



# Dalit Christians

RIGHT TO RESERVATIONS

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Camil Parkhe





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# Dalit Christians: Right to Reservations

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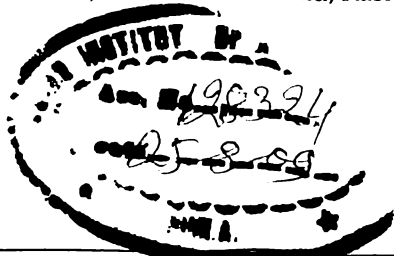
# **Dalit Christians: Right to Reservations**

**Camil Parkhe**

**ISPCK  
2007**

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## Foreword

I congratulate Camil Parkhe for his work “Dalit Christians: Right to reservations”. Being par ans in this country, I am indeed happy to write the foreword to his book.

The struggle by Dalit Christians to secure their right to reservations has proved a slow and arduous task. The complex situation in the country has had an adverse impact on this struggle.

Lack of political organisation, widely perceived to be a sign of political weakness, has been responsible for the denial of reservations to Dalit Christians even 60 years after independence. The multi-lingual nature of the Dalit Christian community, division of the church among various denominations, their so-called theological differences and the ever growing chasm between the rich and poor Christians are the other factors.

A majority Dalit Christians living in rural areas and in urban slums are from the *ati-sudra* caste. They are illiterate, poor, weak and afflicted like any other Dalit communities. Dalit Christians are not aware of their rights. There are no organisations or agencies devoted to educate Dalit Christians about their rights.

In the bygone era, the missionaries used to help the

In the bygone era, the missionaries used to help the underprivileged as part of their foreign-funded welfare programmes. This helped the Dalit Christians only momentarily. The denial of reservations has deprived the Dalit Christians of their basic human rights.

Today, the struggle for reservations to Dalit Christians is fought by some institutions and agencies at the national level. The struggle is not very strong at the grass roots level. We have also failed to join hands with fellow Dalits of other communities for this just and right cause. It is rather sad that the few elites among Christians are opposed to the use of 'Dalit' tag.

The communal-minded oppose reservations to the Dalit Christians, saying "Christianity is a casteless religion'. Some others argue, "Sikh and Buddhism are a part of Hindu religion, reservations can be extended only to them." Political parties have done little except render lip service at the time of elections.

It is a fact that ninety-five per cent Christians in India are from the ati-sudra castes and continue to suffer caste discrimination despite conversion. Their *dalitatva* or low social status is responsible for their poverty, besides social, educational, and political backwardness.

Most importantly, if the Constitution has provided for reservations to Dalits, why are only Dalit Christians being denied their Constitutional right? This is a grave injustice against the minority Dalit Christian community.

The Dalit Christians have been fighting for reservations in a democratic way, requesting various political parties

for their intervention and support. Our struggle for rights to reservations will not go vain. I am confident that we will achieve our right to reservations.

Camil Parkhe's book on the Dalit Christians' six-decade-old struggle will serve as a manual to those in this movement and outside it. It will also serve as a historical document of reference. I hope it will motivate many people and thus strengthen the Dalit Christians' movement for their right to reservations.

*- Rev. S. M. Chandorikar  
President of the sixth  
Dalit Christian Marathi Literary Conference*



## Preface

Some month's back, the news editor called me to his desk at the newspaper we worked in Pune and asked to explain something he found very puzzling. A news agency had reported a writ petition pending before the Supreme Court on extending reservations to Dalit Christians. "Who are Dalit Christians? How can there be Dalits in Christianity?" he questioned.

The young news editor was a Dawoodi Bohra from Mumbai and not very well acquainted with the rigid caste structure of the Hindu society. I tried to explain to him that Dalit Christians are scheduled castes who have converted to Christianity. A majority of the Christians in the country are, in fact, either scheduled caste (SC) or scheduled tribe (ST) Christians.

"But even if in the past they belonged to the SCs or STs, how can they retain their Hindu castes and tribal identities after embracing Christianity? How can the church which preaches equality recognise them as Dalits?" The news editor who was, otherwise, quite knowledgeable about a varied issues seemed really perplexed by my reply to his questions.

"Indeed, the church does not recognise caste nor does it discriminate among the faithful but the society in which

we live does. No Indian can claim a mind which is hundred percent free of caste prejudices. You must belong to a particular caste if you are a Hindu. And caste remains till death. It remains with the persons even if they convert to Christianity, Buddhism or Sikhism. The rigid caste structure does not permit upward or downward mobility. The Dalit Christians are demanding reservations because their *dalitvatva* or social backwardness has not disappeared with their conversion to Christianity," I tried to explain.

The news editor was inclined to accept my argument when I pointed out that the media often referred to former Lok Sabha, Speaker P A Sangma, former Chattisgarh Chief Minister Ajit Jogi or prominent Jharkhand leader Stephen Marandi as tribal Christians! If tribal Christians are granted reservations despite their conversion, why should the same be denied to Dalit Christians, I asked.

The news editor was not the only person baffled by the Dalit Christians or backward caste Christians staking claim to reservations and other concessions applicable to the SC and ST population of this country.

A sizeable number of persons in the society are truly not aware of the plight of Dalit Christians and there are some who deliberately refuse to acknowledge the very existence of Dalit Christians.

This booklet is an attempt to throw light on the social conditions of the Dalit Christians in Maharashtra. It is aimed at making ordinary people aware about Dalit Christians and argues the case for extending reservations and other concessions to them.

I wish to thank a number of persons who have helped me complete this project. Jayant Gaikwad, librarian at the Pune-based Snehsadan Institute, for happily making available several relevant books, Shrikant and Vineeta Joshi for translating the original script from Marathi to English, and Anosh Malekar, my colleague at daily *Maharashtra Herald*, for minutely screening and editing the text. I also thank Rev. S. M. Chandorikar for writing a foreword for the book.

– *Camil Parkhe*





## I.

# Dalit Status did not end with Conversion

Casteism is unique to Indian culture. Even if a person does not believe in caste, there is no escaping it. An Indian is known by his/her caste and sub-caste. Marriages and other social interactions are based upon caste considerations.

Even the communists who proclaim themselves as atheists or agnostics could not shed caste, much to their own discomfort. Late socialist leader and former High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Nanasahab (N G) Gorey often said that he was a Brahmin by 'accident'. But society refused to accept his plea and the caste identity prevailed.

Veteran Marathi poet Rev. Narayan Waman Tilak, social reformer and nationalist Pandita Ramabai and Rev. Nilkanthshastri 'Nehemiah' Gore were all prominent Marathi Christians who made valuable contributions in their chosen fields. Ironically, the society in Maharashtra remembers them as *Chitpawans*, a sub caste of Brahmins, who converted to Christianity.

Thus in the eyes of the society, caste and sub caste of an individual cannot be erased even after giving up

Hinduism and embracing Christianity. The stranglehold of caste on the Indian mind is best captured in the Marathi proverb *Jaat Naahi Ti Jaat* (What cannot be cast off is caste).

One's parents and place of birth cannot be changed. The same applies to one's caste too. One cannot help it. Christians who belong to the erstwhile untouchable castes in the Hindu social structure experience this everyday.

### WHO ARE THE DALITS?

There are many definitions of the term 'dalit', all of which apply to the Dalit Christians who formerly belonged to the Hindu untouchable castes in Maharashtra. Therefore, these dalit Christians can stake their claim to reservations and other concessions granted under the Indian Constitution to all members of the erstwhile untouchable communities in the country. .

Dr. Shankarrao Kharat, former Vice Chancellor of Marathwada University, while discussing the concept of dalits had said: "The term dalit includes castes which as per the Hindu religion and culture were considered as 'untouchables'. The term also includes erstwhile extrajungle tribes and the tribals (*adivasis*) who live in jungles and ravines like wild animals, away from human civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

"Since these people were kept far away from the Hindu culture permanently, they remained culturally backward. From the Hindu cultural point of view, the social and economic levels of all these castes and tribes are almost similar. Their woes more or less are the same. High caste culture has intertwined them in a single entity. All of them

share a similar predicament. They have been kept away from villages and communities for generations. The slavery of these castes and tribes is social, economic and also cultural, therefore the term dalit includes all these neglected classes of castes and tribes.<sup>2</sup>

Pragat Padavidhar Sanghatana (Progressive Graduates Association), a Pune-based organisation, had launched an intensive movement in the 1970s to demand reservations and other facilities for dalit Christians in Maharashtra. The Government of Maharashtra included the dalit Christians in the State in Other Backward Caste (OBC) category in 1978. The entire credit of this goes to the movement launched by the young dalit Christians inspired by Fr. Matthew Lederle, Fr. Leo Desai and Fr. Christopher Shelke.

The Progressive Graduates Association had published a book '*Upekshit Khristi Samaj*' (Neglected Christian Community) to press the demand for reservations to dalit Christians. Even after embracing Christianity, these members of former Hindu untouchable communities could not get rid of the stigma attached to their existence, described in the book as follows:<sup>3</sup>

“There is a proverb in Marathi '*Gao tethe Maharwada*' (meaning 'wherever there is a village, there is a colony of Mahars'). The colonies of the Mahars and Mangs (two predominant castes of untouchables) continue to be referred to as *Maharwada and Mangwada* even after these persons have become Christians. Conversion to Christianity has not changed the way their colonies are referred to, just as mere conversion has not brought any

changes in their social or financial status. Their standard of living, language, food habits and culture remain the same as other family members and relatives who have either continued to be Hindu *Mahars* or *Mangs* or have embraced Buddhism. All of them are erstwhile untouchables. Notwithstanding the conversions, in rural areas the upper caste people even today refer to the dalit Christians by their erstwhile caste names and call them as *Mahars* or *Mangs*.

Many Christian Mahars and Mangs were and still are dependent on uppercaste families of their villages. They are compelled to perform low-level tasks in their villages. Till the last decade, the dalit Christians would carry out degrading tasks like disposing off dead cattle. The untouchables, who also included Christians, went door to door and ate whatever food was thrown at them. While walking on village roads, they had to carry their footwear in hands, which had to be locked behind their backs, while the mandatory earthen pots hung around their necks to serve as spittoons. Their touch and shadow was considered inauspicious and they were prohibited from drawing water from public wells. They had to walk all the way to the lower end of the river to fill water. The Dalit Christians dwelt with other untouchables, and took isolated roads, away from the main approaches used by upper castes, for moving around the village. Due to their very low social status, all the avenues of economic progress and prosperity remain closed to the dalit Christians. There is absolutely no distinction at all between other erstwhile untouchables and dalit Christians. The only difference is while the other dalits like dalit Hindus, neo-Buddhists and dalit Sikhs have been granted reservations and various other concessions by the

Government of India, the dalit Christians have been denied the same till date. The government and the society have many misconceptions about the dalit Christian community, which is the primary reason for this community having remained neglected for several years.

**“CONVERSION HAS NOT CHANGED THE CONDITIONS OF THE DALITS” DR. KHARAT**

Dr. Shankarrao Kharat has discussed in his Marathi book '*Dalit Wangmay Prerana wa Pravrutti*' that there is no change in the conditions of the dalits even after their conversion to Buddhism. Dr. Kharat says, "During Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement of conversion, millions of untouchables gave up Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. These Buddhists are not Hindus by religion anymore. They are neo-Buddhists. Although they are now neo-Buddhists, they have been exploited for centuries by rich classes and high caste people. Therefore they have remained economically backward. They live in poor conditions. Secondly, the high caste people continue to look down upon them socially. Therefore, the neo-Buddhists are compelled to continue their fight for freedom from high caste attitudes."<sup>4</sup>

The state of people converted into Buddhism, as described by Dr. Kharat, holds true for all those who have been converted from untouchable communities into Christianity or Sikhism. Similarly, if the untouchables embrace Islam or any other religion, the argument will still be applicable to them. Conversion to Buddhism, Sikhism or Christianity has not brought any changes in the conditions of the untouchables except the change in their

religion. Hence, all these erstwhile untouchables, irrespective of their present religion, have natural right to reservations and other concessions. No logic or principle of natural justice can deny dalit Christians the right to reservations.

