

Caste and Christianity

David Mosse*

The theme of caste and Christianity raises the broader issue of the relationship between caste and religion, each in itself a difficult term. But perhaps we can start with a sociological observation that has been rather obscured by various theoretical and ideological elaborations of caste. The observation is that a person's caste is determined by lineage, to a lesser degree by occupation, perhaps by residence, but it is usually unthinkable that which god or gods a person worships or believes in, the faith that they have, is determinant of caste identity.¹

Nonetheless, the idea that caste is a matter of religion, that it is a Hindu institution if not actually part of Hinduism, has had extraordinary influence. This idea which may have its roots in the exigencies of 19th century Protestant missionaries² was, during the 20th century, solidified into administration and social theory as a dominant view. It was held in contrasting variants by Mohandas K. Gandhi and his political opponent, Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. Despite the unequivocal findings of Justice Ranganath Misra's Commission on the subject, which concluded that 'the caste system should be recognized as a general social characteristic of the Indian society as a whole, without questioning whether the philosophy and teachings of any particular religion recognize it or not,'³ the idea of caste as Hindu underlies the continued and wholly unjustified exclusion of Christian and Muslim converts from the Indian state's statutory concessions and protections as 'Scheduled Castes'. Add to this the fact that in several parts of India Christians are so predominantly Dalit that the segregation of and discrimination against Christians and Dalits is one and the same.

Little remains standing today of Louis Dumont's once-pivotal theoretical edifice that founded caste on religious ideas of purity and impurity, while treating caste practices among non-Hindu groups as merely residual 'hangovers'.⁴ His ontological separation of the religious from the political was an impediment to grasping changing forms of caste. We also now know that caste evades both structural definition as system and revisionist characterization as 'colonial invention', that it is widely variable in form, reappears in modern institutions (even within the Christian priesthood) in the absence of any of its putative ideological underpinnings, and even where explicitly denied.

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¹ Rajan Krishnan, 'Caste and Religion in the Age of the Nation-State: Certain Polemical Blinders and Dalit Situations.' Paper presented at the Caste Out of Development conference, Chennai, December 2011.

² Rupa Viswanath, 'Spiritual Slavery, Material Malaise: "Untouchables" and Religious Neutrality in Colonial South India', *Historical Research* 83(219), 2010, pp. 124-145.

³ Ministry of Minority Affairs, *Report on the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM)*. GOI, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 153-4.

⁴ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Translated by M. Sainsbury. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980.

Regardless of this, scholarship on Christianity and caste tends to assume that religious affiliation provides a primary mode of social identification; that we can have a sociology of Indian Christians. In fact, despite 'communal' legal-political constructions and an elite Christian discourse,⁵ the churches in India have failed to engendered separate social-political identities or to bring into social existence the Christian 'imagined community.' (The exceptions are certain coastal communities where caste and Christian religion became mutually defining.)

Many sociologists have nonetheless sought to examine and explain caste practices among various Indian 'Christian communities', often in terms of deletion or depletion of an 'original' Hindu form: Christians they say do not hold notions of bodily or caste pollution (something that is in fact highly variable), or that Christians may have caste but there is no caste system among them.⁶ Taking religion as fixed and making caste the dependent variable is, however, mistaken. Caste and Christianity have in fact interacted in historically and regionally specific ways, shaped by various political projects, each of which poses a different sociological question. Both caste and Christianity have been changed by these interactions.

Rather than framing the issue in terms of the nature of caste among Indian Christians, it is often more fruitful to ask about the Christian influence on the experience of caste; or instead of asking whether or how Christianity in India has accommodated caste (a missiological question), to ask how caste has accommodated Christianity as part of its particular cultural politics (an ethnographic question).

