Dalits, Christianity, and the Search for Social Mobility in India

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Abstract:

In order to promote social mobility, this sociological study looks at religious conversion to Christianity among Dalit groups in India. The study makes the case based on historical and contemporary analysis that conversion signified a break from caste hierarchy as well as a route to wealth accumulation through missionary education. However, the existence of caste in Christian institutions and larger Indian culture fundamentally limited this "ladder of mobility" revolutionary potential. A three-tiered theoretical framework is used in the analysis: 1) faith as an ideological weapon. 2) education as capital conversion and 3) limitations as structural reproduction. This study uses historical archives, ethnographic research, and current survey data to show how the Dalit Christian experience is dialectical, experiencing both ongoing marginalization and partial emancipation at the same time. The study advances notions about social mobility, religious conversion, and the extraordinary tenacity of caste as a social system.

Keywords: education, caste, religious conversion, social mobility, Dalit Christians.

- **Introduction: The Christian Pathway's Paradox**

One of the most important yet sociologically contradictory movements of social change in South Asia is the widespread conversion of Dalits to Christianity under colonial India. Millions of Dalits (previously known as "untouchables") converted to Christianity starting in earnest in the 19th century and continuing through the 20th because they saw its theological universalism as a way out of the dehumanizing caste system. This essay makes the case that missionary education was the main means of capital accumulation in this conversion movement, which may be viewed as a group tactic for social mobility and a "ladder" out of caste oppression. However, as this study shows, this ladder proved to be fundamentally flawed, allowing for individual development but failing to eliminate the caste system as a whole.

This paradox is addressed by the main research question: How did conversion to Christianity provide both a means of Dalit social mobility and an excuse for the perpetuation of caste hierarchy? The study examines basic sociological concerns regarding structure vs agency, religion's capacity for transformation, and the adaptability of traditional hierarchies in changing communities.

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This paper develops a dialectical analysis of what I refer to as "the flawed ladder" a mobility pathway that elevated individuals while leaving intact, and sometimes even reinforcing, the structural barriers it purported to overcome based on historical records, missionary archives, modern ethnographies, and survey data. Three significant contributions are made by this analysis: It first creates a cohesive theoretical framework by synthesizing several Dalit conversion literatures. Secondly, it offers fresh perspectives on the continued existence of caste in contemporary India. Third, it provides a complex case study for international debates on social development, inequality, and religion.

- **Theoretical Framework**:

Using an integrated theoretical framework, this research conceptualizes the Dalit Christian experience as essentially dialectical, moving from the micro-level of individual action to the macro-level of structural limitation.

Faith as Ideological Weapon: Subaltern Agency and Resistance

According to James C. Scott's (1985) notion of "weapons of the weak" and "hidden transcripts," the first theoretical phase examines conversion as an ideological resistance tactic. Embracing Christianity was seen by Dalits as a public statement of their secret transcript, a rejection of caste thinking and an assertion of personhood that the Hindu social order denied them. In line with Viswanath (2014), who rethinks conversion as a calculated political endeavor intended to gain state protection and renegotiate civic position, this paradigm goes beyond previous missionary-centered narratives (Forrester, 1980) to focus Dalit agency. The hierarchical particularism of caste was effectively countered by the religious concept of universal brotherhood (Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"). This was a lot more than spiritual belief; according to Sathianathan Clarke (1998), it served as the basis for a new "subaltern religion" that facilitated group mobilization and identity rebuilding.

Education as Capital Conversion – A Bourdieusian Analysis of Missionary Schools as Mobility Factories

The second layer examines missionary education's function as the institutional mechanism of movement using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion. Mission schools served as factories that produced concrete social benefits from religious affiliation:

Cultural Capital: Western manners, formal education, and English-language instruction offered institutionalized cultural capital that might rival Brahminical Sanskritic capital (Mallampalli, 2004).

Social Capital: As an alternative to caste-based jati networks, schools established horizontal ties with other Dalit Christians and vertical networks with missionary benefactors.

Economic capital is the conversion of educational qualifications into jobs in the railroad, healthcare, school, and colonial administration sectors (Webster, 1992).