The condition of these untouchables who were converted to Buddhism, along with Dr. Ambedkar, did not change after conversion. Therefore in 1960, the government of Maharashtra decided to extend reservations and other concessions to the neo-Buddhists. In 1990, the V. P. Singh government took a decision to extend reservations and other concessions to neo-Buddhists across the country. Dalit Sikhs were granted reservations and other concessions at the national level as early as 1956. The decisions of the Government of Maharashtra and the Government of India to extend reservations to these non-Hindu dalits were in conformity with the principle of natural justice. However, this principle of natural justice has not been applied to the dalit Christians in Maharashtra, or at the national level.

In some southern and northern Indian States, however, various concessions have been extended to dalit and tribal Christians on par with dalits belonging to other religions.

One of the reasons for not extending the reservations and other concessions to dalit Christians is that the very concept of 'dalit Christians' was not acceptable to governments. Fortunately, a gradual change in the attitude of the governments is being observed during the past few years. Due to the intensive struggle by dalit Christian groups, some south Indian States have recognised the dalit

Christians and extended various concessions to them. In north India, the tribal Christians do get benefits of reservations and other concessions even after their conversion to Christianity. The former Speaker of Lok Sabha P. A. Sangma and former Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh Ajit Jogi are tribal Christians. Unlike the dalit Christians in Maharashtra, the tribal Christians in North India and the Northeastern states, are well organised, united and well aware of their rights. These tribal Christians of Northeast do not tolerate any kind of injustice meted out to them in the name of their religion.

Even the Maharashtra government has acknowledged the social and economic backwardness of the dalit Christians. The untouchable Hindu communities who embraced Christianity are now included in the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) category. The government has thus accepted that the dalit Christians are erstwhile untouchables. But why have they been included in the OBC category and not the Scheduled Castes (SCs) category like the untouchable communities, which converted to either Buddhism or Sikhism?

The denial of reservations and concessions to the dalit Christians in the country is a grave injustice to this community. The issue raised by the dalit Christians is: "If erstwhile untouchables get converted to Buddhism or Sikhism, their right to reservation and other concessions remains intact. Then, why is the same logic or principle is not extended to the dalit Christians".

The Supreme Court of India posed the same question to the Central government during the hearing of a public

interest litigation seeking inclusion of the dalit Christians among the Scheduled Castes to secure reservations for this community. The Central government has not responded so far and the case is pending. However, the movement for reservations and other concessions for dalit Christians, which has been going on for the last four decades, is gaining momentum.

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## 2.

### Untouchability, Casteism among Christians in South India

There has been no respite from untouchability and other forms of discrimination for the dalit Christians in western Maharashtra, Marathwada and Vidarbha regions of the state. Since the high caste people still consider dalit Christians as untouchables, they continue to be treated in an inhuman manner in the rural areas. The high caste Hindus alone cannot be blamed for this. It is the societal and cultural scenario in vogue for several centuries in this country, which could be blamed. To elucidate, the example of the Christian community in southern India can be quoted.

Anybody who thinks there is no untouchability or casteism in Christianity will be shocked to know the discrimination prevailing within the community. Discrimination between the high and the low castes has existed within the Christian communities of south India since the past five centuries when the first conversions to Christianity happened. Untouchability was prevalent among the Christians in south India until recently.

The prime reason for the widespread practice of casteism in south India could be attributed to the fact that

both the high caste Brahmins as well as the untouchables got converted to Christianity in the southern states. These conversions took place in the seventeenth century under the influence of the Jesuit priest, Robert De Nobili, and other European missionaries. While embracing Christianity, these high caste as well as low caste people did not give up their original social customs like casteism, untouchability and food habits. The European missionaries also did not insist upon them to give up such concepts and traditions. The foreign missionaries perceived retention of casteism, as per Hindu tradition, even after conversion to Christianity as inevitable. To help the converted high caste Christians to retain customs like shaving their head, applying sandalwood paste on their forehead and using the sacred thread, De Nobili had to correspond and personally meet and plead with the church hierarchy in Rome for several years. This priest who was later recognised by the Catholic Church as a saint had to face disciplinary action for letting Hindu traditions continue among neo-converts. His right to baptise high caste people was withdrawn for 13-long years. Between 1612-1624, De Nobili was banned from converting Brahmins to Christianity. During the ban, De Nobili had to confine his missionary work among the lower caste.<sup>1</sup>

### **DISCRIMINATORY CUSTOMS IN CHURCHES**

In his book 'The Liberative Mission of the *Church* among Dalit Christians', Fr. L Stanislaus (SVD) has given a detailed account of how the dalit Christians had to put up with discriminatory treatment at the hands of high caste Christians inside and outside the churches in TamilNadu. Fr. Stanislaus is the programme Coordinator of the Pune-

based 'Ishawani Kendra. Ever since Christianity established its base in TamilNadu in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, till the recent past, there have been caste-based discriminations among the Christians. Many discriminatory customs existed till recently; denial of entry to dalit Christians in churches by the high caste Christians, construction of a wall in the churches to avoid touch or looking at one another, or making separate seating arrangements for the dalit and non-dalit Christians, denial of permission to dalit Christians to stand near the altar during a marriage ceremony, two separate queues of the dalits and non-dalits to receive the Holy Communion and allowing the dalits to receive the sacred body of Christ only after the high caste people, separate arrangements for taking meals for high caste and dalit Christians in the Christian educational institutions. The discrimination does not end even after death. There are two separate cemeteries and two separate hearses to carry dead bodies.<sup>2</sup>

### CATHOLIC BRAHMINS' COLONY

In the southern States, the dalit Christians and high caste Christians found it difficult to give up their traditions and social customs. The differences in the customs of the dalit and high caste Christians due to their low and high social status and habits were openly acknowledged. To facilitate following these customs, a separate colony of Catholic Brahmins called 'Saint Mary's Tope' was established in 1895 in Tiruchirapalli. The fishermen Christians along the eastern coast and Roman Catholic Syrians lived separately, as stated in the Marathi book '*Hindi Khristi Mandalincha Itihas*'<sup>3</sup>

These incidences have certainly tarnished the image of Christianity in India. However the Dalit Christians, high caste Christians, and the Christian priests being part of the Indian tradition did not consider anything wrong in it. After Independence, the Dalit Christians have raised loud protests against the various form of untouchability and casteism. Consequently, the Catholic as well as Protestant Churches had to take steps to abolish casteism and other forms of discrimination within the Christian community.

During the medieval period, untouchability was considered as a part of fate, therefore, the untouchables did not object to it even after getting converted to Christianity. Later on during the British regime, after the spread of education and introduction to the principles of Christianity, the low caste Christian community clashed with the high caste Christians and also with the priests on this issue. During the last 150 years, there have been many incidences of organised opposition to discrimination.

### **DALIT CHRISTIANS' REVOLT**

In Pondicherry, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a new church was opened, there was an outburst from local Christian community on seeing a centrally positioned, internal wall to separate the low and high caste people in the house of God. The outburst of the Dalit Christians resulted in a riot. The church was forced to close for some time and was reopened only after demolishing the separating wall.<sup>4</sup> Of late, the dalit Christians and even several priests have launched an organised movement against the discrimination of Dalit Christians by the high castes Christians.<sup>5</sup>

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### 3.

## Untouchability, Casteism among Christians in Maharashtra

In Maharashtra, untouchability and casteism are not observed on a large scale among the Christians. The main reason being that the majority of the converted are from previous untouchable castes. Thus there is no untouchability as seen in southern India. However this has no relation to rapid urbanisation and modernisation in the State. In Maharashtra, majority of the converted Christians came from the untouchable Mahar caste. In some parts of Marathwada region, people belonging to the Mang community, another untouchable caste, were also converted.

Although high caste persons like Neelkanthashastrī 'Nehemya' Gore, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Rev. Narayan Waman Tilak, Laxmibai Tilak and others became Protestant Christians, it is rather strange that not a single high caste person was attracted to the Catholic sect, which is in majority among the Christians the world over. Of course, there are some historical reasons for the same. In the nineteenth century Maharashtra as Western culture stepped in and Christian philosophy began influencing great reformists like Mahatma Phule, and Prarthana Samajist

R G Bhandarkar, the work of Catholic priests had not even started in the state except in Mumbai and Vasai.

‘In his book ‘*Khristi Dharma*’, G. V. Ketkar, noted scholar and the former editor of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s Marathi daily *Kesari*, has stated, “ Indian Christians are part of our race, language and blood. India is as much their nation as is ours. Excommunicating them after conversion to Christianity is a dangerous custom for Hindus. Indian Christians and the nation as well must give a fervent thought to the problems and sorrows of the Indian Christians.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this remark had a reference to persons like, Rev. Tilak, his wife and veteran writer Laxmibai Tilak, Narayan Sheshadri, Rev. Neelkanthshastri ‘Nehemiah’ Gore, and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati who were converted to Christianity from high castes. As the majority of the Marathi Christians were converted from untouchable castes, there was no question of excommunicating them further. These people who were already among the lowest strata, could not have been pushed further down the rigid Hindu caste hierarchy.

Compared to the Catholics, the Protestants had taken a lead in missionary work in the areas surrounding Pune, Ahmednagar and Kolhapur in western Maharashtra. Among the Protestants the erstwhile high caste persons were very few and some of them excelled in various fields. The others in this sect were erstwhile dalits who were in majority. The Catholic missionaries who came much later had to restrict their work to dalit communities.<sup>2</sup>

## **MISSIONARIES CHALLENGE CASTEISM, UNTOUCHABILITY**

Towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Jesuit priests (members of the religious organisation Society of Jesus (S J) started missionary work in the Ahmednagar district. Initially, Fr. Otto Weishaupt, a German priest, started separate schools for the touchable and untouchable castes in the Kendal area near Rahuri. However, later settling nearby Sangamner and considering the hostile view of high caste people towards Christianity, he decided to challenge the inhuman practices of casteism and untouchability and opened a common school there for all religions and castes. Fr. Dr. Christopher Shelke who had authored the history of Christian missionaries in Ahmednagar district has noted this.<sup>3</sup> Later other missionaries too discarded the practices of casteism and untouchability and did not accept these ideas in their missionary work among the locals. Considering the situation then, this was certainly a bold decision. This helped counseling among high and low caste people in the district.

