
BRAHMANICAL SOCIAL ORDER AND CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

LANCY LOBO

This paper intends to tease out the links between the Brahmanical order and Christianity in India. It also attempts to highlight the differences between them. Having described the character of the Brahmanical order, it goes on to explain the challenge posed by Christianity, as Christian missionaries were the only rival intellectuals to the traditional Brahmanical order. In the bargain, Christianity has internalised some elements of the Brahmanical order. Having discussed the challenges of Gandhi, Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) and Dalits to Christianity, it deals with the possible direction that Christians in India need to take to find their role in secular and globalised India.

I BRAHMANICAL SOCIAL ORDER

Varnashrama dharma, popularly known as the caste system, is the creation of Brahmanical Hindus supported by the scriptures of the Aryans such as the *Vedas* and *Manusmṛti*. The Aryans were invaders and imposed their religion and

hegemony on the conquered Anaryans (non-Aryans), Dravidians and indigenous populations. Eventually, they divided the population into *varna* categories by placing themselves at the top of the hierarchy of wealth, power, position and privilege. The body metaphor of different *varnas* coming out in the different body parts of Brahma is very significant because it indicates the differential importance and place of different castes.

There are claims of the Indus civilisation belonging to the Anaryans and later on being appropriated by the Aryans (Sharma, 1995:65). The Aryans designed the caste system (Ghurye, 1969:176) in which they safeguarded their interests. The caste system assigned everyone a caste, an occupation, a rank, a behavioural code, different sets of rituals for birth, marriage and death, and assigned strictures and sanctions to enforce them. Stability was thus assured and institutionalised. The term Brahmanical is not restricted to the Brahman castes alone, but could apply to all upper castes. There was a clear separation between the producer, agriculturist, peasant, menial and those that undertook intellectual work. The latter were superior to the former.

The stability of the Brahmanical order was slightly disturbed during Muslim rule, but the former had an uncanny way of finding its feet and coping with any threat. Later, during the British rule, too, it faced certain challenges. Hindu or Hinduism is a 19th century construct. It is a shallow word that has gained flesh only recently under the Hindutva campaign, according to the noted historian, Romila Thapar. One must distinguish Brahmanical from non-Brahmanical Hindus; the Sanskritic (the twice-born Hindus who follow the hierarchical values) from non-Sanskritic Hindus; the Great Tradition from the Little Tradition of Hinduism. For instance, Kancha Ilaiah states: "In our childhood, all of us, the Dalit-bahujans of India, never heard the word 'Hindu' not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of the religion" (1996). Hinduism has never been monolithic as the Hindutvavadis are making it out

to be. Religious Hinduism must be distinguished from political Hinduism. There was diversity in religious Hinduism. There was broadly sectarian and non-sectarian Hinduism. Non-sectarian Hinduism broadly belonged to the Dalits and Bahujans, which stressed caste rather than religion. Ilaiyah has made a convincing argument to the embarrassment of the Hindutvavadis. He has exposed how Brahmanical Hinduism has been passed off as mainstream Hinduism and how its traits have been imposed on the intermediate and lower castes for their emulation.

The lower castes in Hinduism perpetually suffered economic, social, political and religious deprivations. They were largely labourers who had to give free services to the upper castes by working in their fields and performing demeaning jobs. They lived in a segregated part of the village. They could not be touched lest they polluted the upper castes. They sought equality from the upper castes, but what they got was only spiritual equality. Protest movements such as Buddhism, Jainism and the Bhakti Movement sought equality, but they too were in turn absorbed by the Brahmanical order. Since Brahmans did not serve them in ritual matters, they created their own priests (Brahmans of lower castes), a kind of replication of the Brahmanical order. The lower castes also replicated a kind of internal hierarchy among themselves.

II

SOCIAL BASE OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

Christianity came to India around 52 A.D., but was confined to the southern tip of India, or Kerala, and composed of high-caste Syrian Christians. Colonial Christianity entered India from 16th century onwards, e.g. the Portuguese, the British and others. The Catholic Portuguese left behind a marine Christianity along the coastal lines of peninsular India consisting of people cutting across caste lines. The British period saw various denominations of Protestants working in many parts of India.

