey. 26-56 age groups constitute one-third of the total members. Their unstable income serves as the financial source for all the needs of the family. The absence of other sources of income destabilises the financial security of families.

**Debt liability and investment**

There are 23% of households with debt up to Rs 1 lakh, 30% of households with debt between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 5 lakh, 11% of households with debt between Rs 5 lakh and 10 lakh and 20% of households with debt between Rs 10 lakh and 15 lakh. 16% of households have no debt at all. 40% of households took loans for the construction of houses, 26% for education purposes, 22% for marriage purposes, 18% for self-employment loans, 18% for vehicle loans, and 13% for medical purposes. Only 7% of the households disclosed that they have fixed deposits or deposits.

**Insurance Coverage**

In this parish 66% of households are not covered by any type of insurance. 12% of households have life insurance, 12% have health insurance, and 6% have accident insurance. The Survey points out that the Dalit Christian community lack of socio-economic security, and their family security remains a problem.

**Participation in political parties and governance**

The Survey shows that four people are in the leadership of political parties. One is at the district level, one is at the panchayat level, and two are at the ward level. But it is important to mention that there is no Dalit Christian representation in the policy-making platforms of political parties. At present, there are no members of the governing committee at the three-tier panchayat levels. There are no Dalit Christian representatives in the Panchayat Governing Council, Municipality Governing Council, Corporation Governing Council, in their chairpersons, in the Legislative Assembly or in the Parliament. It is one of the important problems of the backwardness and marginalisation of this community.

**Religious matters**

It shows that 87% of the families adhere to the Christian faith, regularly participate in church services and are interested in it. Despite claiming 175 years of tradition, it is disappointing that not a single priest has emerged from the parish, but the presence of a student priest can be considered auspicious. The absence of religious power also creates many problems for these communities, such as minority benefits from the religious institution and lack of employment opportunities, financial benefits etc., creating the Dalit Christians too far behind the Syrian Christian Communities.

**3. Findings and Recommendations**

- 1) The Survey indicates that the highest number of people (33.9%) fall in the age group of 26-56 years. 23.7% of people fall within the age range of 16-25. The working age group is more compared to other groups; underemployment is the main reason for the backwardness of this community.
- 2) Dalit Christians are educationally backward people due to various reasons. The majority (54.7%) of people have educational qualifications up to SSLC only. Very few people are able to get higher education. Therefore, most of them do not have a permanent job or other income. It is economically backward. The majority (64%) of the families belong to the BPL category. Most of the families have a monthly income of 0 to 5000 rupees, which is proof of their unemployment and economic backwardness.
- 3) 72 % of the families are working in agriculture and the allied sector. So, they don't have any regular income; Government employees are only 3 %. No one is working as a teaching faculty in aided colleges or universities. So it proves the employment condition of this community.
- 4) According to the Survey, inadequate infrastructure is a major problem for Dalit Christians families. 59% of households live in houses less than 600 square feet. Most of the families live in three-cent (16%), and five-cent (39%) plots. 23% of households in this category are homeless. 6% of people live in Dalit colonies. The majority of the households (66%) do not have any insurance coverage. So the data analysed showed that Dalit Christians socio-economic conditions are very low compared to the mainstream community.
- 5) The majority of the respondent says that they are facing social discrimination from the side of Syrian Christians and other mainstream communities.
- 6) The Survey found that 84% of Dalit Christian families are indebted. The Survey found that there are 53% of households with liabilities up to 5 lakhs, and 31% of households with liabilities between 5 lakhs and 15 lakhs. But the Survey found that only 7% of people have any kind of investment
- 7) There is no Dalit Christian representation in the political party and policy-making forums. Data reveals the lack of representation in the power structure of the government. It also creates social and economic backwardness in this community.
- 8) There are no Dalit Christian representatives in religious institutions, such as priests and bishops. It also reduces the employment opportunities of Dalit Christians in religious and other minority institutions. Lack of religious power is another problem of marginalisation of Dalits in Catholic Christianity.
- 9) This Survey found that 64% of households belong to the Below poverty line category (BPL). It represents the low economic status of Dalit Christians in this region.
- 10) Only a few entrepreneurs are seen in this community. Lack of resources and securities preventing bank loans to this community. It also led to the economic backwardness of this community.
- 11) Digital Divide:-90% of students in families do not have a computer system; the Survey shows that 86% of the

children do not have a study room at home, 70% of the children do not have a study table, 82% of the students do not have internet connection for online learning, and 23% of the children do not have an Android phone facility. 22% of the family have no T. V facilities.

#### 4. Recommendations

- 1) Allow reservation in employment and education to Dalit Christians in proportion to the population.
- 2) Acknowledging the marginal representation of Dalit Christians in the higher education sector, formulate plans to increase the chances of Dalit Christians in higher education.
- 3) Make the existing education reservation (1%) available only to Dalit Christians and separate the sections sharing the 1% reservation and give them special reservations (like for jobs).
- 4) All benefits available to the SC category should also be given to Dalit Christians.
- 5) Take immediate steps to eliminate all discrimination on the grounds of religion and Caste at the governmental and social levels.
- 6) Make special rules for appointments in all government-controlled boards and corporations and grant due reservation to Dalit Christians.
- 7) Set up a special commission to study the problems faced by Dalit Christians as outcasts within the minority, as they differ from the general problems of minorities.
- 8) This study shows that Dalit Christian participation in various schemes of the Minority Welfare Department is dry. Therefore, all the schemes implemented for the Christian minorities through the Minority Welfare Department reserve proportional representation for the Dalit Christians.
- 9) Dalit Christians are equally represented in aided school/college general (general) appointments and management/community (minority) appointments. Consideration based on sharing of resources, proportional population distribution and social justice is their right as outcasts within the minority; therefore, it is the responsibility of the church and the government to ensure Dalit Christian representation in this regard.
- 10) Due to the unaffordability of huge cost and lack of necessary knowledge, the number of students enrolled in entrance exam coaching for Medical, Engineering, Law, IIT, NIT, etc., is very less in this category. To address this shortage of Dalit Christians, the church and the government need to devise and implement plans.
- 11) Allow reservations for Dalit Christians in cooperative institutions.
- 12) Develop special training programs for Dalit Christians for skill development and entrepreneurship.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study tried to put forward the various problems faced by the Dalit Christian community, which are economically and socially backward in society. As outcasts within the minority of the Christian society, the Dalit group has been facing religious discrimination from the government and caste discrimination within the Christian Church for ages. The Christian community, under the influence of Hinduism,

adhered to the caste tradition and kept the Dalit Christians as a separate sect in the church. Endogamous marriage within the Catholic Christian Church has led to the maintenance of vertical inequality, and casteism and invisible reservations in religious institutions have led to the division of Christians themselves into forward and backwards. Only a few, like Saint Chavara, fought and won against casteism. It can be said that after him, there were no significant activities in the church or the society because even today, the socio-economic condition of Dalit Christians continues without any major changes as before.

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