In Ahmednagar district, initially low caste people from Mahar, Mang, Bhil and Dhanagar communities got converted to Christianity. When Catholic and Protestant sects started missionary work in this district, casteism in Hindu religion showed its influence. Even among the so-called untouchables and low castes, each community considered itself superior to the other and therefore, refused to have any interaction with the other 'low' caste people. Thus, the dalit Christians belonging to the Mahar caste refused to have matrimonial or any kinds of social



alliances with the dalit Christians belonging to the Mang caste. The situation has not improved even in this twenty first century. In his book '*Ambedkari Chalwal : Parivartanache Sandharbha*', Avinash Dolas has rightly commented : "These people who wanted to demolish casteism introduced casteism into Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

The foreign missionaries belonging to both Catholic and Protestant missions wanted to teach equality to a society, where casteism was deep-rooted. They concentrated on a particular caste and community though it was not their intention to preach the gospel to a particular community. They were compelled to do so due to the prevailing caste system in the Hindu society. During the time of Robert De Nobili in the seventeenth century, the missionary work was done among the Brahmin community. As a result, the possibility of untouchable communities being kept away from Christianity arose. Similarly, in Maharashtra, if untouchables were to be welcomed into Christianity, it was certain that the high caste Marathas would stay away. In such a situation, the foreign missionaries selected to work among those sections of society where they would be most effective.

Mahars and Mangs were the two untouchable castes from which people accepted either Catholic or Protestant beliefs, and hence, even after conversion they could retain their homogeneity. Dr. Shelke has noted that Catholic priests initially, i.e. towards the end of nineteenth century, converted people from communities like Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars, Bhils and so on in the areas of Kendal and Sangamner.<sup>5</sup> In a particular area, across several villages, a majority of families from the same caste got converted into

Christianity. Therefore the danger of being excommunicated was averted. The original caste being the same, even after conversion these societies remained homogeneous, and as such the problems like excommunication or ban on marriages did not arise. Since their caste background was the same there was no question of untouchability or casteism among them.

Had there been missionary work across the caste spectrum from upper castes to intermediate castes like Brahmins, Marathas, Malis etc. then there would have been problem of casteism among the Maharashtrian Christians as was observed earlier among the Christians in southern India.

Ajit Lokhande, an India-born Christian researcher based in Germany, has been rather forthright in stating that in a way it was good that the high caste people from western Maharashtra and Marathwada did not adopt Christianity. "The Mahars, not the caste Hindus, were chosen and blessed with open heart to the word of God. The missionaries never succeeded in entering the realm of caste Hindus. Was it good? Not good? It is difficult to say. Perhaps it was good. Or else we would have had skirmishes between castes within the Catholic Church as we see in TamilNadu or in Andhra Pradesh. Perhaps we would have experienced differences in the church something like rites disputes in Kerala. Or even like the silent caste discrimination among the traditional Goan Catholics, which comes to surface on certain occasions. The practice of equality among the children of God is not to be taken for granted in the Catholic Church."<sup>6</sup> Although, all children of God are equal as per the principle accepted by the

Catholic society, it is not necessary that this would be implemented in practice.

The people who embraced Buddhism along with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar comprised mainly Mahars, therefore casteism could not prevail in the neo-Buddhist community. While there were no caste conflicts among dalit Christians in Maharashtra, it cannot be denied that differences over sects surfaced after the conversions. But compared to the Catholics, the number of Protestants is low in Maharashtra, and hence the differences among these sects have not surfaced in the open.

The Catholic and Protestant missionaries, who did not believe in casteism, however, did not oppose untouchability and other caste practices in the Christian community of southern India for three to four centuries. Had they opposed this wicked practice then, there was a danger of the high caste communities drifting away from Christian religion. Since, there was no awareness in the Christian community itself about this aspect, casteism continued openly for several centuries in southern India and by stealth in Vasai and Goa.

If efforts are made to bring together the dalits and high castes, or for that matter any other castes and sub castes, for whatever reasons, those who consider themselves high castes do not turn up; this was the experience of the great social reformer *Maharshi* Vitthal Ramji Shinde in Maharashtra of the twentieth century.

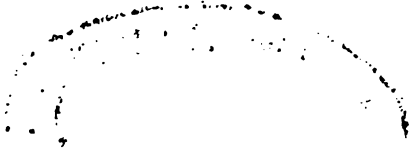
*Maharshi* Shinde says in his book '*Bharatiya Asprushhatecha Prashna*': "The three supposedly untouchable castes of Mahars, Chamhars and Mangs did

not see eye to eye when we opened schools for helping the destitute. Initially nobody used to come. Later Mahars started coming. But due to this very reason and the suspicion that our mission was to bring them all- Mahars Chamhars and Mangs- at par, the Chambhars (who despite being low castes considered themselves superior to Mahars and Mangs) stopped coming. How the already oppressed castes fail to take advantage of effort put in by well wishers due to the prevalent casteism is clear from the statistical data collected by the Depressed Classes mission of the last five years. It establishes that the Chamhars refuse to sit along with Mahars and Mangs and thus prefer not to take advantage of our mission and prefer to forgo the Mission's benefits."<sup>7</sup>

In the post-independence days an organised opposition to casteism started both within the Christian community and the churches. Catholic and Protestant priests started supporting the rights of dalit Christians both within the community and outside.

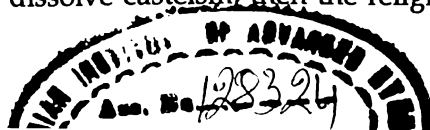
That castes continue to rule the lives of Indians has been proved time and again by their exclusive food habits, birth and marriage customs. The restrictions on food habits may be fast disappearing in the era of globalisation, but when it comes to marriages even among the ever-increasing tribe of migrants to the West, each detail of the caste and sub caste is looked into.

It is no different back home when it comes to the Maharashtrian Christian families. While looking for a marriage alliance, they look for people in their native places like Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Latur, and Nasik and



Kolhapur districts. For a marriage alliance they would not consider Christians matches from Goa, Kerala, Mangalore or TamilNadu. Therefore, Prof. Devdatta Husale has posed a question in his lecture, as the president of the fourth 'Dalit Christian Marathi Sahitya Sammelan', " Why do these hypocritical Christians who say caste becomes immaterial or non-existent after conversion, rush to Ahmednagar, Jalna and Kolhapur for marriage alliances? Why do they look at their place of origin? This implies that Christians still look for their original caste. How long can this fact be suppressed?"<sup>8</sup>

In India, any person from a Hindu tradition, on conversion to Christianity, Buddhism or Islam, cannot get rid of his original caste. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar however said this is the folly of the Indian tradition. While answering the question ' Why conversion?' he said, " It is argued by Hindus that there is no point in resorting to conversion to avoid casteism, since casteism prevails in Christianity and Islam as well. Unfortunately, the fact is casteism has entered other communities too. But this has originated from Hinduism and has spread everywhere. Although there is casteism among Christians and Muslims, it is different from casteism within Hinduism. There may be casteism among Christian and Islamic communities, but it is not the main aspect of their society. When asked ' Who are you?' if somebody answers 'I am a Christian' or 'I am a Muslim', the answer is adequate and satisfying. It is not necessary to ask 'What is your caste?' The origin of casteism in Hinduism is the religion itself. Casteism in Muslim and Christian communities has no bearing on the respective religions. If Hindus ever decide to dissolve casteism, then the religion



itself will pose an obstacle. But, if Christians and Muslims decide to end the practice of casteism, their religion will not be an obstacle.<sup>9</sup>

### CONVERSION IS A REVOLT AGAINST CHATURVANA, EXPLOITATION: REV. NIRMAL

Rev. Arvind Nirmal who is credited with ushering in the dalit Christian liberation movement in Maharashtra, says -'Conversion is not the solution to all the problems arising out of being a dalit. But the act of our conversion to Christianity is our revolt against Hinduism, the religion that created *dalitvatva*, the religion that created the *Chaturvarna* system and exploited us socially, economically and politically in the name of religion and imposed on us life equivalent to the animals. This religion did not allow us to lead a life of human being. Therefore, through our act of conversion, we have turned down Hinduism and revolted against it. It is immaterial whether conversion wipes out *dalitvatva* but I feel the 'rejections', 'protests', and 'revolts' expressed through conversion are much more important.<sup>10</sup>

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## 4.

# The Church's Stance on Untouchability, Casteism

Even though untouchability and casteism had been practiced for several centuries among the Christian communities in south India, the Church hierarchy avoided either dissuading the people from following these practices or taking action against those perpetuating these social evils. The British rulers in India had taken a lesson from the war of independence of 1857 and to continue their rule decided not to interfere in the religious matters of India. Even before the arrival of the British in India, Robert De Nobili and other European missionaries had adopted a similar view in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Madurai and Tiruchirapally.

The European missionaries did not believe in the practice of untouchability. However they realised that the converts faced the risk of ex-communication from their own community if they gave up practices of casteism and untouchability after embracing Christianity. So the missionaries decided to go slow in this matter. As a result, inhuman practices like untouchability could take roots in the south Indian Christian communities and continued to flourish for many years even after Independence.



## MISSIONARIES CONNIVE AT CASTEISM, UNTOUCHABILITY

In Madurai and other areas of southern India, during Robert De Nobili's time, many Brahmins embraced Christianity. However, the high caste Hindus coming into Christianity meant closing the doors of Christianity to the low caste and untouchable communities. The missionaries faced a difficult dilemma- whether to choose high castes or low castes for their missionary work. If they selected one caste, it was certain that the other would turn its back on them. The missionaries did not want to lose either of the two. Therefore depending on the possibilities at different places at different times, they baptised people from both the communities and brought them to Christ.

The missionaries permitted the converts to continue observing social customs like untouchability, casteism, strictly vegetarian diet in case of the Brahmins and non-vegetarianism of the lower castes, etc. The missionaries presumed that having learnt the tenets of Christianity, over a period of time the converts would give up untouchability and casteism. This proved wrong.

The native high caste missionaries may have found nothing amiss in all this. As a result, the walls of casteism continued to separate the Indian Christians from each other for nearly four centuries after they gave up Hinduism. Till the twentieth century, the erstwhile high caste Christians continued to be vegetarians and no inter-caste marriages took place within the Christian community.

Cyril Bruce Firth says- "On the whole, the Roman Catholic Church did not directly address the problem of

casteism. It was assumed that casteism is an inevitable social aspect of life in India, therefore it was permitted to have social strata as per caste in the Christian community. Still, due to education, casteism was curtailed. It condemned the extreme casteism in the form of untouchability and hoped that unity will slowly grow in the society."<sup>1</sup>

### **'DALIT IS DIGNIFIED'**

The dalit converts to Christianity were initially referred to by the Catholic Church as 'Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin' (CSCO). This term was frequently used since the First National Convention of Christian leaders held in Bangalore in 1978. After the 1970s and in the 1980s, the term 'dalit Christians' was accepted in the Christian circles of south India. Like the famous phrase- 'black is beautiful', the phrase, 'dalit is dignified' found acceptance with the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement which began to take strong roots in south India after the mid 1980s.

The term 'dalit Christian' had led to greater awareness among the dalit Protestant Christians as early as 1970s. The national conference of All India Catholic Union (AICU) held in 1989 passed a resolution formalising the use of 'dalit Christians' in reference to the Scheduled Caste Christians. This very conference also dedicated the 1990s as the 'decade of the dalit Christians'.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of discrimination towards the dalits in churches and across the Christian community was discussed for the first time at the meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) held in Bangalore in

1969.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, the CBCI has made substantial efforts to remove casteism within the Christian community and to secure reservations and other concessions for the dalit Christians.

The general body meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India held in Goa in 1986 appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Bishop Cheriyankunnel to take up the cause of Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Backward Classes.<sup>3</sup>

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## 5.

### Reservations to Dalit Christians during the British Regime

The effort to ensure adequate opportunities for progress through reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) converted to Christianity, are on since the British Raj. In 1925, the then Governor of Bombay Presidency had issued a directive that 'Indian Christians' should be treated as backward communities for the purpose of recruitment to the posts of clerks. As per the directive, Anglo-Indians, Goans, East Indians and Mangalorians, were considered progressive while all other Indian Christians were considered backward communities<sup>1</sup> and some posts of clerks were reserved for them.