A large number of group conversions took place from among the lower castes and then tribes. The tribals of Chotanagpur and the north-east accepted Christianity. Thus, Christians in India are not at all homogeneous. They belong to three social bases: (a) the upper castes of Kerala, Mangalore, Goa; (b) the Dalits in many parts of India; and (c) tribals. Though initially, Protestant missionaries rooted for high-caste conversions, they were few to come by, and eventually, they accepted lower castes into their fold. The Roman Catholics by and large went for mass conversions or group conversions.

In general, it could be said that the missionaries were the only rival intellectuals in 18th and 19th century India for the traditional Brahmanical order. However, in their conversion drive, they showed preference for high-caste converts with the idea that the lower castes would automatically follow suit if the high castes accepted Christianity. But instead, the lower castes came in large numbers. The reason for this rush was the ill treatment they received at the hands of the upper castes who were either landlords or the priestly class. These lower castes wanted to escape the ignominy, indignities and exploitation meted out to them and both Islam and Christianity offered them visions of equality and dignity. The British period also brought about a lot of social consciousness among lower castes. There was an anti-Brahman movement led by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker in South India that spread up to Maharashtra. Large numbers got converted to Christianity, setting off alarms among the upper-caste Hindus. Reactionary movements like the Arya Samaj began to reconvert the low-caste converts to Christianity. So, today, of the 25 million Christians (2.4% of the total population of India), nearly 50 percent are estimated to be of Dalit origin, 30 percent tribals and the remaining 20 percent of upper-caste origin.

M.K. Gandhi, who was a Vaishnav Baniya (a higher form of Hinduism), while appreciating the selfless service of the Christian missionaries to the low castes, showed his unhappiness over conversions. He felt that health, sanitation,

education and social uplift are good in themselves and are to be provided as good in themselves and their provision not used as means to realise other ends. In theological matters, Gandhi felt that each country or nation has an adequate religion and it needs no conversion to an outside religion. Hinduism, which has a multiplicity of gods, can accommodate Jesus as one more leader, teacher, god and revealer of truth to man.

After independence, the secular democratic Constitution of India put in generous clauses of affirmative action for the lower castes. The 'one man, one vote' policy flattened the merit of caste and there was no difference between the vote of a Brahman or a Dalit. For the lower castes, education and other institutional changes set off favourable moves for upward mobility in the class order. This meant loss of power, loss of opportunities for employment and loss of status for the upper castes. The upper castes felt that their privileges were encroached upon or thieved upon by the lower castes.

Over a period of time, the Dalit Christians found that their visions of seeking equality within the Church were not totally realised. Studies show that the Church and its resources dominated by the upper-caste Christians and its clergy hardly paid any attention to the felt needs of dalits. Satisfaction of spiritual needs alone was not sufficient. The Dalit question has brought to the surface the internal contradictions of Christianity in India. The Dalit question has become an embarrassment for the Church. The relevant issues to be addressed are: the nature of caste and Christianity in India; the Brahmanical order and Christianity; the Brahmanical order in Christianity; and religion and the socioeconomic order.

A criticism levelled at the Church in India by S.K. George, an eminent Gandhian and Christian, is the following: "Christianity has so far occupied only the byways of life, filling them with works of mercy, building schools and hospitals, sending out missionaries, and in these days providing refugee relief and sending food ships—but it has left the highways of life largely unoccupied; and it is along these highways that great injustices,

cruel exploitations, racial discriminations, political dominations and other great evils stalk the world" (1939:90). He further states: "Religion has always had a tendency to be content with partial solutions, with encouraging charity instead of securing justice, with saving the individual and leaving the environment unredeemed" (1939:90-91). This suggests that mere charity is not enough, but that there must also be some fight for justice, perhaps through political action. What is needed is perhaps some kind of religious mass action rather than religious feasts and solemn assemblies.