There are potentially many starting points and directions in which to take this kind of enquiry, and much of the rest of the article is particularly shaped by the experience of Christianity and caste in Tamil South India. My own work has traced a four-hundred year history of Christianity-caste interactions, focusing on Catholicism in southern Tamil Nadu.⁷ This begins with the 17th century Jesuit mission of Roberto Nobili that was particularly exercised by its converts' preoccupations with caste rank, and regarded some accommodation of the culture of caste as necessary to ensure the prestige of Christianity without which the mission would be consigned to the impure social periphery of outcastes, fisherfolk and foreigners. To this end, these Jesuits argued that caste was a matter of 'indifferent external things' (adiaphora) and of no theological significance.⁸ This prepared the way for the incorporation of Catholicism into elaborate caste political systems in many parts of South India, so that one can truly speak of caste taking Catholic ritual form. The caste organization of church space, the caste honours at saint festival, caste-based service and ritual offices, and the systematic subordination of Dalits in every imaginable way, became characteristic of South Indian Catholicism.⁹

Catholicism did not, however, cease to proclaim a transcendent truth beyond caste. The simultaneous reproduction of caste relations/rank and its theological and institutional denial for centuries, I have argued, was allowed by a particular 'dual morality' which, up to a point (and given a particular structure of power), reconciled the demands of Catholic religion and

⁵ Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937*. Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2004.

⁶ Lionel Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987.

⁷ David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012 (in press).

⁸ Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in 17th Century India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

⁹ David Mosse, op cit., 2012.

those of being a caste person. The point is that in participating in Catholic religion – congregational worship, attending confession, the Eucharistic unity of the Mass, devotion to saints and so forth – Tamil villagers did not cease to belong to a rural society divided and unequalized by caste. The tension between the demands of Christian religion and those of caste belonging account for complex ritual forms, and symbolic improvisation in Christian communities. In this scenario, the relevant question is what are the social effects of Christian participation; and the answer has to be historically specific.

Before turning to this question let me suggest another starting point, namely the mass conversion movements to Christianity by subordinated Dalits during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. It is as a consequence of such conversions that a majority of India's Christians are Dalits – a demographic which has only recently found institutional or theological expression. It is often claimed that it was the anti-caste stand of Protestant Christian missions – who regarded caste practices as religious and so incompatible with Christian faith – that prompted this 'Dalit movement' from the mid-19th century. It is true that in 1845 the Bishop of Madras expressed a new missionary consensus when he asserted that the discriminations of caste 'are unquestionably religious distinctions, originating in, and maintained by, the operation of Hindu idolatry' and as such 'caste is utterly incompatible with the very principle of Christian morals.'¹⁰ While there can be little doubt that becoming Christian had something to do with the rejection of social inferiority and the affirmation of a positive social and religious identity, Dalit mass conversions seem in fact to have had little to do with missionary policy – Protestant or Catholic. Those seeking conversion did not discriminate between missions with very different views on caste.

I cannot here resolve the complicated matter of the religio-social politics of conversion. As Terry Eagleton says of faith in general, Christian conversion was performative rather than propositional; it was not a matter of signing up to new belief or an alternative description of reality, but of a new allegiance and commitment that might make a difference to a desperate situation.¹¹ The circumstances of Dalit conversions varied widely, and there was certainly no single reason or set of reasons for them. But what seems evident is that regardless of the denomination, Christian conversion took place in the first instance within rather than against existing moral and social orders, producing Christian identities that were both part of, but separate from, the old order. It was not uncommon, for instance, to find caste divisions reproduced through affiliation to different Christian denominations: where Madigas became Baptists, Malas became Lutherans, for example. Being Christian offered a means to negotiate or modify, but never to substitute for caste identity.

What, then, are the social or cultural effects that Christianity has produced? In the parts of South India with which I am familiar, these are important, varied and have unfolded over centuries. They have to be studied locally. First, Christianity can be seen to have placed significant limits on the naturalization of inequality. Even if Tamil Catholics reproduced the form of caste service, for example, this was hollowed out of any particular meaning. Here, Christianity can be seen as desacralizing caste, making it an 'outer thing', a public display of honour, a public form of knowledge, or a model of society subject to deliberative contest: more about power than person; enacting control rather than maintaining moral condition. Where they exist, Christian caste orders have been perhaps especially open to contest and challenge. In one way or another missionaries and priests invoked a transcendent Christian

¹⁰ Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missionaries in India*. Curzon Press, London, 1980, p. 39.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010.

truth that introduced a relativizing self-awareness into social forms even ahead of contemporary projects of equalization, or more recent caste-political mobilization. The churches also allowed more particular forms of social status striving.