It is a matter of regret that almost nobody took advantage of this facility. Even today, in the post - Independent era, those declared as backward communities do not benefit from reservations and other concessions available to them. Similar was the case with backward Christians in those days.

In 1945, once again a directive was issued to extend educational facilities to the dalit Christians. As per this directive, instead of extending facilities to every one who

was converted to Christianity from the SCs and STs, the district collector and officers from the Scheduled Castes department were authorised to issue certificates regarding backwardness based on an individual's social, and financial position.<sup>2</sup> This step was apparently taken to keep away the East Indians, Goans whose financial state was sound, from availing the reservations.

The British had provided reservations and other concessions to the Hindu backward castes. The European missionaries were trying hard to secure these concessions for the dalit Christians as well. This can be seen from the following article published in the March 1946 edition of the Marathi monthly '*Niroopya*' bought out by the Jesuit priests since 1903:

#### 'CONCESSIONS TO CHRISTIANS'

It gives a great pleasure to announce that the task taken in hand by 'The Maharashtra Catholic Mandal', during the last two to three months has succeeded. Christians are considered among the financially well-to-do communities. Therefore whatever facilities extended to the untouchables were not extended to the Christians. Now the government has understood the injustice done and has legislated as follows- 'All those Christians whose financial and social state is like the untouchables should receive facilities for education like other untouchables. However, for establishing the case of a Christian for such a help a certificate from a District Collector or from a designated officer deputed for welfare of backward people is required.' The government should be thanked for this legislation as the injustice prevailing so far has been eradicated.<sup>3</sup>

Keeping the same practice alive, in the post-independence time, the Union home department directed all the States of

the country to extend facilities and concessions to economically backward Christians from Scheduled Castes vide their ordinance, dated February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1951. During the same time the Union education department through their directive (F 3/450 - 54) dated 13 February 1951, asked all the States that the Christians from SCs communities, if educationally and economically backward, be included in the OBC category.<sup>4</sup>

However, the concessions were not made automatically applicable to Christians. The two directives mentioned above were at the discretion of government officers who were to decide whether or not a dalit Christian was eligible for such concessions.

In spite of these directives, the dalit Christian community could not derive any benefits of reservations and other facilities. They lacked political or social leadership, a fact that holds true even today, to educate them about their rights and help them claim benefits. As a result all the concessions or benefits have remained on paper. While the dalit communities belonging to other religions were availing of the benefits to make progress, the dalit Christians continued to struggle in isolation.

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2. *Ibid* (p. 25, 26).
3. *'Niropya'* Marathi monthly, March 1946.
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## 6.

# Reservations to SCs, STs, and Dalit Sikhs

After Independence, during the drafting of the Indian Constitution, it was decided to grant reservations and other concessions to the erstwhile untouchables and tribes, who were subjected to injustices for centuries. A list of Scheduled Castes and Schedules Tribes was prepared. As per clause 341(1) of the Constitution, the right to include various castes and tribes in the list has been conferred on the President of India. Similarly, according to clause 341(2), rights have been conferred to make amends or include other castes in the list.

Based on this clause, the President issued an order on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1950 stating that all those who do not follow Hinduism could not be included in the Scheduled Castes. The third paragraph of the order however said that "notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Hindus alone were to get the reservations and other facilities meant for Scheduled Castes. Those untouchables, who accepted Sikhism and Christianity were denied these facilities.

The dalit Sikhs and neo Buddhists raised their voice of protest. Therefore the rules were changed and a decision was taken to make reservations and other facilities applicable to dalit Sikhs in 1956 and to neo Buddhists in 1990. Using the strength of unity, the dalit non Hindus like dalit Sikhs and neo Buddhists secured reservations and other facilities. The dalit Christians of south India too demanded and were granted these rights and concessions. The same rights and facilities were made applicable to the tribal Christians from north and northeast. The dalit Christians in Maharashtra, however, have remained deprived of their just rights to this date.

### **RESERVATIONS GRANTED TO DALIT SIKHS**

According to the legislations of 1950 and 1956, the benefits of reservations and other facilities were restricted to the backwards among Hindus and Sikhs, denying the same to the converted Christians and Buddhists coming from the same dalit communities. Fr. Jerome D'Souza, a Jesuit priest and former Principal of Tiruchirapalli-based St Joseph's College and Chennai-based Loyola College, was a Member of India's Constitutive Assembly. Dr. H.C. Mukherjee, a Christian leader from West Bengal, was another of the Constitutive Assembly.

Both Fr. D'Souza and Dr. Mukherjee are said to have been responsible for doing away with constitutional provisions for reservation of seats in the legislatures for linguistic and religious minorities. They opined that such reserved constituencies would endanger national unity. Due to their effective stand, the resolution was dropped.<sup>2</sup> Fr. D'Souza and Dr. Mukherjee emphasised that the



majority should look after the interests of linguistic and religious minorities, and the minorities should not have any doubts in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

When the issue of reservation policy was discussed in the Constitution Committee, it was opined by majority of the members that the reservation facility be given only to untouchables from the Hindu and Sikh religion.

Fr. D'Souza in his address to the Parliament on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1951 stated that the reservations and other concessions given to dalits should be extended to dalit Christians as well, and there should be no injustice because of their religion. This was the last speech of Fr. D'Souza as a member of the Constitutive Assembly. He felt that as the holy work of the Constitutive Assembly was over, his role as an M.P. was also over. Being a priest, he had no interest in active politics or elections and so he retired.

Fr. D'Souza had strongly emphasised that keeping in view the spirit of giving reservations to the dalits there should be no injustice to the dalit Christians as conveyed in the newly formed Constitution of the country. Fr. D'Souza requested all representatives of Scheduled Castes in Parliament that all those Scheduled Caste peoples who were converted to Christianity should not be denied the facilities just because of their religion.<sup>4</sup>

In 1950, besides those within the Hindu fold, a few untouchable castes like Ramdasia and Majhabi who were converted to Sikhism, were recognised as Scheduled Castes. Later in 1956, all untouchable castes among the Sikhs were also recognised as Scheduled Castes.

In 1956, the followers of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar under his leadership embraced Buddhism. It was then that the issue of reservations and other facilities for untouchables from other religions was raised in the Supreme Court.

The clarification given on this subject matter was that, there is recognition for these untouchable castes in Hinduism, however, in Buddhism, Christianity or other religions such castes do not exist. However the definition, 'What cannot be cast off is caste' was conveniently overlooked. The religious conversions changed neither caste nor social or economic backwardness. Still by denying reservations and concessions an injustice was done to scores of dalits.

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4. *Ibid* (pp. 214-221).

## 7.

### Reservations denied to Neo Buddhists

*(Dalit Christians are also denied reservations on similar grounds)*

On March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1970, Madhu Limaye, Socialist leader and a Member of Parliament from Maharashtra, tabled a Private Bill in Parliament, demanding the same legal protection for Muslims, Christians and other minorities, as the Scheduled Caste Hindus.<sup>1</sup>

About three decades ago, there was tremendous opposition to granting the status of Scheduled Castes to the neo Buddhists. It was said that untouchability and casteism prevails only in Hindu religion and that there is no sanction for these two customs in Buddhism and Christianity. It was also argued that the conversion of the Hindu untouchables to other religions transformed their social and economical conditions and therefore, they did not need reservations for their upliftment.

The arguments put forward to deny reservations to neo Buddhists need to be read in detail. Because these same arguments are now reiterated to deny the same status to dalit Christians. The neo Buddhists have now been granted reservations and other concessions by this time.

Interestingly, if one replaces the word 'neo Buddhists' with 'dalit Christians', it fits in very well as the issues involved in demand for reservations to dalit Christians are the same.

On November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1977, Republican Party of India (RPI) MPs N. H. Kumbhare and R. H. Gavai began their fast unto death in front of the Parliament in New Delhi. They were demanding the continuation of reservations and other concessions for all those dalits who had converted to Buddhism and Christianity. They wanted nothing less than the facilities made available to dalit Hindus.

When the issue of the fasting MPs came up in the Parliament, the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai and Union Home Minister Charan Singh declared that reservations and concessions meant for the Harijans (dalits) could not be extended to the neo Buddhists. Desai also said that though he was prepared to accept neo Buddhists as dalits, he could not consider them to be Scheduled Castes some 20 years after they had given up Hinduism to become Buddhists.

### **PRIME MINISTER DESAI ON RESERVATIONS TO NEO BUDDHISTS**

Kumbhare called on Prime Minister Desai on 2 November 1977. The following dialogue took place between them.<sup>2</sup>

**Kumbhare:** "Please try to understand that there has been no change in the status of neo Buddhists after their conversion, they are still victims of untouchability and poverty."

**Desai:** "I had not asked them to change religion."

**Kumbhare:** "I have approached you because you are the leader

of the nation. This is an injustice to the neo Buddhists”

**Desai:** “You may argue for 10 days and I may continue replying to all your queries. All this happened 15 years ago, I have not done it.”

**Kumbhare:** “If that decision was incorrect, the government can change it now.”

**Desai:** “I do not think the decision taken was wrong. If concessions are given to the neo Buddhists today, the Muslims and Christians will also make similar demand.”

**Kumbhare:** “But we are erstwhile Scheduled Castes and eligible for special concessions. When the Constitution has granted the freedom of religion, this is over-riding the Constitution.”

**Desai:** “You can go to the court. Government will accept the verdict of the court.”

The political forces ruling Maharashtra could not afford to ignore the neo Buddhists in the State in a similar manner. The neo Buddhists in Maharashtra were a political force to reckon. Therefore, soon after the formation of the Maharashtra State in 1960, the government of Maharashtra issued a special order and made non-statutory educational and other concessions applicable to neo Buddhists. While doing so, the dalit Christians were completely ignored. In absence of political awareness and an effective leadership, the dalit Christians did not even realise that they were being discriminated.

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## 8.

### **Dalits' Right to Reservations continues after Conversion – Dr. Ambedkar**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, had emphasised that even after giving up Hinduism and accepting Buddhism or any other religion, the right to reservations and concessions remained unaltered. Babasaheb, having drafted the Constitution of our country, must have definitely known the legal and social basis for the statements he made. He embraced Buddhism along with thousands of his followers in Nagpur in 1956. After the mass conversion ceremony, he explained his stand on conversion, while assuring his followers that even after the conversion, reservations would continue for the converted dalits. Dr. Ambedkar's address is an excellent example of his immense brilliance, his self-confidence and his concern for the dalits.

Some people do ask – 'if the right to reservation is still demanded after conversion, then why resort to conversion at all?' Dr. Ambedkar has explained the need for conversion, besides giving an assurance to his followers that whatever concessions he had helped them gain, he would ensure that the same would be given to them even

after giving up the Hindu religion.

Dr. Ambedkar in his speech said, "The press and many people have criticised me for the mission I have initiated. Some have criticised me severely. According to them, I am misguiding my poor, innocent untouchable people. They are instigating some of us by saying that untouchables would remain as they were even after conversion while they would be foregoing their existing concessions. They are asking them to go by the path already marked for them. If there is suspicion in the minds of some young and old people, it is our duty to dispel it"

Dr. Ambedkar further says," Yesterday, a Brahmin youth came to me and said, - there are reserved seats for you in Parliament and Assemblies, why do you forego them?" I answered, "You become Mahar and fill up those vacancies in Parliament and the Assemblies. Whenever there is a vacancy, it is filled. Some Brahmins and many others apply for it. Why don't you Brahmins become Mahars and fill the reserved seats as well? My question to them is why do they have to cry when we suffer loss?"