This procedure is an example of what John W. Meyer (1977) refers to as "institutional isomorphism" , the adoption of universally accepted contemporary scripts that gave Dalit Christians a "first-mover" advantage in the emerging contemporary economy.

According to Bourdieu's paradigm, many interconvertible types of capital economic, cultural, social, and symbolic are used to amass and preserve societal advantage. Conversion to Christianity offered Dalits, who were ensnared in a caste system that denied them access to traditional forms of capital (like land ownership, ritual knowledge, or clean lineage), a potential new currency: religious affiliation within an institutionally robust, globally connected network. But because there was no way to transform this theological capital into real, practical benefits, it remained mostly symbolic. This fundamental mechanism of systematic "factories" for converting the raw potential of conversion into spendable social currency was exactly what mission schools served as. Through a standardized curriculum and social environment, they established a conversion pipeline that converted the intangible capital of a new Christian identity into the embodied, institutionalized, and objectified forms of cultural capital necessary for progressing within colonial and modernizing Indian society. Recoding Dalit habitus their deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs away from the stigmatized identity of the "polluted" worker and toward that of the "respectable," literate, contemporary subject was a purposeful, if occasionally unsuccessful, attempt.

Structural Limitations: The Reproduction of Caste

The third phase analyzes the structural barriers to change using David Mosse's (2012) historical anthropology and critical race theory, particularly Derrick Bell's notion of "interest convergence". The limitations of missionary assistance when Dalit development challenged developing Christian upper-caste supremacy can be explained by Bell's observation that dominant groups only support minority advancement when it aligns with their interests. The basis for comprehending how caste divisions were replicated inside Christian societies is provided by Mosse's idea of "encastement"—the assimilation of Christianity into regional caste logics.

Additionally, this tier uses intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to examine the special situation of Dalit Christians who experience discrimination from both the Hindu majority (based on both caste and religion) and upper-caste Christians (based on caste).

- **Historical Context: Mass Movements and Missionary Enterprise**

Archival and historical evidence strongly suggests that the mass conversion campaigns among Dalits in the 19th and early 20th centuries were collective acts based on a pragmatic strategic calculation rather than an all-encompassing spiritual breakthrough. Conversion to Christianity seemed as a realistic, if dangerous, sociological strategy, a determined attempt to change the basic conditions of their existence for societies crushed under the combined weight of ceremonial dehumanization and economic exploitation.

The Strategic Calculus of Conversion – A Pragmatic Reckoning with Caste Oppression

Conversion, particularly to Protestant denominations like the Presbyterians, was closely associated with escaping the difficult cycle of debt bondage to landlords (zamindars) and

gaining access to mission schools, which were seen as literal gateways to a different future for their children, for the Chuhra community in Punjab (traditionally associated with sanitation work) (Webster, 1992). The mission compound provided a possible haven, a place of social and physical separation from the oppressive hold of the ruling agricultural hierarchy, in addition to a new faith. In a similar vein, conversion was seen by Tamil Nadu's Paraiyar (farm laborers and drummers) as a direct challenge to the philosophy that supported their enslavement. The idea of ritual pollution (theendal), which labeled them as "untouchable" and eternally enslaved, was publicly and collectively rejected when they converted to Christianity. According to Viswanath (2014), it was an attempt to let go of their "pariah" character and rebuild themselves as subjects with rights who might demand protection and civic engagement from the colonial state. Therefore, the choice to convert was more motivated by what anthropologist Nathaniel Roberts (2016) describes as a fundamental searching for "moral community and care" in his ethnography of a Chennai slum than by a profound theological revelation. What Roberts refers to as "the right to care" the fundamental human expectation of reciprocal concern and moral worth was systematically denied to Dalits inside the Hindu caste system. According to missionaries and Dalits, Christianity offered a profound sort of social and psychological relief that was just as precious as any cash gain. It also promised participation in a society connected by a theology of global brotherhood and divine love.