III

CHRISTIANITY AND THE DALIT CHRISTIANS IN INDIA

As mentioned earlier, nearly 50 percent of India's Christians are Dalits, ex-untouchables. The Dalit Christians include the Pulayans in Kerala, Pariahs in Tamil Nadu, Tigalas in Karnataka, Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, Chamars (Ravidasis) in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Churhas in Punjab, Vankars in Gujarat and Mahars in Maharashtra ... converted during the last two hundred years. These conversions came to a halt after Independence. Christian Dalit issues cannot be considered in isolation from those of non-Christian Dalits. Such issues relate to religious changes leading to socioeconomic mobility, identity, differentiation, stratification, urge for self-determination, and movement towards viable, sustainable communities, reservation and discrimination as well issues relating to Dalit women, the official Church and its personnel.

There have been social movements among the untouchables in recent times—the Satnami movement of the Chamars in the Chattisgarh plains of eastern Madhya Pradesh, the Adi Dharam movement in Punjab (Juergensmeyer, 1982), the Mahar movement in Maharashtra (Zelliot, 1992), the sociopolitical mobilization among the Jatavs of Agra (Lynch, 1969) and the Anti-Brahman movement in South India. In all

these, the untouchables were asserting their dignity and quest for equality either within or outside Hinduism. "To the untouchables," wrote Ambedkar in 1946, "Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors" (Zelliot, 1992). He further said in his conversion speech, "Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment" (Elliot, 1992). Group conversions to Christianity by Dalits should be seen from this point of view. The Dalits saw visions of equality in Christianity.

Did the Christian Dalits achieve their visions? Yes and no. It is more no than yes for the following reasons: Christian Dalits have faced four-fold discrimination: (a) from the upper castes, (b) from the Church, (c) from the state, and (d) against Dalit Christians as they did with non-Christian Dalits. Most Dalits were economically dependent on the upper castes and on becoming Christian, there was no significant change in their economic status. The upper castes have not conceded any change. At the most, they call the Christian Dalits *Sudhrela* or civilised, educated Dalits.

The official Church has also discriminated against Dalit Christians. They are called at best neo-Christians. There are instances in some places in India of Dalit Christians being assigned a separate place during religious services, separate burial grounds, less decision-making power in church matters, and facing discrimination in their recruitment for the clergy. An estimate states that in the Pondicherry archdiocese, Dalit Catholics compose 80 percent of the population, whereas only 10 percent of the total priests in the archdiocese are Dalits, and none of them occupy any important post in it. In contrast, the priests from other minority upper castes comprise 90 percent and occupy high posts in the archdiocese (Raj, 1992:102).

The state has discriminated against the Christian Dalits in the sense that anyone reverting to the Hindu religion automatically becomes eligible for the reservation benefits that are available for scheduled castes. The argument is that Christianity, unlike Hinduism, has no caste. However, the state has

granted reservations to Dalit converts to Sikhism and, later (1990), to Buddhists, but withheld it from Dalit converts to Islam and Christianity. In some states, Christian Dalits are placed in the OBC category. For instance, in Gujarat, they are labelled as 'Gujarati Christi'.

It should be stated that many religions such as Christianity, Sikhism and Islam do not believe in caste, but Sikhs, Muslims and Christians have castes. Most of the converts were from Hinduism and have not been able to shed their caste. And yet the state has thought it proper to give affirmative action to Sikh and Buddhist Dalits, but not to Christian Dalits. Perhaps political expediency has played a role in this.

Non-Christian Dalits, too, discriminate against the Christian Dalits. The former are worried about encroachment by Christian Dalits on their reservation benefits. Cultural differences are also creeping in among Christian and non-Christian Dalits.

