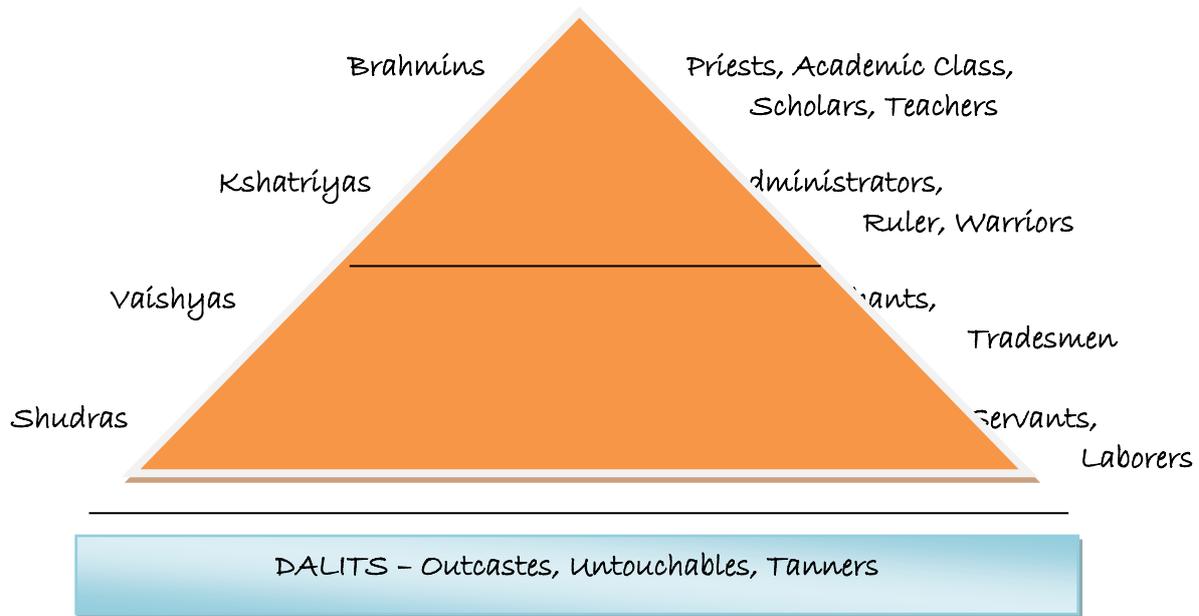


Dalit Christians and Caste System in India: A Challenge

The word 'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit and it means "divided, split, broken, scattered". As per the census, Dalits comprise 16.8% (more than 200 Million people) of India's population (1.35 Billion people, the second highest in the world). India may be a democratic republic, but justice, equality, liberty and fraternity-the four basic tenets promised in the Preamble of Indian Constitution-are clearly not available to all. Dalits continue to be oppressed and discriminated against in villages, in educational institutions, in the job market, and on the political battlefield, leaving them with little respite in any sphere or at any juncture of their lives. The most shameful fact is that even within the Church 'casteism' is being practiced. Christians are still under the clutches of the Indian "Brahmanical" system of caste.



According to Hindu creation story, all the dominant caste people are created from the body of "BRAHMA", but Dalits are created from the dust under his feet. So they are not considered even as human beings. One of the greatest leaders of India, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, took a firm stand against discrimination based on caste, and brought forth the concept of reservation for the oppressed people. This helped the people from lower strata at least to make their presence felt in the field of education, employment and politics. But, Dalits who are converted to Christianity and Islam are still denied reservation, which is again a grave discrimination and injustice done to them.