'As a matter of fact, human beings love dignity and not benefits', Dr. Ambedkar said, adding that the aim of the conversion was to lead a life of dignity and honour.

Dr. Ambedkar said, "Even though, we have become Buddhists, I am absolutely confident that I would retain our political rights. I cannot say what will happen after my death. This movement ( to retain reservations for dalits after conversion) will need tremendous work. I have given a thorough thought to circumvent the problems, to put in efforts and to argue the case for the same. Whatever concessions I have acquired are for my people. I am

confident that the one who acquired these rights will help secure the same once again. I myself have been instrumental in granting of these rights and concessions and I am sure I will get them again. You should therefore trust me for the time being. I shall prove that there is no substance in the propaganda by the opposition.”

Two months after the mass conversion ceremony, Dr. Ambedkar died in New Delhi. And a new question arose; whether the untouchables and neo-Buddhists should enjoy the right to reservations and concessions after they had given up Hinduism. Dr. Ambedkar who had emphasised that dalits' right to reservations continued even after their conversion to Buddhism, was no longer there to fight on behalf of the neo Buddhists.

The government of Maharashtra, however, under its own special powers, decided to continue the concessions to the neo Buddhists. At the national level, these reservations and concessions were denied in totality to Dr. Ambedkar's followers on the grounds of their conversion. The neo Buddhists in the country had to struggle for over two and half decades to get their just rights restored. The Janata Dal government at the Centre, under the progressive leadership of Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh, at last extended the reservations and other concessions to the neo Buddhists at the national level. An injustice meted out to dalit Sikhs was done away in 1956, the neo Buddhists too received justice in 1990. The dalit Christians in the country, however, continue to await a messiah who would deliver justice to them.



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## 9.

### Initial moves to organise Dalit Christians

The first convention of the dalit Christians in Maharashtra was held before independence at Rahata near Shirdi in Ahmednagar district in 1946.<sup>1</sup> It was convened by Fr. Pius Geisel and Fr. Ivo Meyer, the two German Jesuits, who have played an important role in establishment of major institutions in Ahmednagar district and Pune city. The Rahata meet was the first effort to organise this illiterate and downtrodden community to fight for its rights. It was noteworthy that J. S. Abhang who chaired this convention was just a college student then. (Abhang who now lives in Mumbai has to this date continued to work for the upliftment of dalit Christians).

However, the conference organised to make dalit Christians self-reliant could not achieve its objectives. By then, the community had started relying heavily on the foreign missionaries and desired that the missionaries should find solutions to all their problems. (To a large extent, this mentality of the community especially in rural regions has not changed to this date) Due to this attitude, at the conference, the leaders of the community voiced the need for a school for their children and said the missionaries should open the school at a conveniently located place.

The convener of the meet, Fr. Geisel, headed the Catholic Marathi Mission for the districts of Pune and Ahmednagar. With his initiative, a school— Dnyanmata (Mother of knowledge) Vidyalaya— was started in 1948 at Sangamner in Ahmednagar district. The establishment of the school was a major milestone in the development of the dalit Christians in the region.

Till 1980, Dnyanmata Vidyalaya was the only secondary school with a boarding facility where the dalit Christian children from various parishes in Ahmednagar, Aurangabad and Nasik districts could complete their secondary education. Until the late 1970s, the children belonging to this community from Ahmednagar district used to complete primary education at St. Teresa's School at Haregaon near Shrirampur and then shift to Dnyanmata for secondary education. The situation improved in 1980 when Fr. Nelson Machado introduced secondary education at the Haregaon school as well. A majority of the matriculates or graduates presently in their fifties or forties are almmater of these two rural institutions.

### **HAREGAON MEETS DEMANDS RESERVATIONS (1950)**

The second conference of the dalit Christians, held in 1950 at Haregaon in Shrirampur taluka of Ahmednagar district, demanded reservations and other concessions for dalit Christians. Fr. Geisel was in chair this time and there was an increased awareness in the community about the injustice being meted out to them. Even though born untouchables, they were being deprived of reservations on the grounds of conversion to Christianity.

Another difference was the involvement of native Christians. Earlier only foreign missionaries were involved in organising the community. The list of volunteers included M. G. Dive, the Ranavare brothers, Anandrao Ohol, M.S. Kadam, M. U. Darole, Louis Brahmane, Michael A. Kadam from Pune, B. H. Palghadmal, F.G. Gaikwad, M. P. Salve, Bapu K. Muntode, Anand Shelke, G. D. Brahmane, Mede Guruji from Sangamner, Paulas Rambhaji Pandit, Gopaji Pandit, Gerald K. Muntode from Haregaon, Changdeorao Tribhuvan and Kashinath Gaikwad of Tilaknagar, V.G. Bagul, Anandrao Parkhe from Marathwada, Manohar Shingare from Malighogargaon, and Pathare from Borsar. All of them put in painstaking efforts to make the conference a success.

This could be considered as the first political conference of the Marathi Christian community. A resolution was passed during the conference that all concessions that are applicable to the Scheduled Castes communities should be extended to the dalit Christians who belonged to these backward communities. The 'Maharashtriya Catholic Sangh' was also established during these proceedings. J. S. Abhang was elected president of the working committee formed at the meeting. F.G. Gaikwad was the vice-president, Gerald K. Muntode and B. A. Palghadmal were the secretaries, and Fr. Felix was the treasurer.

Later on, the new association organized conferences on the issue of reservations at Vahegaon Manjari in Vaijapur taluka of Aurangabad district and at Sangamner, Kendal, Songaon, Shrirampur and Tilaknagar in Ahmednagar district.

Thereafter, a delegation of the Christian community called on Balasaheb Kher, the then Chief Minister of Bombay State, and submitted a charter of their demands. During the same time, the 'Maharashtra Catholic Sangh' started publishing a Marathi magazine '*Pragati*' to create awareness in the society about the right to reservations. Unfortunately, differences cropped up among the activists and this movement met with a premature end.

A bimonthly titled '*Catholic Maharashtra*' was launched in Pune in 1960 and was edited by Lucia Peter Sangle. Around the same time Fr. Matthew Lederle, the director of 'Snehasadan Ashram' in Pune, took a special initiative to organise the dalit Christians in Maharashtra. Fr. Lederle, a German national who had participated in the second world war and was also held as a prisoner of war before he joined the Jesuits, got himself deeply involved in organising the educated dalit Christian youth.

On May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1962, activists like Dadasaheb Gaikwad, M.P. Salve, Bhausaheb Abhang, Francis Bhosle, T. D. Khedekar and S. U. Darole attended a conference in Pune and discussed various problems of the community. Darole later established the '*Hitvardhak Sangh*' in Mumbai.

### **CATHOLIC-PROTESTANTS' JOINT MEET AT VAIJAPUR**

A joint conference of dalit Catholics and Protestants was held for the first time with the initiative of Amaravati's Bishop Dominic Rosario at Vaijapur town in Aurangabad district. This conference proved a new ray of hope for the Marathi dalit Christians.

In an article in '*Niropya*' monthly, Raphael Pandit of Ahmednagar wrote, "Why should we Harijan Christians remain without representation in the Maharashtra State Assembly? The denial of such concessions to the Harijan Christians is due to the absence of unified voice, organisation and struggle to secure rights. Nobody is prepared to take any initiative in this connection. Nobody is prepared for selfless social service. Do we have leaders who are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the welfare of the society? The situation is difficult, but we must face it. It would pain anybody's heart to see the starving Harijan Christians at the drought relief camps in Ahmednagar district. They stand on the sides and watch helplessly as relief material is distributed among the Hindu Harijans. Will there be any worse humiliation for the Christian community if someone says to these hapless souls, 'Become Hindus to get these concessions'?"<sup>2</sup>

#### REFERENCES

1. '*Upekshit Khristi Samaj*' (p. 32).
2. '*Niropya*' monthly, 1966 (pp. 154,155).

## 10.

### Dalit Christians Manifesto on Right to Reservations (1970)

*Karmaveer* Dadasaheb Gaikwad, a close associate of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Republican Party of India (RPI) leader, helped the dalit Christian community to organise a convention to press the demand for reservations. The rally was held at Tilaknagar near Shrirampur in Ahmednagar district, on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1970. The convention was organised by Fr. Leo Desai, a Jesuit, who was fighting for the cause of the dalit Christians.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the local people, nearly 4,500 people from Mumbai, Pune, Vidarbha and Marathwada regions attended the convention. The then Union Minister of State for Food and Agriculture Annasaheb Shinde and MLA Dadasaheb Rupavate, a leader of the dalits in Maharashtra, were present as guests.

An appeal was circulated in the monthly '*Niropya*' of May 1970 for the occasion, the excerpts of which are given below: -

"We are pleased to inform you that a Maharashtra-level rally of the Christians will be held on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1970.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Vasant Rao Naik is expected to grace the chair of the convention. Union law and social welfare minister P. Govind Menon, Union Minister for State for Food and Agriculture Annasaheb Shinde and several MPs and MLAs will remain present for the convention. India is a secular state. However, it has been observed that there is discrimination in the concessions and rights given to people of other religions and Christians. This convention provides us with an opportunity not only to voice this injustice but also to find solutions. The success of this convention depends on the co-operation of you all. This convention is a mission of the Christian community for their own welfare and it does not have any connection whatsoever with any political party. All correspondence or donations may please be addressed to the convener of the rally, Fr. Leo Desai, St. John Church, Camp, Ahmednagar.' T. B. Chandekar (Joint Secretary), D. M. Tribhuvan (Gen. Secretary), Dr. D. K. Salve (Chairman, Action committee)

The then chief minister Vasant Rao Naik was unable to attend the convention. He sent a message, which along with an account of the convention, was published by '*Niroopya*' in its June 1970 issue.

The following Charter of Demands was passed in the convention. This charter of demand in fact is the declaration of right to reservations by the dalit Christian Community.<sup>2</sup>

### THE CHARTER OF DEMANDS

1. We Christians gathered here at Tilaknagar in Shrirampur taluka of Ahmednagar district accept our secular Constitution. In our opinion, there should not



be any injustice to a person because he belongs to a particular caste, tribe, race or religion. Therefore, a person belonging to the Christian community or any other religion should not be denied government concessions. We strongly demand that whosoever has been deprived of these concessions because of his/her religion must rightfully get them immediately.

2. Our programme for concessions is as follows: -

*Educational concessions*

Exemption from tuition fees, reservation of seats, scholarships, scholarships for college education, scholarships for education abroad and free boarding schools.

*Economic development programme*

Redistribution of uncultivated land, help for improvement of agricultural fields, aid for digging new borewells as well as for repairing the old ones, grants and loans for purchasing improved agricultural implements, grants and loans for purchasing oil pumps.

*Industrial concessions*

Loans and grants for business, training and production centers, and co-operative industrial societies.

*Reserved seats*

We should have reserved seats in assemblies, municipalities, zilla parishads, taluka committees, village councils, co-operative societies, and banks. Besides, we should have reserved seats in government and semi-government institutions.

***Housing, Health and other Schemes***

We are not demanding the above-mentioned concessions afresh, as these are being given to our Hindu brethren but we have been denied the same because we are Christians.