After independence, the conversions from Dalits to Christianity and other religions have tapered off. This is partly due to the institutional changes that were set off by the democratic and secular Constitution of India. The ban on untouchability, protective discrimination and education have all assisted the Dalits to look up. But there have been instances of conversion like in Minakshipuram in Tamil Nadu in 1982. Conversion is still used as a weapon by dalits against the upper castes. Whenever Dalits are driven to the limit of their endurance, they threaten to change their religion. It is also true that upper-caste Hindus have subjected upwardly mobile Dalits to untold atrocities. For instance, during the anti-reservation riots spearheaded by the upper castes in Gujarat, only the upwardly mobile Wankar caste was attacked, not the Bhangis. The reaction of Hindu nationalists to conversions has been either to blame the missionaries or rush to appease the Dalits and cajole them into remaining within the Hindu fold.

Christian Dalits have experienced partial changes. A prefix or suffix has been added to the caste tag, e.g. Christi Mahar,

Wankar Christi, and so on. In the case of the Dalit Wankar caste, a comparative study shows that a creamy layer has emerged from among the Wankar Christi who are living in towns and cities, while the masses have remained in the rural areas without any socioeconomic change. However, the Christi Wankars have better literacy than the Hindu Wankars. There is some change in the living conditions and etiquette, too, among the Christi Wankars (Lobo, 1994).

Very few Christian Dalits have reverted to Hindu SC status to avail of reservation benefits. Most have opted to remain Christian despite a significant lack of change of economic status. This shows that the new identity of Christian has significance and made a difference, though not to their satisfaction. Becoming a Christian has made a difference to them. Today, many bishops, priests and nuns are recruited from Christian Dalits. One can say that the disabilities that Hindu Dalits faced in Hinduism are greater than those the Christian Dalits face in Christianity. The Dalit Christian movement in some parts of India has brought about great awareness in the Church about the discrimination the Dalit Christians faced.

The official Church is increasingly becoming conscious about the replication of the Brahmanical order within Christianity by the upper castes and its clergy. On their part, the Dalit Christians have mounted an anti-clerical stance seeking to participate in greater measure in the power, position and privileges of the official Church. The official Church dominated by the upper-caste Christians is taking note of the following:

- (a) There is a cultural distance between the non-Dalit Christian clergy and Dalit Christians.
- (b) The Church has taught docility to the Dalits instead of militancy to fight for their rights like in Buddhism and Islam.
- (c) The Church has preached a kind of pietistic, ritualistic and cultic Christianity. What the Dalits need is a liberation theology component.

- (d) The Church has offered a kind of terminal experience to Dalits in its parishes where they are born, married and die. The Church and its priests become the only reference. This has kept the Dalits from getting into the mainstream politics. The Church can no longer pretend to be a parallel state for Dalits.
- (e) The economic support given by the Church to Dalits has not been communitarian, but selectively individual.
- (f) The Church has been paternalistic rather than participatory in its interactions with the Dalits.
- (g) In the context of patriarchy the Church has done little for Dalit women.
- (h) One of the motives of Dalits in converting to Christianity was the upgradation of their socioeconomic status. The Church must throw its weight behind social justice rather than ritualism and religiosity.
- (i) It is no longer sufficient to remain Christian Dalits or Hindu Dalits, they should all stand as Dalits first and then as Christians or Hindus.

The Church, conscious of its failure towards Dalit Christians, has mounted a sustained attack on the state for its discrimination against Dalit Christians. In recent times, in a number of fora, it has aired its displeasure. Rallies, meetings, memoranda and visits to dignitaries of the state have yielded little result. The state adamantly holds that Christianity does not believe in caste. The state must realise that the ground for reservation is socioeconomic backwardness, which cuts across religious boundaries. The state, in holding religion as the ground for reservation, is contravening the letter and spirit of the Constitution. Besides, the Constitution has outlawed untouchability and if caste and religion are the bases of reservations, then there is a clear violation of the Constitution by the state.