The complicated intentions of the missionaries themselves were constantly in conflict with the strategic, community-centric pragmatism of Dalit converts, a conflict that is well chronicled in missionary letters. The missionaries were troubled by skepticism and concern at the same time as their evangelical optimism prompted them to acknowledge growing baptismal numbers as evidence of divine favor and effective proselytization. The phrase "rice Christian" emerged as a recurring motif in their correspondence and reports, conveying a profound concern that converts were driven more by the tangible "rice" of missionary safety, education, generosity, and medical assistance than by true spiritual conviction (Forrester, 1980). However, this division between "material" and "spiritual" motivations reveals a basic misunderstanding of the Dalit lifeworld by missionaries. The spiritual and the material were intricately linked for Dalits, whose bodies and labor were cruelly commodified within the caste system. The mission's "care" was the concrete, living manifestation of Christian love and moral community, whether it took the shape of food during famine, support against harsh landlords, or education for their children. In their experience, seeking this care meant embracing the most genuine promise of the religion.

The internal dynamics of the Christian groups that emerged were significantly and permanently impacted by this fundamental conflict between missionary idealism (seeking pure souls for salvation) and Dalit pragmatism (seeking comprehensive freedom from a degrading society). First-generation converts, particularly those from the most marginalized backgrounds, might be viewed with lingering skepticism by both clergy and upper-caste converts due to the implied hierarchy of validity it generated inside the church. Because missionaries and subsequently indigenous church leaders could present themselves as providers of temporal and spiritual gifts to a flock that was always "needy," it created paternalistic patterns of leadership. In the end, this dynamic set the stage for the structural constraints that would eventually materialize as a "glass ceiling," since the same pragmatism that prompted conversion was later used to subtly

cast doubt on the leadership abilities or spiritual profundity of Dalit Christians, thereby rationalizing their exclusion from full authority and representation within ecclesiastical structures. Thus, strangely, some of the seeds for the partial emancipation that would define the Dalit Christian experience were sown by the strategic calculus of conversion, which sprang from a frantic need for mobility and dignity.

- **Education as the Engine of Mobility – The Empirical Foundation of Institutional Expansion**

Robust research illustrating the scope and targeted reach of this institutional growth supports the theory that missionary education was the main driver of Dalit social mobility. Christian missionaries carried out what might be described as one of the biggest private educational projects in colonial history between 1850 and Indian independence in 1947, building a vast and purposefully dispersed infrastructure throughout the subcontinent. According to Mallampalli (2004), the extent of this endeavor was such that by 1931, around 20% of all educational facilities in India were Christian establishments, ranging from prominent colleges to country elementary schools. The dispersion of these institutions, which were purposefully and frequently controversially focused on servicing communities routinely excluded from indigenous educational networks, deepens the sociological importance of this statistic, which is astounding in and of itself. They created a parallel educational world that openly challenged the caste-based monopoly on knowledge and cultural capital by disproportionately serving Dalit and lower-caste groups. This rapid expansion and its direct relationship to Dalit access are eloquently demonstrated by a detailed case study of the Madras Presidency. By 1900, the network had grown from a small foundation of 87 mission schools in 1857 to over 2,000 schools. This growth was driven by evangelical enthusiasm, colonial policies that occasionally provided grants and land, and an increasing demand from neglected people. Crucially, a qualitative change in enrollment demographics corresponded with this quantitative growth. Dalit enrollment rose in tandem with the expansion of the facilities, going from token numbers to a sizable student presence. This was a fundamental, frequently controversial, mission strategy rather than an unintentional result. As a direct route out of agricultural slavery, schools were built in Dalit neighborhoods (cheris or wadas), fees were reduced or eliminated, and education in vernacular languages (and subsequently, English) was provided.The theoretical model of capital conversion has a tangible, historical foundation thanks to this empirical record of institutional growth and targeted access. The schools were more than just structures; they were the operational factories where the strategic choice to convert could be processed into the concrete, transformative assets of literacy, certification, and social network formation, turning the abstract "ladder of mobility" into a reality that could be climbed, although imperfectly.