After 72 yrs of independence, Dalits continue to bear the brunt of violence and discrimination. Dalit dilemma in India reads like an entire data sheet of tragedies. According to a report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. Every day, on average, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits murdered, and two Dalit houses burnt. According to the NHRC statistics, 37 per cent Dalits live below the poverty line, 54 per cent are undernourished, 83 per 1,000 children born in a Dalit household die before their first birthday, 12 per cent before their fifth birthday, and 45 per cent remain illiterate. The data also shows that Dalits are prevented from entering the police station in 28 per cent of Indian villages. Dalit children have been made to sit separately while eating in 39 per cent government schools. Dalits do not get mail delivered to their homes in 24 per cent of villages. And they are denied

access to water sources in 48 per cent of our villages because untouchability remains a stark reality even though it was abolished in 1955. This Article 17 of Indian Constitution says: - *"Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law."* The main thrust of Article 17 is to liberate the society from blind and ritualistic adherence and traditional beliefs. It seeks to establish a new and ideal society.

Dalits belonging to Christian and Muslim religions have been denied their legitimate constitutional rights and equality before law. The paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 is discriminatory because Dalits belonging to Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism are given Scheduled Caste status while Scheduled Castes of other Indian religions are denied the benefits of reservation policy. Even though the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities under Justice Ranganath Misra, appointed by Govt of India strongly recommended for deletion of this paragraph but government is not willing to do so due to the fear of the Hindutva forces. The equal rights are denied and the lives of the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are of double oppression. The Dalit Christians in India believe that even though they face multi level struggles in India, the ray of hope is still strong since the God they believe is a God who identifies with the struggling people. God encountered Moses from the burning bush and said to him: *"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...."* This God is still hearing and seeing the miseries of the Dalits in India. This is the same God who gives the courage to the Dalits to fight all the unjust powers of oppression.

Present day Indian context is of a continual struggle for the Dalits in India. The neo economic policies and the dominant development paradigm attached to it make Dalits refugees in their own land. The landless Dalits are becoming homeless also. The 'upper layer' of the society continues to consider the Dalits as those who are destined to do the menial jobs for them. People in India are not ashamed of the fact that manual scavenging is still prevailing in India. Caste system is the most heinous social structure world has ever seen. Demeaning the Dalits, who are also the creations of the Creator God, on the basis of birth could be seen as a challenge to the entire humanity. But the people from the 'high caste', who benefit out of this system in India, want to strengthen the system by any means because they are the beneficiaries of the system. India has been witnessing many struggles and great leaders of Dalits who fight against the inhuman caste system. The cries of the people who are oppressed and pushed out from the main stream of Indian society become actually the protest. The Dalits who have to struggle for a decent life shout loud to register their protest against casteist marginalisation. Dalits are no more a people who silently yield to oppressions. They are more aware of their rights and strength than ever. As Christians we claim to reflect the mind of Christ but we are mired in the logic of caste. Jesus says: *"No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either love the one and hate the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other"* (Matthew 6:24). Aiming at challenging the Indian churches to address the issue of casteism within the church and society, a campaign titled **'No one can serve Christ and caste'**, which has been making ripples in Indian churches, especially in the member churches of the National Council of Churches in India.

We believe that all human beings are created in God's own image. Therefore, categorizing Dalits as inferior and backward or outcaste, thus discriminating, marginalising, and alienating them is sin. They are entitled to fullness of life, dignified respect, and participatory inclusion in society. Caste Discrimination and Racial Profiling are two major evils among several others in society. The injustices and violence suffered by dalits are unending. The gospel of Jesus

Christ calls for affirmative action towards the liberation of Dalits from caste related injustices within the church and in the society. Dalits are entitled to life, the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, opportunities for education and employment in society, due space for participating in decision making and development of society, and respectful regard and protection of their culture. Therefore systems and strategies of caste and globalization as well as legal systems have to be confronted and reformed. The NCCI Dalits, and Tribals/Adivasis Concerns therefore is committed to accompany and facilitate churches and ecumenical bodies to express solidarity with Dalits, advocate their cause, journey with them and equip them if required, as they engage in bringing about a just and equitable society. This may entail a radical change, a paradigm shift in mission, as mission from the margins.

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