3. We are extremely aggrieved due to our poor social and financial conditions. Unless and until we get the government concessions as has been given to our Hindu and neo Buddhist brethren, we cannot progress in parity financially and socially.
4. Secular Constitution of our country cannot tolerate injustice under the name of religion. Therefore;
  - a. So long as the concessions are being denied to us, we feel that the very principles of our Constitution are being trampled upon.
  - b. We strongly protest the draft Bill tabled in the Parliament, which defines Scheduled Castes and Tribes, to be based on religion alone and we request the Government of India to turn down this discrimination. (Ref:-Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders – Amendment Bill 1967)

We demand that the concessions given to people of other religions should also be given to us in keeping with the principles of equality and justice.

5. We represent millions of Christians from Maharashtra, who have been afflicted and are suffering due to the biased policy of the government. We profoundly demand that the concessions that have been denied to

us for the past 20 years should be given to us without any further delay.

Maharashtra State Christians Association was founded at this convention. Dr. D. K. Salvi was elected president of the association, Harishchandra Ujagare the executive chairman and Satyavan Namdeo Suryawanshi, editor of weekly 'Aapan', was the treasurer.

#### REFERENCES

1. '*Niropya*' monthly, May 1970.
2. '*Niropya*' monthly, June 1970.

## II.

# Justification for Dalit Christians' Right to Reservations

At the Tilaknagar convention, the speech by Fr. M. Nunes on the dalit Christians' right to reservations proved to be very effective. Most of the points from that speech are applicable even today. Therefore, the excerpts of the speech are given below:<sup>1</sup> -

"I am extremely happy to see that you have come to this convention from big and small cities like Mumbai, Pune, Aurangabad and Nasik. Even the villagers from Maharashtra have been inspired to attend this convention. They have traveled long distances and faced hardships to be here.

Our Christian community has been built up through several castes and communities, several religions and varied classes and through different circumstances. There is no place for caste in Christian community. We do not recognise caste and community. The whole world recognises us as followers of Jesus Christ. It is said that the law is an ass. Due to prevalent legal system, we have to mention our erstwhile castes and tribes.

There are doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers, traders, managers, different types of government and semi government officials, social workers amongst you. You have completed your education by supporting yourself or with the help of mission or other social organisations. You are well educated and are on good posts. You can happily have two square meals, have a house to live, have farms and assets, can wear good clothes. Your children can have proper education. You have acquired all comforts through your hard work. I congratulate you on your all-round progress.

We are the people who in the past were not even noticed because the right to live and education was not granted to other than the high castes. Now we have got the right to live as human beings, we are freed of the shackles of casteism and have obtained equal rights.

But my dear brothers, as you have reached high levels, and therefore perhaps you do not want the concessions given by the government to the Scheduled Castes. But our poor fellow beings living in small villages do need all these concessions.

You were freed from difficult circumstances or you have managed to free yourself from these difficult circumstances. In this 20<sup>th</sup> century, the same difficult circumstances still prevail in villages of independent India. Our own relatives living in these villages are looked down upon in the society even today. They are literally trampled. They are totally illiterate. They do not have enough clothes to wear. Right from their birth till death, they have to spend their entire lives in the service of people of high castes.

They are even now humiliated, considered even lower than animals, and are still not liberated even after getting independence.

Yes, this country projects itself as an impartial and secular democratic State in the world. The country has got reputation of being broad-minded, tolerant and co-operative. India allows all religions and philosophies to prosper in this subcontinent. The flag of our Indian culture flies high the world over. I shall be grateful to you for ages, for attending this convention, to help acquire concessions for your deprived brothers who are still suffering- even after being in independent India, to those human beings who are still being treated as animals, in this prosperous India.

Today through this convention, I expect you all to hope in unanimity, harmony, in agreement with a single slogan to help restore rights snatched from our brothers and get back the educational, social and economical concessions. Hope, you will desire to see them on various posts and put in effort to give them housing, clothing, land, education and employment.

### **DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DALIT CHRISTIANS**

The following injustice is being done to us through the secular Indian constitution. -

Since we have got converted to Christianity or Islam, we have not been granted the rights meant for dalits or Scheduled Caste communities. The moment we are baptised, we are included among the developed classes.

Yes, our thinking has improved because of Christian ideology, our attitude became better. But our progress was interrupted by the Indian Constitution. The government is responsible for our degradation.

There was no change in our economic and social conditions due to conversion. Due to initiation in Christianity, there will be an appropriate change in our psychology, but proportionate change in financial and social status is impossible.

Thus even a child will be able to tell you that including the people converted from Scheduled Caste communities to Christianity in the developed lot only on paper and snatching their Constitutional and natural rights is a grave injustice.

You do not need a philosopher to come to this conclusion. All Hindu brothers and sisters and relatives of a converted Christian are eligible for all types of concessions. They get financial aid for housing, education and business. There are seats reserved for them in elections and jobs.

Then what is the difference between a dalit Christian and a dalit Hindu ? That, one was baptised and the other was not !

Furthermore, if relatives of a converted Christian convert themselves further as Buddhists, then their change of heart and conversion is not considered as a conversion and even then they enjoy all the concessions reserved by the Constitution for the Scheduled Castes.

**A MIRACLE CAUSED BY BAPTISM!**

Just see the miracle! If you are baptised, then you upgrade after your conversion, but if you convert from Hindu to Buddhism, even after the conversion the government gives them all concessions. It is indeed commendable and just!

Why does the government grant concessions to neo Buddhists ? The reason is, even if these Hindu dalits embrace Buddhism, their economical and social condition remains the same even after conversion. Anybody will agree to it that, even after their conversion, their financial and social condition does not change.

Then why does the government deny similar concessions to dalits after their conversion to Christianity? Why does the government feel that we Christians progress on conversion but neo Buddhists do not? This logic employed by the Government is strange as it is causing grave injustice to peace loving people like us.

We Christians are peace loving, law abiding and loyal. We do not get involved in any activity against the government. We serve our country and countrymen in various ways through the educational and social field. In spite of being a minority, we have schools, hospitals, dispensaries, social offices, and agricultural improvement centres, various social and financial and varied schemes that no other majority or minority people or religious institutions provide. Still, as if as a reward to our diligent work, injustice is meted to us.

To cite an example of injustice, - today if a person from backward class, who had had embraced Christianity, gives



up Christianity and converts into Hinduism or neo Buddhism, then the charisma of baptism vanishes in no time and the same person is pushed back into the Scheduled Caste at that very moment.

His supposedly improved state while being a Christian disappears immediately. Once again, his economic and social condition becomes difficult. Further, there is a world of difference in his psychological state also.

Is it justified? Or is the government maintaining a biased view intentionally? Or, is it a blatant oppression of the peace loving, law abiding Christian community? Or is it a kind of government control on conversion to Christianity? Now it is only for us to decide as to what we are going to do about this injustice, oppression and this partiality.

Today, it is an important day. This task is not only of Fr. Leo Desai alone, or of the executive committee, or of people only from Ahmednagar district or of people from Maharashtra alone. It is of the entire dalit Christian community from across India. Therefore every person, every family, every village, and every State must support this cause.

Further, people from the majority, and other religions should help the afflicted dalits from the minority to restore their rights. This manifests the unity of the country, broadmindedness and universal brotherhood. If the rights of the minorities are trampled, it is not only the question of snatching the just rights of the poor, but it is the question of India's prestige.

India and Indian people alone have established a real secular democracy in the world. But misleading the minority and people of other religions, snatching away their constitutional and natural rights, will give rise to a void in the secular Constitution.

So, dear brothers let us have determination. In our own ways, let us request the government of Maharashtra and the central government for the implementation of these laws. Let us do it by following principles of Christianity in a disciplined manner, without arson and rioting, without any loss of life, without slandering our rulers, as per the Constitution, abiding by the law, being just and unanimous.

*Jai Maharashtra! Jai Hind!"*

## REFERENCES

1. '*Niropya*' monthly July 1970 (pages 97 to 100) and August 1970 (pages 116 to 118).

## 12.

### Stir by the Bishops' Council and Graduates Association

A campaign was launched all over India from April 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, 1975 for securing the same rights and concessions to dalit Christians as made available to other dalits, recognised as Scheduled Castes. The campaign was launched by the Catholic Bishops' Council of India (CBCI).

But Christians who were not from Scheduled Castes background were not enthusiastic to observe such a week. Fr. Prabhudhar, the then editor of Marathi monthly '*Niropya*', expressed his strong displeasure in a stinging article in the July 1975 issue of the magazine. It is as given below:<sup>1</sup>

#### **'APATHY OF MUMBAITES AND REASONS FOR THEIR LUKEWARM RESPONSE'**

Out of 5,42,429 Catholics of Maharashtra, only 87,429 have been converted from backward classes (the numbers have been taken from the Catholics directory of December 1972). Thus out of every six Catholics, one is a neo Christian. The other five Catholics may not appreciate the sufferings of this dalit Christian. The Protestants are of the opinion that accepting concessions meant for backward class means

being disloyal to Christ. This opinion influenced some Catholics and hence they did not show the expected enthusiasm. Mumbaites were even less enthusiastic. There are two reasons for it. The government of India decorated a Cardinal with '*Padma Vibhushan*' and a Congressman from Mumbai was given ministership. Therefore, Mumbaites presumed that they must speak the truth, but softly. Mumbaites are known for taking such a moderate stand. Fr. Leo Desai, the leader of dalit Christians in the State, has been slightly disappointed due to this wavering attitude of Mumbaites. But he should not get disappointed. This is just the beginning. The great leaders like, Bishop Thumma who have come from the dalit community, are leading this struggle. There is also '*Niropya*' for some canvassing. Our people have to realise that in the present circumstances in India, you will not get anything without going through a struggle".

### **PRAGAT PADVIDHAR SANGHATANA'S ROLE**

Fr. Matthew Lederle is among the Christian religious leaders who motivated the Marathi dalit Christian community to achieve academic, social and economic progress. Significantly, he never worked in any places in Ahmednagar, Nasik and Aurangabad districts where the population of Marathi dalit Christians is significantly high.

Under his guidance, Pragat Padvidhar Sanghatana (Progressive Graduates Association) was established at a camp of Marathi dalit Christian college students, held at Haregaon in Ahmednagar district in 1970. Snehasadan in Pune, the ashram established by Fr. Lederle in Pune, was the headquarter of the Sanghatana.<sup>2</sup> The Progressive

Graduates Association presented a memorandum to the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai on behalf of the dalit Christians on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1977.

Vasantrao Brahmane, a social worker from village Songaon, went on a hunger strike in front of the office of the Ahmednagar District Collector on 13 August 1977 to demand reservations to dalit Christians. Meetings of Christian community were also organised at Sangamner on August 14<sup>th</sup> and August 15<sup>th</sup> the same year.

Later, a 16 member delegation presented a memorandum to the then Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil. The delegation was led by Shrirampur's then MLA Govindrao Adik. The delegation demanded that all the concessions enjoyed by the untouchable communities and the neo Buddhists should be given to those in the dalit Christians who belonged to untouchable classes.

The then Minister of State for Home Sharad Pawar, who was present there, also supported this demand.

After this meeting, it was decided to revive 'The Maharashtra State Christian Association'. Harishchandra Ujagare was elected the chairman of the provisional committee appointed for this purpose. Advocate D.M.Tribhuvan was made the vice-chairman and Sonyabapu Waghmare the secretary. With great enthusiasm, this committee held meetings at Nasik, Shrirampur, and Haregaon etc.