As already mentioned, from the 17th to the early 20th centuries, Catholicism reproduced caste inequality through its own hierarchical ritual forms. Over the past century, as it redefined the boundary between what was merely civil and what contravened core Christian religious teaching, the Church would also insist on equality of access for Dalits to those ritual privileges and caste honours that had been denied them. For some Dalit castes in Tamil society, the Church was important to a new social mobility not only because of the educational and employment opportunities it provided, vital though these were, but also because successful Dalits could gain long denied prestige through the ranked honours of Church ritual and festivals, with the support of the priesthood, at a time when such public recognition was impossible within Hindu temple systems.

Indeed, in some places it can be shown how in this way the Catholic Church was important in opening space for a Dalit politics, which began in the early 20th century as a claim to the right to equal treatment as Christians. Even today, Dalit Christians mobilize to challenge ritual exclusions, whether it is processional routes that ignore their streets, their exclusion from serving at the altar or joining the choir, the caste-separation of biers or burial grounds, often facing violent upper caste resistance when 'customary' caste practices are challenged.

Especially from the 1980s, the Catholic Church has progressively tried to disembody itself from caste, and to dismantle expressions of rank. However, the turn against social expressions of caste only revealed the remarkable extent to which the Church's own institutions had been infused with caste distinctions. The Dalit Christian challenge of the 1990s exposed a structure of caste and caste discrimination within the Church, its priesthood, dioceses, educational institutions, convents and religious orders. The radicalization of a humiliated Dalit priesthood generated novel forms of social action, protest, cultural and theological innovation that have also made an important contribution to secular Dalit movements and politics. Protestant Christian centres have been especially prominent in cultural and theological work, but being relatively less caste-divided and Dalit-excluding (because overwhelmingly Dalit in composition), Protestants did not produce the kinds of mass-based social action that Catholics did.

The point here is that the Christian (or at least the Catholic) contribution to Dalit politics did not arise from a Christian critique of Hindu caste society (the conversion narrative), but from the contradiction within Catholicism, between the universal demands of faith and the particularistic interests of caste. This contradiction was long-present but surfaced politically by the circumstances of the 1990s, and experienced intensely by the Dalit clergy (especially Jesuits) who lead the Dalit Christian liberation movements in South India. Caste inequality was now reframed as evil rather than profane, and Christianity not simply as relativizing caste obligations, but as organizing militancy against them. Significantly, the Dalit social movement within the Church arose not from Christian ethics per se, but from their negation in the life of the Church; that is from the experience of 'dalitness' not of Christianity.

Christianity has had other cultural effects too. Historically speaking, it could be said that for some, Christianity inculcated a certain capacity for symbolic experimentation, or brought a negotiability to given meanings. Thus, Christian Dalits who entered churches and received the sacraments along with other castes were able to treat their exclusion as polluted persons as arbitrary and symbolic of their inferiorization as labourers and servants rather than as substantially connected to, or an index of, their persons. Signs of untouchability, or kinds of demeaning work, could be detached from the identity of the person they related to; explicit

meanings were emphasized over implicit conditions. After all, against the grain of recent ethnographic accounts of caste,¹² Christianity of all varieties teaches that the actor and the act are separate, and that exchange of substances is unimportant to the making of moral persons.

Symbolic innovations, especially by Dalit Christians, that delinked identity from occupation, action and substance, have led to larger-scale experiments in re-signification that turn signs of stigma into symbols of liberation, now developed and displayed in public performances of Dalit arts. Inferiorized drumming and dance forms, sometimes associated with funerary work and usually with servitude, are celebrated along with eating beef, as empowering Dalit culture rather than vilified. It is not necessary to regard these as exclusively Christian processes to recognize that it is in fact Christian seminaries that have become centres of South Indian Dalit cultural production.¹³ At any rate, the meaning-making of Dalit theologians and activists that honour an 'outcast culture' are as significant for contemporary Catholicism as was Nobili's cultural production of a Brahmanized Catholicism in the 17th century.

