

## Re-reading on the Conversion and Caste Supremacy among the Dalit Christians in Kerala

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### Abstract

*Religious conversion played a considerable change in the socio-religious life of Kerala, especially among the indigenous communities. The socio-religious upheaval movement was one of the landmarks in the history of Kerala during the 19th century. During this period, there was a considerable transformation in the socio-economic life in Kerala affected by the 'civilizing mission' of the protestant missionaries in the physical life of the natives, such as social, economic, political, educational, and cultural life. For that purpose, they used the tools of modernity, like fashion, food, rituals, beliefs, etc. It cannot be neglected that the missionaries in the 19th century played a notable role in the society. But we cannot read the history of Indigenous people regardless of the history produced by culture, politics, religion, and values. Conversion is a strong historical tradition that treats Christianity as an offshoot of colonialism. In the Indian context, Christianity is an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the nation, rather than as people are separated from it. During this period witnessed tremendous changes in almost all fields of socio-economic life. That is why historians considered, the 19th century as the decisive period as far as Indian history is concerned. These changes were visible in the traditional life of the native Dalit peoples and were mainly brought about by the colonial impact. The backward Christians, under the dominance of the ruling majority and the economic dominance of them, could not develop a proper ideology. There is an opinion that Dalit conversion was peripheral and one-sided. That is, it happened under the influence of British hegemony and missionary influence. Religious conversion gave the slave society a kind of religious unity. But it could not completely develop freedom. Today Christian congregations face the struggle for democratization.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, British hegemony, Colonialism, Missionary, Caste System, Protestantism

### INTRODUCTION

The cultural interaction among the western parts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of considerable transformation in the socio-economic life in Kerala region by the so-called civilizing mission of the protestant missionaries to engage in the physical life of the natives such as social, economic, and political, educational and cultural life. In the Indian context, Christianity is an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the nation, which rather than as people are separated from it. This period witnessed tremendous changes in almost all fields of socio-economic life. That is why historians considered the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the decisive period as far as Indian history is concerned. These changes were visible in the traditional life of the native people as mainly brought about by the colonial impact. Religious conversion played a considerable change in the socio-religious life of Kerala, especially among the indigenous communities. The nineteenth century was a period of significant transformations in the socio-economic life in Kerala, affected by the civilizing mission of the protestant missionaries in the physical life of the natives, such as social, economic, political, educational, and cultural life. For that purpose, they used the tools of modernity, like fashion, food, rituals, beliefs, etc. It cannot be neglected that the missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a notable role in the society. But we cannot read the history of Dalit people regardless of the history produced by culture, politics, religion, and values.

In a native society, the caste system is the main institution of the social relationship during this period. As per M.N. Srinivas, the caste system is unquestionably a ubiquitous phenomenon in India, signifying the presence of hereditary and endogenous groups arranged in a hierarchy, each with a traditional association with certain occupations. In 1891, the Travancore Census report considered the caste system not merely as a social institution of society but also as a religious institution. It had rigidity, which made the forward mobility of the

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individuals from one caste to the other impossible in the Kerala region. In the Indian context, religious conversion is an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the nation, rather than as people are separated from it. The colonial impact on the economic policies and religious conversions in British India brought in exploitation and social renaissance.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has stated that knowledge is the source of power, and the findings of the search for knowledge make history. We cannot say that the knowledge of power should be true, but we must add a face of truth to it. Most historians write history to ensure the supremacy of higher classes. We must understand that there is a history of Christians who developed through different cultures. The history of Christianity is not the history of bishops and priests. But we should consider the unwritten history of religion and caste supremacy among Christians.

The end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in European countries were restored under the reform movements. We see in the pages of history that the restoration period was a blow to the Western feudal tradition. It became developed as an agricultural riot in Germany and the religious revolution of Martin Luther. The effects of national restoration in the history of India has to be discovered. Colonialism is not 'financial looting' by imperial powers by invading other countries. However, it is the indigenous colonization of the people, castes, and tribes who are suppressed within the country. The people, social divisions, and castes who are suppressed and exploited within the country are also colonies.

Colonial education, colonial religion, colonial restoration, and colonial culture were the products of colonial dominance in India's history. There was no fundamental change or modification, even though the styles were modified. The internal colonial structure was dominated by caste supremacy and foreign capitalist forces. The present backward Christians are the victims of this colonization.

### **Religious Conversion and Caste Supremacy**

As a unique case in India, Christianity in Kerala dates very early. The 'Thomas' tradition, who was the first Christian missionary to arrive in India, which they cherished is that he came to Kerala soon after he landed in the west coast area of Cranganore, in present 'Kodungalloor'. He preached in different areas and made converts. The present consideration of study of this tradition, from contemporary records, we fix that they divided into four categories, ie, Roman Catholic, Latin Catholic, Syrians and Protestants. The Christian missionary works were done by Christian nations with a set of motive, which wasn't different in the case of British (Colonial) missionaries. But Christianity has a long root in the Indian soil even before its colonization and the religion in India was an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the people. The origin and understanding of Indian society and its cultural and political encounters are the changes embedded in the arrival of Christian missionaries in the context of the socio-cultural history of India, particularly in Kerala.