Occupational Mobility – The Tangible Yield of Educational Capital

The concrete vocational shift that the "ladder of mobility" permitted was the final measure of its effectiveness. Rerouting whole populations from the dead end of agricultural slavery into the burgeoning channels of the modern colonial and, subsequently, national economy was made possible by the surprisingly predictable and systematic patterns of the conversion of newly acquired educational capital into professional development. With courses carefully crafted to generate graduates with the particular abilities required by a growing bureaucratic

state, mission schools functioned as clear passageways. Instead of preparing Dalit Christians for traditional artisan jobs or farm labor, they prepared them for jobs in the secular, credential-based institutions of power, such as accountants and clerks in the colonial bureaucracy, stationmasters and ticket collectors on the extensive railway network, postal workers in the communication system, and most importantly teachers in the very government and mission school systems. This last occupation was especially potent because it created a self-replicating cycle in which the educated Dalits of the first generation taught the next. A great microcosm of this transforming arc may be seen in Kooiman's (1989) detailed study of South Travancore.He describes how the Shanar (later known as Nadar) group, which was historically connected to toddy-tapping (extracting palm wine), a job stigmatized as lowly and polluting, used mission education to carry out a spectacular social ascension in just one generation. Their collective social identity and economic foundation were drastically changed when they transitioned from climbing trees to managing stores, overseeing classrooms, and working at government desks.

Current observations and biographical facts powerfully enliven this macro-pattern. In his analytical works, even Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leading Dalit leader who eventually converted to Buddhism, acknowledged the relative socioeconomic development of Dalit Christians in comparison to their Hindu counterparts, noting their educational advantage as a critical element. A new social stratum is defined by a tapestry of individual paths found in missionary records. The rise of the first-generation Dalit Christian professional is documented in these archives through letters of recommendation, graduation records, and personal testimonies: the village boy who became a certified teacher in a district school; the young woman who trained as a nurse in a mission hospital, gaining both respected employment and a degree of social autonomy unimaginable for her mother; the hardworking student who landed a coveted clerical post ("chaprasi" or clerk) in a government office, using his fluency in English and neat handwriting as his passport out of the fields.

The Rise of a New Dalit Christian Middle Class

A distinct Dalit Christian middle class had emerged by the mid-1900s as a result of the combined influence of education and conversion, particularly in expanding cities and towns. This was more than simply a bunch with a little extra cash. They stood for an entirely new lifestyle based on a certain set of accomplishments. First, they were emancipated from the unpredictability of agricultural labor or traditional caste-based crafts by having paid jobs—steady income as teachers, nurses, clerks, or government employees. Second, proficiency in the English language was essential to their achievement (Mallampalli, 2004). In the colonial and post-colonial systems, knowing English was like possessing a master key that opened doors to higher education, government posts, and respect. Thirdly, their lifestyles appeared to be different. They embraced Westernized lives, living in various types of residences, dressing differently, and according to new trends in their spending and purchasing patterns. Lastly, they were engaged citizens who learned how to lead and advocate inside formal institutions by taking part in social groups, teachers' unions, and church committees.As a living example, this new class became crucial. These educated, employed, English-speaking Dalit Christians became what renowned sociologist M.N. Srinivas referred to as a "reference group" a real-life

model demonstrating that a new future was possible for other Dalit groups still ensnared in repressive rural institutions. They served as tangible, effective evidence that the Christian road might function as a ladder of mobility, encouraging both imitation and hope.

- **The Sociology of Limitations: When the Ladder Breaks**

Caste divisions have proven extremely resistant throughout Indian Christian communities, despite the fundamental theological universalism espoused by Christianity, which expressly condemns birth-based authority. This enduring "glass ceiling" functions as a structural impediment, preventing Dalit Christians from fully engaging in and taking on leadership roles within the very organizations that were supposed to bring about their freedom. Caste was not eliminated but rather "encased" absorbed and replicated inside Christian practice according to historical and anthropological data, such as David Mosse's (2012) groundbreaking study in Tamil Nadu. Mosse describes how upper-caste converts maintained social and religious distance from their Dalit co-religionists, and how rituals, festival roles, marriage relationships, and even the physical seating arrangements in churches sometimes quietly reinforced old caste barriers.This de facto segregation pattern is a current reality rather than just a remnant of the past. This systemic exclusion is starkly demonstrated by quantitative sociological research. Dalits are severely underrepresented in positions of ecclesiastical power, according to research by Walter Fernandes (2007) and groups like the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) in Ahmedabad that have carefully examined church leadership demographics. For example, a 2016 CSJ analysis of major Christian denominations revealed that, although making up between 65 and 70 percent of India's Christian population, Dalits held fewer than 5 percent of bishopric or comparable high posts. According to the All India Catholic University Federation's 2014 report on inclusion, this discrepancy is reflected in the staffing of esteemed theological institutions, where Dalit teachers continue to be a minority. Additionally, anthropologist Rowena Robinson's (2003) research in Goa and Maharashtra demonstrates how caste endogamy marriage within one's caste remains common among Christians, protecting social and economic capital among upper-caste Christian lineages. The church serves as both a conduit for mobility and a location for the perpetuation of the very inequality it ideologically denounces, thereby erecting a glass ceiling over the spiritual and administrative leadership of its largest demographic. This internal replication of caste hierarchy creates a profound contradiction.