The majority supported a demand for concessions put forth by the committee. But some people from the community itself strongly opposed the demand. They were

of the opinion that in spite of sharing a historical background with the 'dalits', the Christians should not accept reservations and other concessions. Some meetings organised by dalit Christian leaders including some priests in Ahmednagar district were also disrupted by dalit Christians opposing the move to label neo Christians as dalits.

Later the Progressive Graduates Association pursued the issue. On November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1977, the Association, in co-operation with the Catholic Association, organised a meeting at Snehasadan in Pune.

In 1977, the Janata Party government led by Prime Minister Moraraji Desai appointed a commission under the leadership of Bindeshwar Prasad Mandal, which was to prepare the revised list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). On social, economic and educational basis, 3,747 castes of the country (272 castes from Maharashtra) were included in the OBC category by the Mandal Commission.

Significantly, all the untouchables and backward classes from Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists were included in OBC. For the 52 per cent population of the OBC in the country, the Mandal Commission proposed 27 per cent reservation in the government jobs.

## REFERENCES

1. *Niroopya* monthly, July 1975.
2. *Niroopya* monthly July 1972.

### 13.

## **Dalit Christians in Maharashtra included in OBCs**

The efforts of the Marathi dalit Christian leaders culminated in an order issued by the social welfare department of Maharashtra on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1978. As per this order, people who were converted to Christianity from the Scheduled Castes were included in OBC category (Social welfare, Cultural activity, Tourism and Sports department, Government order no.57485/D-V). Thus neo Christians became eligible for reservations and concessions applicable to the OBCs.<sup>1</sup>

In the list of OBCs for the entire Maharashtra, dalit Christians (converted from backward classes) were placed at the end, at serial no.192. 'Tamboli', a section of Muslims converted from backward class, was also included in the same list. Thus the government of Maharashtra accepted that social backwardness is not related to religion.

It was the first major success for the organised Christian community in Maharashtra. Though the dalit Christians did not get the status of Scheduled Caste community, it was accepted in the government records that the Marathi neo Christian community were from the untouchable

community. For the first time, it was underlined that the community had a just right to reservations and other facilities enjoyed by the other dalit communities. The Progressive Graduates Association had played an important role in this entire process.

### **MEETING WITH CHIEF MINISTER SHARAD PAWAR (1978)**

On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1978, Chief Minister Sharad Pawar invited a special meeting at the Sahyadri Guest House in Mumbai to discuss the problems of dalit Christians. A delegation under the leadership of F. M. Pinto, MLA, held three-hour-long discussion with the chief minister. The delegation had representatives from Catholic and Protestant communities. Pawar suggested the formation of a representative delegation to hold discussions with the government from time to time. Thus the Maharashtra Christian Forum came into existence.<sup>2</sup>

In 1978, while Moraraji Desai was the Prime Minister, by a presidential order 1950, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Bill was presented in the Parliament. The Bill was in connection with the changes in the list of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The Bill was later handed over to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) for further deliberations. There were 14 MPs in the committee, which was led by Suraj Bhan.

In Bombay, Harishchandra Ujagare pleaded very effectively on behalf of the Maharashtra Christian Forum during the meeting with the JPC. A memorandum was also presented to the committee on behalf of the Forum at Aurangabad. But the Janata Party government collapsed



before completion of its term and Parliament was also dissolved. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Bill also lapsed due to these development.

## REFERENCES

1. *'Upekshit Khristi Samaj'* (p. 40).
2. *Ibid* (p. 41).

## 14.

### Reservations extended to Neo Buddhists

During the Janata Dal government's regime led by Prime Minister V P Singh, a legislation amending the Constitutional order meant for Scheduled Castes was passed in 1990, thus granting the special right to reservations to untouchables converted to Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> This was a major step towards achieving social justice in the country.

If the untouchables converted to Buddhism could get reservations and concessions, then by the same logic the former untouchables in Christianity or any other religion could also stake claim to the same concessions. But unlike the neo Buddhists, the neo Christians lacked the political will and organisational power to pursue their demand. Thus political parties, which cater to their vote banks, paid little or no attention to the dalit Christians just demand.

Eighty five per cent of India's Buddhist population lives in Maharashtra, most of whom are followers of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and embraced Buddhism with him in Nagpur. Many Scheduled Caste people outside Maharashtra too were staunch followers of Dr. Ambedkar Babasaheb but not all of them were converted to Buddhism.

Maharashtra government had granted concessions to its neo Buddhists some two decades ahead of the Central government.<sup>2</sup> The first Chief Minister Y B Chavan had taken a very progressive decision soon after the formation of Maharashtra in 1960. A government order passed on 6 July 1960 put an end to the injustice done to the neo Buddhists by granting them all the concessions meant for Hindu Scheduled Castes.<sup>3</sup>

However, the dalit Christians in Maharashtra till date have been denied similar concessions. The community leaders failed in carrying out a sustained movement at that point of time. While the demand for concessions at par with neo Buddhists and others was put up at a later stage, it failed to influence the State's political leadership though dalit Christian vote banks are sizeable in Ahmednagar, Nasik, Pune, and Latur and Aurangabad districts.

Sometime in 1995, Sitaram Kesari who was then part of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's cabinet announced that his Congress party will make a provision for extending reservations to Muslims and dalit Christians.<sup>4</sup> Some people termed it as a move aimed at wooing the minorities before the general elections in the country. It was since then that the idea of extending reservations to the dalits among the religious minorities began to feature at various political forums.

However, elections were held thereafter and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government came to power in the country. The dalit Christians did not harbour any hope that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Atal Behari Vajpayee will extend reservations to them.

**REFERENCES**

1. Y. D. Phadke '*Khari Hi Nyayachi Reeti*' (p. 207).
2. *Ibid* (p. 207).
3. '*Upekshit Christi Samaj*' (p. 32).
4. Y.D.Phadke '*Khari Hi Nyayachi Reeti*' (p. 224).

## 15.

### The RSS opposes reservations to Dalit Christians

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Balasaheb Deoras had said, "The question of reservations is an internal matter of the Hindu community. There will be no disagreement on the opinion that all of us must have a sympathetic view towards weaker sections of the society. At the same time we should be aware that the society should not get disorganised."<sup>1</sup>

The RSS' stance that 'only the backward castes within the Hindu religion should have the right to reservations; and the moment they convert themselves they shed their backwardness and their right to reservations gets terminated' has been dismissed from time to time by the Central and State governments under different political party's leaderships. The RSS, however, has not changed its stance.

Dr. Y. D. Phadke says, "For the RSS, social justice and equality is confined only to the Hindu community. It can be clearly seen that the same is not applicable to people who either got converted voluntarily or were converted forcibly."<sup>2</sup>

One cannot say that this kind of resistance exists only in the case of Marathi dalit Christians. The same has happened with dalit Christians in other States as well. But in other States, the dalit Christians have organized struggles to secure some concessions. The dalit Christians in Maharashtra have lagged behind on this front.

Some sections of society in Maharashtra are not ready to part with even a small portion of what the Constitution or law has provided them, in the interests of other deprived sections. Phadke has said that their mentality can be compared with that of passengers who manage to enter an overcrowded train at one station and then do not allow other passengers to board at the next station.<sup>3</sup>

#### **DHASAL OPPOSES DALIT CHRISTIANS DEMAND**

Veteran Marathi poet and dalit leader Namdeo Dhasal had led a morcha in Pune on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005, to oppose the dalit Christians' demand for reservations. A Marathi daily had published the following news item next day:<sup>4</sup>

"Pune, June 22 Dalit Panthers president Namdeo Dhasal today accused Congress president Sonia Gandhi and the Democratic Front government of attempting to divide the dalits.

Dhasal made this charge at a morcha organised by the 'Save Reserved Seats Committee'. The Supreme Court has posed a query to the Centre with regard to dalit Christians' demand for grant of concessions available to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Opposing the move, Dhasal said that concessions should not be given to dalit Christians as it would cause division among the dalits. The morcha

commenced from *Samata Bhoomi* (Mahatma Phule memorial) and concluded at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Udyan opposite the district collectorate.

Meanwhile, the Dalit Christians Reservations and Rights Protection Committee also held a counter-morcha. It was led by Republican Yuwa Morcha president Rahul Dangle and Pune city Congress Backward Classes and Tribes' Cell president Milind Gaikwad. The police detained them as a precautionary measure and released them later.

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## 16.

# Reservations to Dalit Christians in South India

As per the special Constitutional rights granted to them, states in the country can grant non-statutory concessions to some communities. Some states have thus granted concessions to its backward communities.

The Supreme Court and the governments led by Prime Ministers V. P. Singh and P V Narasimha Rao did not accept the list of 3,743 OBCs, prepared by the Mandal commission in toto. The Supreme Court accepted the list prepared by the commissions or committees appointed by State governments.

Dr. Phadke says that a mere glance at the list would reveal that in the Indra Sahani case, the apex court had not accepted the argument of RSS that reservations is an internal matter of the Hindus. In the judgment, there is a mention of backward classes as declared by the TamilNadu government on 30 April 1985. According to this declaration, out of a population of 27,05,960 Muslims, 25,60,195 (i.e. 94.61 per cent) were included in backward classes in Tamil Nadu. Similarly out of 31,91,988 Christian population, 25,48,148 (i.e. 79.83 per cent) were included in backward classes.



Consequently, Latin Catholics, Christian Nadars, Christian Shanars, Christian Gramnis, as well as Muslims started getting benefits of reservations. There are also castes like Harijan Christians, Reddy Christians and Kamma Christians in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>1</sup>

On July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1985, on the recommendation of J. M. Ambashankar Commission, the Tamil Nadu government prepared a revised list of backward communities. Those from various Scheduled Castes in the State who embraced Christian religion or whose ancestors got converted to Christianity were included in the dalit Christian category. The dalit Christians from Tamil Nadu started getting benefits of reservations due to the government order on 24 February 1986.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Dr. Y. D. Phadke '*Khari hi Nyayachi Reeti*' (pp. 103, 104).
2. *Ibid* (p. 224).

## Attitude of Urban Christians on Dalitvatva and Reservations

A few members of the dalit Christian community have recently gained social status with their newfound prosperity and English education. This class does not want to be identified as dalit. They want to do away with the past that has been long forgotten along with the dusty villages they originally came from.

It is not as if this urban Christians are not aware of the social reality. One need not be a sociologist to know that caste cannot be shed so easily, by changing one's religion, by dumping the family name or by any other means.

However, in the case of the urban dalit Christian, his religion serves the purpose of a shell that protects him from the prying eyes of the others, and at the same time gives him the feeling of having overcome the limits imposed by Hinduism. It is a fact that a majority of Indian Christians come from erstwhile Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Christian communities from Goa, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and West Bengal too can be included in this category.

The former touchable and untouchable castes and tribes who embraced Christianity left their villages or states and have settled elsewhere. This has helped in getting rid of their caste identity to an extent. The societies they now live in recognises them only as Christians.

Marathi dalit Christians living in urban, cosmopolitan centers like Pune and Mumbai are treated in offices and factories as a species that is highly anglicised and doing comfortably well in life. Therefore, they are not prepared to degrade themselves in the eyes of others by seeking financial and educational concessions for their children. They are not keen on the issue of reservations.