People were converted to different religions at the early time of their rule. Under the colonial supremacy, missionaries were able to convert people to Christianity. Colonial economic policies and religious conversion are the two sides of a coin. The conversion was a boon for the lower class communities, but it was harmful for the conversion of Syrians, Brahmins, and Nairs because, in the case of Dalit communities, who were slaves to the upper class for a long time. It helped the Dalits improve their education standard and could bring changes in the socio-economic structure. This became a challenge for the upper class.

The Dalits have been neglected by the common people and the government and also face supremacy from the church even today. W. J. Gladstone has noted that the conversion of the Pulayas and Parayas has caused problems for the church and society. The upper class and Christian society do not consider Dalits equal to them.

Aryans have established their supremacy during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. But the history of social change in Kerala has been written since the modern time. So, the history of the social renaissance of Kerala is brief and conspicuous. When it reached the time of Missionaries, Dalits could feel the ripples of a social renaissance. The activities of Ayyankali empowered the Dalits in Travancore. The religious conversion and the *Channar* riot of 19<sup>th</sup> century became a part of the revolutionary history of backward communities. The Channar riot catalysed the other revolutionary activities for the coming activities.

Even though the religion influenced the social structure, it could not make an overall change. Religious conversion was for combining religion with religion. Conversion is said to be a shift from one kind of life structure to another life structure, knowingly or unknowingly. It takes place in the spiritual area materialistically and socially together or isolated. Religious philosophies do not construct thoughts and their applications against the social structure of society. But it dominates society through orders and prohibitions. Each religion and sections stand as particular religious-social divisions. Caste discrimination and capital dominance indeed perpetuate in that religion. Such a system exists in Christian congregations.

### **Conversion among the Dalits**

Religious conversion can be defined as the conversion of an individual or a group of individuals from an organized religious group into another for better social status, security, and self-respect. Conversion is a strong historical tradition that treats Christianity as an offshoot of colonialism. They were not a part of any religion until the arrival of Protestantism and Islam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The religious conversion brought diverse possibilities to identities, beliefs, and practices once regarded by the mainstream Hindus of the nation. The modes, motivation, and symbolic meanings made Christianity a platform for the transformation of caste and tribe, which altered hereditary customs and practices that bound the lower class people to this ill fate, along with fuelling natural changes in the psyche of an individual. According to Rowena Robinson, 'Religion is not a separate arena of human life but is not a province that can be isolated from the plethora of accurate human living. Thus it is proper to term it as a phenomenon of Dalit Conversion. It must be termed as their reception could be considered as the climbing for a better position from their wretched situation. It does not mean a mass conversion of an organized religion into another. The content of this paper is an examination of whether it was a conscious encroachment of colonial power upon the Dalits or it was an untruthful effort for their liberation. The second concept gets much prominence as it deals with the politics of slavery and caste-based subjugation. Whatever the aims of missionaries, the Dalit succeeded in changing their focus for their liberation. Thus, this paper presents the reception of religion by the Dalits as an upliftment of their community.

Many important factors paved the way for Dalit conversion. The first is the Dalits' extreme desire, and the second is the missionary activities that developed under British hegemony. There is an opinion that Dalit conversion was peripheral and one-sided; that is, it happened under the influence of British domination and missionary influence. Most of the British works and missionary activities were focused on higher communities. It was the upper class who enjoyed the benefits of English education.

From the beginning, missionaries' prime focus was converting upper caste communities. Much of their money and time is spent in that direction, especially in the field of health and education. Most of the benefits went in the direction of higher Hindu communities. But they did not convert to Christianity. The converted were the lower caste people. Ambedkar mentioned the major share of missionary activities never touched the lower-class people. They spend the least time and money among these groups. Missionaries accepted this opinion, showing that the conversion was not a one-entered process. It was the result of the Dalit struggle for their liberation. The conversion was the outcome of British hegemony and missionary activities. Moreover there was a collision between slaves and the others.