Social Discrimination: The Persistence of Stigma

Caste-based discrimination is a strong social structure that endures regardless of religious affiliation, according to empirical research, which restricts the liberating potential of conversion. Untouchability in Rural India, a seminal national research by Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, and Baviskar (2006), offered methodical, quantifiable evidence that stigmatization of Dalits transcends religious lines. According to their research, 25–30% of rural Dalit Christians said they had experienced conventional untouchability practices, including as social boycotts for violating caste standards, segregation in burial sites, restriction of access to shared water sources, and segregated seating in public places like schools. Further study confirms and expands on this evidence. In her ethnographic research in Andhra Pradesh, anthropologist Clara Nunez (2014) documented how residential segregation (Dalitwada) persists despite shared Christian worship and how Dalit Christians are frequently denied equal

participation in village festival committees that are dominated by upper-caste Christians. In his work "Nation-state" and Minority Rights in India, legal scholar Tanweer Fazal (2013) points out that social boycotts and violent incidents against Dalit Christians for trying to marry outside of their caste or access communal resources are often underreported, indicating that the survey data may only reflect a portion of reality. Additionally, in a study of Tamil Nadu, sociologist S. Selvaraj (2018) draws attention to the phenomenon of "ritual subcontracting," where Dalits are still expected to perform filthy tasks like handling corpses or leatherwork even in Christian villages, demonstrating the persistence of the caste-based labor division. The theoretical position put forth by academics such as Dipankar Gupta (2005) in his essay "Caste and Politics: Identity Over System," which holds that caste functions not only as a religious ideology but also as a deep social structure a framework of power, exclusion, and economic division that can adapt to new religious contexts is strongly supported by this body of evidence. In Republic of Caste, philosopher Anand Teltumbde (2018) contends that while conversion modifies the symbolic story of identity, it does not inevitably alter the material and social relations of power in rural India. The continuation of this stigma shows that although the "ladder" of religious conversion offers vital resources for personal mobility, it does not lift converts out of the deeply ingrained social hierarchy itself, leaving them to negotiate a world where their caste-marked bodies are still interpreted using the antiquated grammar of pollution and exclusion.

- **Political Mobilization and Legal Struggles**

Since the 1980s, Dalit Christians have engaged in a persistent, systematic fight against the legal and political obstacle of being denied Scheduled Caste (SC) status, turning their social grievance into a powerful movement of "contentious politics." Sociologists Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly first used this word to describe the episodic, public, communal engagement between claimants (the marginalized) and authority that involves innovative claims and new combinations of action. This is seen by the comprehensive strategy of the Dalit Christian movement. Using symbolic actions like marches to Parliament and public fasts, the National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) Office for Dalit/Indigenous Peoples have regularly brought the issue to the attention of the country through public protests and marches. At the same time, a key component of their approach has been legal battles. Although the Supreme Court has consistently deferred to Parliament on this "policy matter" and rejected landmark petitions like the case filed by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL) in the 1990s and subsequent appeals, this litigation has been essential in framing the exclusion as a violation of constitutional rights to equality and freedom of religion (Articles 14 and 25). This legal activism uses contemporary human rights frameworks and draws inspiration from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's own use of constitutionalism to question caste supremacy, echoing older traditions of anti-caste mobilization.