Writer and president of the fourth Marathi dalit *Sahitya Sammelan* Devdatta Husale has said, "I do not feel the need to tell everyone that my family belonged to this caste before conversion to Christianity. But what to say about those who do not even remember this? As a matter of fact, in spite of different religions, the problems of dalit Christians and dalits from other religions are the same. Due to academic progress and financial prosperity, Brahminism has crept in among the urban dalit Christians and the chasm between them and other dalits has widened."<sup>1</sup>

He further says, "If the dalit Christians from Mumbai and Pune visited their native villages, they would realise that high caste people still address their fellow Christians as Mahars, Mangs and Bhangis. They must realise this reality first and then only consider themselves as high caste."<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, one cannot claim that the Marathi dalit Christian community is at par with Christians from other

States when it comes to their presence in the job market, business and industry, financial prosperity and social status. In reality, the so-called 'feel good' factor among the urban Marathi dalit Christians does not hold good.

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2. *Ibid*, (p. 346).

## Solidarity of *Jai Bhim* and *Jai Khrist*

Renowned Marathi Christian poet Shahu Dagdoba Ujagare, had in 1929 dedicated his poetry entitled *Nave Anjan* to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who fought against untouchability.<sup>1</sup> It was the first conscious move on the part of a dalit Christian to establish and maintain close ties between the dalit Christians and the Ambedkarite movement.

Delivering the presidential address at the fifth Marathi *Khristi Sahitya Sammelan* held at De Nobili College in Pune in 1972, Satyavan Namdeo Suryawanshi, editor of Marathi weekly *Aapan* had strongly advocated that the dalits Christians should unite with other dalits and minority communities in the State. His ideology is important even today.

Suryawanshi gave the call for uniting all dalit forces at a time when the dalit movement in the State had just started making its presence felt. The established Marathi literatures and majority of the society had not recognised this separate rebellious ideology till then. Suryawanshi's call came at a time when even the dalit community itself had not realised the potential of the movement. Significantly, Suryawanshi

at that time was editor of a weekly, which was run by the Jesuits.

Suryawanshi enjoys a special place in Marathi literature and also in the dalit movement in Maharashtra. In the 1970s, a series of autobiographies by dalit writers created a major upheaval in Marathi literary circles as well as in the society. The autobiography of Suryawanshi – ‘*Aga Je Kalpile Nahi*’ (‘I had never even imagined this’) published in 1975, was the front-runner of these autobiographies. Suryawanshi had stated in this book that in his childhood, despite being a Christian, he was always treated by the high caste Hindus as a Mahar, an untouchable caste.

Unfortunately, Suryawanshi’s autobiography remained neglected for quite some time due to lack of effective marketing system. Veteran dalit writer and poet Daya Pawar’s autobiography ‘*Baluta*’ and P. E. Sonkamble’s autobiography ‘*Athavaniche Pakshi*’ were published subsequently in 1978<sup>2</sup> and became landmarks in Marathi literature.

In his presidential address at the *Khristi Sahitya Sammelan*, Suryawanshi had said, “In today’s democracy, a handful of Christians have absolutely no value. Even in a democratic set up, the government’s facilities and rights cannot be distributed evenly to all because every community thinks for itself and lives by protecting its own interests. Everyone is trying hard to gain a major share of cream for one’s own community, and gets maximum benefits with the help of majority votes in democracy. Due to this ‘*Might is right*’ situation, the sweet fruits of democracy are being enjoyed by majority communities and

at the same time our poor community is merely watching it in bewilderment. All the minority communities also face a similar situation. However hard we may try and get our community organised and united, we would never be the rulers!. We would never be able to acquire the power to rule. If a dalit Christian writer is shrewd, intellectual and practical, he will realise mere uniting the Christian community would not yield any major benefits for the society. In a democratic set up, some social benefits can be secured only if the people are able to cause some kinds of nuisance to the government or the rulers, if they can cause terror or pose challenges on the basis of their solidarity. A handful and peace-loving Christians can never pose such challenges. Therefore, why should we waste our strength and intellect in running after mirage of securing and protecting welfare and interests of the Christian community?

Instead, let us mingle and be a part of the crowd of those who are helpless, dalit, distressed, ignored, weak and exploited. Let us share their misfortune, their pain, let us wipe out their tears, and while protecting their welfare, and while pleading for them, let us protect our welfare as well. Our interests and welfare are no different from them, nay, without them, we do not have any existence!

Sometimes, referring to my *Aapan* weekly, some of my friends ask me, "You take up issues of Muslims, Buddhists, Harijans and tribals in your weekly very enthusiastically. But in comparison, you are less enthusiastic while fighting for the Christians' issues, why is it so? Who will protect our interest? Who will fight for us Christians? Who will plead for us?" I reply to my friends, "Our interests are not

different from the interests of the sad, exploited and the dalits. One who pleads for these people also pleads for the Christians. Because, I perceive Lord Jesus in every sad person. If some one is making a false and unjust propaganda against the Muslims, he is doing the same against the Christ and defaming Him. If Buddhist women are stripped, I feel my sisters Martha and Maria have been molested.<sup>3</sup>

Christians as well as some others from my native town *Shrirampur* were astonished when they saw a photograph of Dr. Ambedkar prominently placed at the local Catholic parish priest's office. Most of the people are under the impression that they should keep themselves away from the Ambedkarite movement if they are Christians. Marathi writer Avinash Dolas has described this mentality of dalit Christians in following words: "Members of this community find themselves in a fix. On one hand , they looked at Christ for the heavenly abode and on the other hand, there was Dr. Ambedkar who could solve their worldly problems and help them to lead life on this earth. The dalit Christian community was caught in a dilemma. Will they, as Christians, be able to march on the streets, shouting slogans of *Jai Bhim*? Can they, even after remaining true Christians, become Ambedkarites and return the salute of *Jai Bhim* of the Amberkarite brigade?<sup>4</sup>

It was Rev. Arvind Nirmal who succeeded in solving the predicament faced by the dalit Christians in Maharashtra. Rev. Nirmal, an authority on Christian theology, declared that the dalit Christians can retain their umbilical cord with the Ambedkarite movement while still practicing Christianity. Rev. Nirmal who is credited



with bringing in the dalit Christian liberation movement in Maharashtra motivated many dalit Christian writers and social activists to be a part of the Ambedkarite movement.

Rev. Nirmal was a student of Milind College, one of the institutions founded by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He had the fortune to see Dr. Ambedkar from a very close quarter. While in Chennai, he started Christian Dalit Liberation Movement (CDML) . He has edited a book, entitled 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a centenary tribute'.

One of the major contribution of Rev. Nirmal is starting the tradition of holding separate dalit Christians' *Sahitya Sammelans*, Until his death in 1995, he took the initiative to hold the annual sammelans for consecutive four years. Until Rev. Nirmal established this rebellious path in literary circle, the dalit Christians considered themselves as a part of the 'main stream' literary circles although their existence was not even acknowledged there. Rev. Nirmal himself presided over the first and third dalit Christian sahitya sammelans held at Ahmednagar in 1991 and at Lonavala in 1994. The presidents of other sahitya sammelans were S N Suryawanshi (Jalna, 1993), Devdatta Husale (Ahmednagar 1995), Bishop Pradeep Kamble (Pune 2001) and Rev. Subhash Chandorikar (Sangamner 2004).

On behalf of '*Sugava*' magazine of Vilas Wagh and Usha Wagh, and also on behalf of 'Christian Dalit Liberation Movement' (CDML), a seminar was organised in Aurangabad some fifteen years ago. Along with Shantaram Pandere, Sharad Patil and Avinash Dolas literary personalities and leaders from Christian community like, Rev. Nirmal, Anil Dahivadkar, Sunil Adhav also had

participated. <sup>5</sup>The organiser Rev. Nirmal had tried to take Marathi Christian community to Dr. Ambedkar's movement through this seminar.

After the death of Rev. Nirmal, Dr. Gilbert G Londhe, Rev. Chandorikar and Vasant Mhaske have kept up dalit Christians' movement in Maharashtra alive.

Well-known Marathi author Devdatta Husale has succeeded well in maintaining the ties between dalit Christians and the Ambedkarite movement. Well known for rural literature, Husale has commented on the situation of the dalit Christians often in a terse manner.

Delivering the presidential address of the 19<sup>th</sup> Marathi *Sahitya Sammelan*, at Ahmednagar in 2001, Husale said, "Instead of praying ten times and living in constant fear, the dalit Christians should just erect a memorial ( of Dr. Ambedkar) and then not a single organisation will ever have the courage to challenge the Christian locality. In any case, do we not attend birth and death anniversaries of people who have never come to the rescue of Christians? We will definitely have the solid backing of our own Buddhist brothers if we give them call at any time. If we participate in Dr. Ambedkar's birth anniversary celebrations and if the Buddhists attend the Christmas celebrations, the unity of the two communities will have the desired effect."

The large number of dalit Christians from Marathwada region, from Pune, Nasik, Jalna, Latur and Ahmednagar districts and the migrants to Bombay should serve as a natural vote bank to various factions of the Republican

Party of India (RPI) and its alliances. The dalits in Maharashtra originating from the same castes, roots and after living together for ages in villages have now got divided into three religions, Hindu dalits, neo Buddhists and the dalit Christians. Fortunately, they have never got separated geographically and psychologically. It is a fact that the neo-Buddhists have progressed more than the dalit Christians due to the availability of reservations and other concessions.

The social and political leaders of both these communities have not realised that the interests of the people would be served better if these communities remained united politically. These leaders are yet to realise that their social, economical, educational and political problems may have a common answer in spite of their different religious streams, as the root of these communities is one and the same.

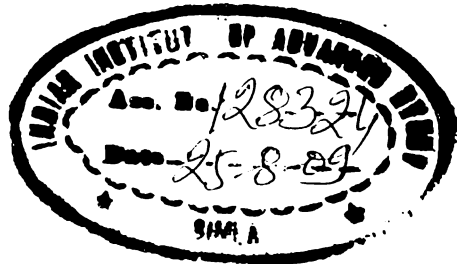
During my first meeting with Vilas Wagh of Sugava Publication, he asked me whether I was in any way connected to the movement of the dalit community. Wagh, who is a prominent leader of the dalit movement in Maharashtra, said. "Dalit Christians must maintain strong ties with the Ambedkarite movement," adding "though the two communities follow different religions, their original root and community is the same, their problems also are similar. Therefore, the two communities must stay together in their struggle."

Dalit Christians belonging to the older generations greet each other, saying '*Jai Khrist.*' People from the Ambedkarite movement have the tradition of greeting each

other with the 'Jai Bhim' slogan. When a dalit Christian participates in Ambedkarite movement, it cannot be considered as being disloyal to his religion. Therefore, he may well greet a fellow dalit from the Ambedkarite movement with salutation, 'Jai Bhim'.

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**Camil Parkhe** is a Pune-based journalist and an author. A graduate and post-graduate of the Bombay University, he began his journalist career as a Staff Reporter of *The Navhind Times* in Panaji, Goa. He was deputed by the Indian Federation of Working Journalists to complete his diploma in journalism at



Sofia in Bulgaria, when he had the opportunity to visit Russia. For the past over two decades, he has worked with *The Lokmat Times* (Aurangabad) and Pune editions of *The Indian Express* and *The Times of India*. Presently, he is working as a senior sub-editor with *The Maharashtra Herald*, a Pune-based English daily published by the Sakaal Group of Publications. He has authored five books in Marathi.

The Dalit Christians (the people belonging to the erstwhile untouchable communities converted to Christianity) in India continue to be socially, economically and politically backward even six decades after India gained independence and abolished untouchability. Dalits belonging to the Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist religions have been granted reservations in educational and political fields to enable them to overcome their backwardness and to compensate out to them for several centuries. Dalit Christians have been denied and thus blocked their progress. The Dalit Christians in Maharashtra to reservations.



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