IV

HINDU NATIONALISM, BRAHMANICAL ORDER AND
CHRISTIANITY

During the last four years, atrocities against Christians have been on the rise in India. This appears to be an extension of atrocities on minorities like Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, tribals and women. Modern citizenship is not based on primordial ties like caste, creed, language and region, it cuts across all of them. However, modern citizenship is seriously contested by the Brahmanic order whose traditionally held privileges and hegemony have been seriously under threat since the secular democratic Constitution was promulgated after Independence. Hindu nationalists must be distinguished from Indian nationalists. Indian nationalists stood for modern citizenship. The Hindu nationalism is a backlash to the Constitution of India. It is the Brahmanical hegemony that controlled the Congress Party, but when it became apparent that it was losing its hold, Hindu nationalism, through the Sangh Parivar, helped it to reassert itself. The minorities, Dalits and tribals became cannon fodder in this game. The Hindutva of the Sangh Parivar is a cover for a gradually rising fascism with the objective of foisting the Brahmanical order on the country.

India is for Hindus alone and minorities like Muslims and Christians either have to remain second class citizens or become Hindus. But then who is a Hindu ? There is no clear definition of a Hindu, except that one who is not a Christian, Muslim, Parsi, etc., is a Hindu.

In sociological literature, one finds that there are high-caste Hindus and lower-caste Hindus, Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic Hindus, Great Tradition and Little Tradition Hindus, Brahmanical Hindus and non-Brahmanical Hindus. The first category amounts to 20 percent and the second 80 percent of the Hindus. However, there are lower caste Hindus who would prefer not to be included in the Hindu fold, as, for instance,

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Kancha Ilaiah (1994). Tribals, too, have been included among Hindus.

One must differentiate between political Hinduism and religious Hinduism. Hindu nationalists belong to the first category mentioned above (Brahmanical). They subscribe to political Hinduism. These have been upholding their hegemony and imposing it on the second category. There is no need to worry about Hindu nationalists if they extend dignity, human rights and equity to the Dalits and tribals. There is no harm in considering them Hindus either. But the whole project of political Hinduism is dubious as far as the minorities, Dalits and tribals are concerned.

It is the first category of Hindus who mounted anti-reservation riots and anti-Mandal riots against the Dalits and tribals. It is the same Hindu nationalists who are apologetic and want to modify the Constitution, which upholds democracy and secularism. It is doubtful if they will share their power, position and privileges with the Dalits and tribals.

It must be realised that given today's situation in India, we must ask the following questions which are in the interests of the Indian nation (Fernandes, 2000:4):

1. Are we promoting distributive justice in a rational and transparent manner among all sections of Indian society?
2. Are we applying secular, socioeconomic criteria in extending reservations to the weaker sections?
3. Are we mixing up communal and casteist considerations in what should be a humanistic, egalitarian enterprise devolving on the public authorities?

CONCLUSION

Indian Christianity has to shed its Brahmanical model in order to gain credibility to fight Hindu nationalists. Official Christianity tends to conform to the status quo in the established social order. It leaves much to be desired in the matter of social justice. Social historian Sarkar (1999:1696-7) has pointed out

that in the past, the fight for justice was more of a fallout than conscious agenda in group conversions. The Church has to take cognisance of all pervasive caste structures as well as class structures in wider Indian society as well as among Christians. Contemporary Christianity in India, spurred by liberation theology, has found echoes in a number of episodes of social activist priests being murdered and nuns who fought on the side of the poor being killed or raped. In the face of these brutal attacks, Christian activists have not retreated into sectarian or fundamentalist shells, but continued to build bridges through joint work with secular, liberal and Left formations. Sarkar then concludes: "It is precisely these aspects of contemporary Christianity that arouse the greatest anger and fear among adherents of Hindutva" (1999:1698).

The Church needs to come out of its isolation and insulation in greater measure and get into the mainstream and strengthen civil society, rather than get burdened with institutions, be they educational, health or relief. It has also to reconsider its religious minority status. It has to raise its voice not just when a Christian is subjected to atrocities, but also when a non-Christian is subjected to such atrocities. What is at stake in contemporary India is not just Dalits, tribals and minorities, but democracy and secularism as enshrined in the Constitution.

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