The so-called historians were blind to this history of Dalit conversion. They treated it as a phenomenon that took place anywhere outside of Kerala. Moreover, they projected the history of Hindu renovating temple entry movements and Vaikom satyagraha. But, actually, the Dalit communities were not much interested in these movements. The academic community and progressive movements sabotaged Dalit ventures. The mass conversion of the Dalit community into Protestantism and Islam was a movement that trembled the cornerstone of feudal, provisional administrations

### **Politics and Strategies of Conversion**

The influence of Ayyankali did not start the origin of the new images of Dalits. It began with the disgraced community who hugged Christianity. As far as the histories of social movements in Kerala were concerned, it was something very relevant. Chattampi Swamikal, Sri Narayana Guru, and Ayyankali were not born at the time when the Dalits converted to Christianity. Religious conversion was the result of the desire of Dalit

communities for liberation and their quest for the restructuring of Kerala society. In the conversion of Dalits into Islam and Christianity, the one man who struggled was Ambedkar, and he screeched for the representation of Dalits in the assembly that created the 'Scheduled Caste' security for Dalits who accepted Hinduism. The politics and history of Dalit conversion come in the gap of many factors. Dalit attraction towards religious and the experience they got from the coalition of missionaries and Syrian Christians.

No evidence is there in the hands of missionaries and Hindu nationalists to prove that the Dalit's acceptance of religion was without proper observation and analysis. In Kerala, the missionaries started their work in the 18th century. Since then, the problems of Dalits have come into consideration. But they had to wait until 1854 to convert Dalits in central Kerala. The missionary work was on the basis of their nation and culture. This is one of the primary examples of missionary politics. British hegemony came into Kerala after the fall of Mysore. The British had offered their guardians to the provinces from the Mysore kingdom. Through these tactics, they established their hegemony in Kerala. As a result, the revolutionaries, who were agents of the British, were always a stumbling block before religious conversion. In Kundara proclamation of 1809, Velu Thambi Dalawa said, 'If the British establish their hegemony in Travancore, they will suppress the Brahmin community, and they will destroy the system of temple worship. They will make the lower caste able to punish the upper caste, they will establish a Christian flag and cross on the temple, and will insist on caste marriage without consideration of caste and religion.'

Colonel Munro, who came as a resident of Travancore in 1810, worked with a vigilant future perspective. Munro understood that strong bondage was absent in the relationship between the locals and the British government on the basis of religion, culture, and organization. He began his work with an aim to establish English education and Protestantism in Travancore. He believed that the propagation of Protestants was crucial and important for the stability of British authority. He expressed that their primary aim was to uplift the Syrians into a better societal position. As per the desire of Munro, the C.M.S. missionaries came in to Kerala in 1816. They came to the Maliankara Syrian church to lend their assistance.

The British had an opportunistic attitude towards slavery. Their opinions differed in the case of private slaves and company slaves. Thus, it could be understood that the missionaries who came into India spent much of their time converting higher-class Hindus. Abbe Dubois, a Catholic missionary who worked for three decades, stated that it was a meaningless activity. Ambedkar, too, had the same opinion. In his opinion, the missionaries planned their services to benefit upper-caste communities. They did everything to attract them to Christianity. Ambedkar said most of the Indian Christians were hailing from the untouchable communities. So, the missionaries must have focused their service on fulfilling the needs of the untouchables.

In central Kerala, the disgraced had to wait for forty years to get an entry into the Anglican Church. But when the converted Dalits entered the church, the Syrian Christians ran outside from the Churches. The opinion of Michel D. Zerdo about power and discipline, strategy or tactic or technique is very much helpful in understanding the power relationship between Dalits and missionaries. Strategy is the life style of powerful people and tactics is the style of powerless.

## **CONCLUSION**

The conversion of Dalits was not a simple process or phenomenon. It was something complex and diverse in many respects. Thus, it is clear that, in Kerala, the conversion was a part of colonialism. Industrialization impressed the status of converted Christians. Mainly it empowered the Syrian Christians. The people who enjoyed all the benefits of missionary services were against the conversion of Dalits into Christianity. On the other hand, Dalits came into Christianity without these kinds of motives. The missionaries developed the Anglican Church from this paradoxical relationship between the victims and oppression. Here, it clarifies Western missionaries and Syrians' real strategy to control Anglican Churches' power structure. They enjoyed all the privileges from the church. The Dalit Churches were outside the parish. The missionaries introduced the different strategies for Dalits. It shows their tactical power in using the strategy. The history of missionary activities is nothing but the strong bond between the missionary and Syrian coalition and the untruthful struggle of the Dalits. Actually, the Dalit community was not climbing into a minority religion, but it was a movement into a majority group. The history of Kerala Pulaya Mahasabha and P.R.D.S. are best examples of this. Many

important factors were there which paved the way for Dalit conversion. The first one is the extreme desire of the Dalits, and the second one is the missionary activities that developed under the British hegemony. There is an opinion that Dalit conversion was peripheral and one-sided. That is, it happened under the influence of British domination and missionary influence. Religious conversion gave the slave society a kind of spiritual unity. But it could not completely develop freedom. Today Christian congregations face the struggle for democratization. The backward Christians, under the dominance of the ruling majority and the economic dominance of them, could not develop a proper ideology.

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