This kind of Dalit Christian activism and cultural production are part of a broader contemporary Dalitization of the churches. Adapting 'liberation theology', Dalit theology reframes Christianity in Dalit terms, prominently claiming 'dalitness' – simultaneously an assertion of and against caste – as Christianity's core. Christian truth would now have to pass through the suffering of the Dalits. The rising stream of anti-Christian Hindu nationalism in the late-1990s Indian politics, intersected with this Tamil politics of caste and religion in ways that gave a further drive to Dalit theological-cultural work and an underpinning connection to secular Dalit movements.

This Dalitization of the churches has to be seen as a recent trend; it is also to some degree a seminary-based phenomenon, and an approach to Christianity adopted by the mainstream churches. The gospel of social justice is in fact explicitly rejected by the largely urban charismatic/Pentecostal forms of Christianity through which Dalit Christians (especially women) find a different way to contend with caste humiliation. The point is that Christianity did not take root in India generally as an anti-caste movement, even in the Dalit conversion movements, but rather was made counter-cultural in certain circles as Dalit Christianity in the 1990s came under the influence of Ambedkarite thought.

This revived older missionary ideas that Dalits were adherents to a pre-Brahmin, pre-Hindu, anti-caste autochthonous tradition, now conceptualised in terms of the politically necessary assertion of anti-majoritarian cultural difference which Christianity could articulate along with Buddhism and other non-Hindu Dalit traditions. These perhaps acquired significance within a Dalit cultural politics that conceived of Brahminic Hinduism as the root of caste oppression, and brought 'caste Hindu' and 'Dalit Christian' into play as an oppositional pair, rather simplifying the politics and economic relations of caste as experienced by most Dalit Christians.

Among some of the poorest and most exploited Dalit groups, those least able to bring about change in their socio-economic circumstances, the experience of being Christian may not take such public or political forms. Instead, Christianity provides imaginative resources for a certain self-refashioning: through dignifying lifestyles or abandoning alcohol; literacy and Bible reading as a source of articulate and confident speech; work on the self that challenges the definitions and stigma of others (as Rajan Krishnan is showing in current ethnographic

¹² McKim Marriott, *India Through Hindu Categories*. Sage Publications, Delhi, 1990.

¹³ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999; C.J. Arun, *Constructing Dalit Identity*. Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2007.

work on Dalit Christians in Tamil society).¹⁴ Christianity may offer a narrative break with a humiliating past or a cultural capacity akin to what Arjun Appadurai refers to as the ‘capacity to aspire.’¹⁵

Becoming Christian was never sufficient to free Dalits from subordination, but along with economic change Christianity did provide idioms for the expression of autonomy and detachment for caste oppression. Today, even in remote villages, caste as a scheme of service and public order is fast disappearing, but then caste reappears as the private social capital essential for negotiating access to higher education and employment, or the ‘hoarding of opportunity.’¹⁶ The churches are again important in mediating access to scarce education and jobs, and their institutions – schools and colleges – are the focus of caste competition and politics.

In broad conclusion it can be said that while often profoundly localized into existing caste identities and inequalities, especially perhaps in South India, Christianity has nonetheless become a source of distinctive forms of thought, self-making and social action that are potentially transformative. To understand how this is so requires a long-duree historical perspective. One thing is clear, today caste among Christians is a lived reality whose truth is in experience, in emotion (fear, anger, outrage, shame). These ordinary and everyday Christian narratives of caste contradict the teleology of Christian modernity and equality (or citizenship) that leaves caste behind in the village, in the past, among Hindus, or the uneducated.¹⁷

As is true of other fields of the study of contemporary caste, whether in business, in education, in labour or other markets, it is clear that caste is not India’s past not tradition eroded by the conditions of modernity, capitalism or economic transformation in India. Caste has continuing significance and is reinscribed through new modes and mechanisms entirely in the absence of any particular ideological underpinning and within institutions that are apparently set against its particularism. The prior construction of the Christian self as a caste self has today become the principal social problem of the churches in India, certainly in Tamil Nadu.

¹⁴ Rajan Krishnan, op cit. 2011.

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, ‘The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition’, in V. Rao and M. Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2004, pp. 59-84.

¹⁶ Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.

¹⁷ M.S.S. Pandian, ‘Writing Ordinary Lives’. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(38), 2008, pp. 34-40.