Strategic pushing of national and international organizations has also been a part of the mobilization. They have consistently presented empirical facts on their socioeconomic backwardness to every major government body in the country, including the National body for Minorities, the Ranganath Misra Commission (2007), and the Mandal Commission (1980). Human rights scholar Phillipose V. Mathai (2015) documented the way communities like the

Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) utilized UN human rights forums, like the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), to exert pressure on the Indian government. Building strategic alliances with Dalit Muslims, who experience the same legal discrimination, has been a crucial development in this battle. Formalized through coalitions such as the All India Dalit Christian-Muslim Rights Forum, this solidarity acknowledges their common experience of what sociologist Anand Teltumbde (2018) refers to as "post-conversion stigma" and stands as a practical, intersectional front against a common enemy. Compared to previous, more community-specific mobilizations, this pan-Dalit solidarity across religions represents a considerable advancement. This movement, according to modern scholars like Surinder S. Jodhka (2020), is a new kind of Dalit assertion that is media-aware, legally astute, and functions within a global discourse of rights. However, it still faces the obstinate opposition of a majoritarian political order that, as political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot (2021) points out, sees SC status as a compensatory mechanism unique to Hindus. Therefore, this decades-long campaign involves a fundamental struggle over the state's concept of caste, citizenship, and historical justice rather than just a battle for a legal document.

- **Suggestions**:

Regarding Legal and Policy Frameworks:

Extend SC Status to Dalit Christians: In order to eliminate the religious barrier in the Scheduled Caste (SC) Order of 1950, the government should implement the recommendations of several committees and judicial opinions. Granting SC status to Dalit Christians will acknowledge the reality of caste-based discrimination persisting after conversion and grant critical access to affirmative action measures in education and employment.

Implement the Sachar Committee Recommendations for Christians: To produce accurate statistics on deprivation, conduct a thorough, extensive socioeconomic and educational census of Christian communities in India, broken down by caste. Targeted welfare and development programs should be informed by this data.

Strengthen Anti-Discrimination rules: Make sure that rules prohibiting discrimination based on caste are enforced and expanded to include and be applied sensitively in residential associations, educational campuses, and places of worship.

Regarding Christian Leadership and Religious Institutions: Confront Caste Within the Church: Start a methodical, open, and long-term process of institutional transformation and repentance. This needs to consist of Representation ensuring proportional representation of Dalit Christians in clergy, bishoprics, seminary faculties, and church administrative organizations. Liturgical reform is the process of challenging religious hegemony by incorporating Dalit theology, stories, and cultural manifestations into worship and ritual.

Property and Resources: Auditing and assuring fair access to and control over church-owned educational institutions, hospitals, land, and financial resources. Promote Dalit Christian Leadership, Establish specialized scholarships, leadership training programs, and mentorship efforts to develop and strengthen Dalit Christian theologians, intellectuals, and community organizers.

- **Conclusion:**

A significant sociological paradox—a story of both freedom and entrapment—is presented by the Dalits' migration to Christianity in pursuit of social mobility. This study has shown that conversion acted as a collective, strategic "weapon of the weak," allowing Dalits to openly reject caste belief and get access to missionary education, which was an essential catalyst for capital conversion. Dalits escaped agricultural slavery and entered the contemporary clerical, educational, and bureaucratic sectors by gaining the cultural, social, and economic capital required to create a new Dalit Christian middle class through mission schools. This route formed an actual, albeit incomplete, "ladder of mobility."

But the ladder turned out to be defective. The enduring logic of caste, which replicated itself within the very organizations intended to overcome it, methodically undercut the revolutionary promise of Christian universalism. The remarkable persistence of caste as a social structure is demonstrated by the paradoxical experience of Dalit Christians, who are both exalted and restrained at the same time. The "glass ceiling" of encastatement inside Christian institutions, persistent discrimination from the Hindu majority, and the structural constraints of a society where caste interests constantly converged to preserve hierarchy eventually limited their mobility. Therefore, conversion did not lead to the collective emancipation of Dalits from the caste system, but it did allow individual growth and the formation of a new class fraction.

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