

Still untouchable: The politics of religious conversion

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In their long struggle for equality, India's dalits, or "untouchables," have often exchanged their Hinduism for Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism, believing that they will better their lives by doing so. They have been persuaded that Hinduism, with its *varna ashramas* (caste distinctions), has been solely responsible for all their ills. But when they switch to other religious faiths and experience the same distinctions—albeit in different forms—they realize that such a change neither improves their social status nor remedies their economic problems of unemployment and poverty—the real source of their social discrimination.

A letter written by M. Mary John, president of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, to Pope John Paul II during his 1999 visit to India speaks volumes about the treatment meted out to dalit Christians within the churches of India. The dalits are oppressed and persecuted by "the hierarchy, the congregation, the authorities and the institutions of the Catholic Church." Despite the condemnation of such practices by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, casteism still persists among Christian communities. A state commission on dalits has pointed out that they are "twice discriminated against"—in society and within the church. At the time of conversion, they are assured that they are being inducted into a religious fold that is egalitarian and free from the twin curses of caste and untouchability. But the reality is altogether different.

Sikh places of worship have separate quarters for dalit Sikhs. High-caste Muslims do not marry dalit Muslims. Dalit Christians can hardly hope to reach any high position within the church. (They are not even allowed to occupy the pews meant for higher-caste Christians.) And Buddhist monasteries have not been able to prevent their converts from continuing their earlier casteist practices.

At the same time, in breaking away from Hinduism, dalits lose out on the basic safeguards provided to them in the Indian Constitution. In 1981, thousands of dalits in southern India converted to Islam to escape social victimization—only to find that they had forfeited whatever state privileges they enjoyed earlier as Scheduled Caste Hindus. Converted dalits are now fighting for these privileges, having perceived the

age-old caste system still dogging their footsteps. The very fact that they still have to label themselves as “dalits” even after conversion in order to seek special privileges exposes the futility of that exercise. Today, India’s dalits are 82 per cent Hindu, 12 per cent Muslims and less than 3 per cent Christian.

A mass conversions of dalits to Buddhism in recent months in India poses the question once again whether religious conversion alone can improve the social and economic status of people who have been marginalized for centuries. Some 50,000 dalits assembled in New Delhi in November to embrace Buddhism. In January another 25,000 followed suit in the southern state of Kerala. Such conversions expose the hypocrisy of the religious and political leaders who exploit the socially and economically backward groups for their own ends.

In the November mass conversion, participants from both northern and southern states converged on India’s capital city. They were led by Ram Raj, an official working for the Indian Revenue Service, who also heads the All India Confederation of Scheduled Caste/Schedule Tribes Organizations. Giving himself a new name and identity after his own conversion, he used the occasion to lash out at the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Government at the Center, claiming that it had denied opportunities to the dalits.

Subsequently, the converts recited the 22 vows taken by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, founder of the dalit movement in India, who in a similar exercise in 1956 had embraced Buddhism, along with half a million other dalits, “to escape the tyrannies” of Hindu society. Senior monk Buddha Priya initiated the new converts into the Buddhist fold. Surprisingly, well-known Christian activists also participated in the conversion ceremony to provide “moral support” to the dalit movement. Although no Christian literature was circulated, a Syrian Christian bishop who had traveled all the way to New Delhi sat through the ceremony, offering to convert to Christianity anyone who desired it.

Dalits seem to prefer Buddhism to other religions unless they are enticed with gifts or other allurements. The reason is that Ambedkar, who was also one of the main architects of the Indian Constitution, stated that of all religions only Buddhism advocates equality of all human beings as a fundamental principle. Declaring that Lord Buddha alone raised his voice against separatism, and that the religion he taught is the only one which does not recognize caste, the dalit leader exhorted his followers to convert to Buddhism—“which is a religion of this country”—rather than

Christianity, which enticed the poor and the oppressed “by giving them porridge free of cost.”

It has also been argued that Buddhists are accepted more easily in Indian society than other minority groups. Since Buddhism, like Jainism or Sikhism, is an Indic religion, it is not considered alien. Christianity and Islam are both perceived by Hindus even today as the religions of the conquerors and invaders.

“Dalit” literally means depressed. Mahatma Gandhi named these hapless citizens Harijans, meaning “the children of God.” In the ancient and much abused system called *varna ashrama*, citizens were originally divided into castes based upon the professions they followed. Even during the days of British rule, manual workers in India’s villages were placed in the lowest hierarchy of the caste system. It was only after independence in 1947 that the government instituted a policy of affirmative action, through its Constitution, to reduce these inequalities.

By reserving 23 percent of all central and state government jobs for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, with comparable reservations for school and university admissions across the country, India paved the way for improving dalits’ professional and educational opportunities. They also have seats in legislatures, state assemblies and Parliament so as to allow them greater participation in the country’s governance. Conversion, unfortunately, only deprives the dalits of these special privileges, which are intended only for Hindu Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

The answer, then, is not in religious conversion so much as in streamlining the system of reservations itself. While this system has gone a long way to better the economic status of India’s 82 million Scheduled Castes and Tribes, it has lost its direction because it is not envisioned as a time-bound program. The earlier beneficiaries and their progeny continue to enjoy its privileges even after half a century. These privileges are now passed on to the second and sometimes to the third generation. Families who have reaped the full benefits of the Indian government’s reservation policies have already advanced in both social and economic terms. And they continue to corner desirable jobs and university or school admissions through the reserved quotas.

Result: the poorest sections of the same reserved categories are denied their due. It is not uncommon, especially in rural India, to find poor and illiterate Scheduled Caste workers serving as the bonded laborers of their rich and influential kinsmen. An

insidious caste system has thus crept into dalit circles as well. Privileged members of the community do not marry those doing menial jobs, since they consider them inferior. A few years ago, the Indian government reduced the opportunities of dalits further by extending reservations to other backward castes. And lately the government in New Delhi has extended reservations in promotions to those who have already benefited by its policies. Consequently, almost every caste is seeking the “backward” tag to claim a piece of the pie.

No wonder this poorest and most backward segment of India’s population is constantly exploited: by politicians for their votes; by religious leaders for their numbers; by their self-styled advocates for power. Despite much touted policies of compulsory primary education, there are no proper school facilities for dalit children. Family planning and other health-care programs rarely reach dalit women. Illiterate, impoverished and vulnerable, the Scheduled Castes cannot even reach the jobs that are earmarked for them because they are not qualified.

These crucial issues are completely ignored by their champions, who prefer to harp on caste discrimination and religious conversion rather than take the real measures that might improve dalits’ lives.