

## Remnants of Caste within Catholic Church in India

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Velankanni Basilica, Tamilnadu

Courtesy: <https://www.pinterest.com/thecatholicmuse/pilgrimimages-india/>

### Abstract

Caste is one of the most dominant social hierarchies that plague India. It works its way through myriad channels surpassing all shields of ethics and reform. Christianity as a religion is based on the fundamental equality of all human beings - it merits righteousness and shuns discrimination. However, Christians in India occupy a rather 'liminal' space – either converted from other dominant religions of India or descended from a colonial past, they retain a good amount of religious and caste practices from their previous ways of life. Caste relationships provide a cultural feature which, within the new structures, still reigns over certain frontiers and gives rise to divisions. In this paper, we will be looking at the extent of these influences within the Catholic Church and focuses on the visible and normalised caste practices within this body. The method used for analysis is qualitative and the relevance of this paper rests with the space occupied by caste within the cultural studies, postcolonial studies discourses.

**Keywords:** Caste, Church, Dalit, Hierarchy, Catholic Church

## **Introduction**

India is a secular nation by virtue of its constitution. However, it's one of the most overtly religious spaces in the world. Known across the world for its plurality, India is home to a wide variety of vivid devotional practices. Unique for its way of balancing diversity, India has neither privatized nor limited any religion. It has always considered religion as a seminal feature of the free Indian existence. The history of Catholicism in India is coloured by intense rituals and practices that belongs to Hindu, Syrian, colonial Portuguese and contemporary Catholic practices. Though the boundaries between religions are multi-layered and indefinite, a tolerance, rather acceptance of differences acts as the cohesive element. In *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*, David Mosse observes that in the practices of ordinary Catholics, "Christianity [is] not merely a 'thin veil' over an underlying autochthonous South Indian 'folk religion.' "It has its own independent and synthetic identity." A good number of Indian Latin rite Catholics are of Dalit origin, the class once understood as "untouchable."

The foreign missionaries who arrived with the European tradesmen and subsequently colonisers, were chiefly effective along the coasts, amid the lower-caste fisher folk. Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholics, often trace themselves back to the high caste-class Namboothiri Brahmins evangelised by Saint Thomas by which they assumed a special place in the Kerala caste hierarchy superior to the Dalits. Such origins are further echoed in the point that Syrian Christians in Kerala incline to be better off than other Keralites in the faces of education, employment status, housing quality, land ownership etc. But, this explanation given for the casteist divide is widely debated on due to the lack of evidences to prove its validity. As we examine history, we understand that there were no Namboothiris in Kerala during the first century (such a section is said to have emerged with Sanskritization around the eighth century) when St. Thomas is said to have come to Kerala. There are also claims of Jewish and Assyrian descent for the Syro-Malabar community in Kerala. However, it is an indisputable fact that caste-wise divides are rampant within the Kerala Catholic communities i.e. between the Syrian and Latin rites as there are generally known. This is evident from the debates that still go on to establish a 'proud' legacy to their history before conversion.

Despite the colonial excuse of civilizing the natives by giving them a renewed faith, caste was retained within the religious system in order to utilize it for further divisions. Therefore, a superficial model of the original Christianity was offered to India. In turn, such divisions and the thus arising lack of unity within the religion is used to marginalize the third most followed religion in the country as 'foreign'. Indian Catholics commonly trace their origins to St. Thomas, the Apostle of Christ who is said to have arrived in India around 52 AD. Further, waves of missionaries, under Portuguese rule in the 16th century, designed the dynamics of Indian Catholicism. Portuguese Catholicism particularly shaped the spread of the religion in Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and parts of Karnataka. Despite being a minority religion in Kerala, Catholicism has very deep roots in the state. Kerala is the major strength for the Syrian rite Christian churches, the Syro-Malabar and the Syro-Malankara, and is also home to a great Latin rite following. According to the 2001 census, Christians constituted 19% of the population of the state, a much higher ratio when compared to the rest of India. Caste has plagued the Indian society since an indefinite excess

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of time. Any number of theories have been proposed to explain the onset of such an exceptional form of discrimination, but never without speculations. But what we know for sure is that caste does exist and that it infests every nook of the Indian being. For a very long period of time, caste was accepted and imbibed as the most normal of practices.

When Christianity spread in India, caste seeped into the system and handicapped it of the principles of equality and love for all. In the process of adaptation, social stratification and injustice rising out of caste owing to the accident of birth became a part of Christianity in India. As a result, never did the goodness of the religion fully benefit the Indian followers. The situation prevails even when we consider other dominant religions in India like Islam or Buddhism. Interestingly, the word ‘catholic’ means ‘universal’ implying equality for everyone. Therefore, what Christianity became by imbibing the evil of casteist discrimination was certainly most uncatholic. This power struggle prevails across the plane of rituals, customs and marriage thrusting it heavily upon the people. It hinders any form of social mobility for the ever oppressed. The gravity of this issue is heightened by a solid and thoughtless carryover of oppression through generations. Though such discrimination remains an undercurrent in some areas, it rules over the life of many who happen to fall into classifications by merit of birth. Discrimination based on caste therefore defies the very essence of Christianity. Voices raised against this evil have been forcefully silenced by the ones who benefit from the hierarchies.

### **Caste and Catholicism**

Caste practices within Catholicism are deeply rooted in the history of conversion. When people embraced Christianity in India, the then existing practices and rituals were adapted to suit the Christian principles. Caste was so strongly ingrained in the Indian psyche that it remained within the system. However, the importance of caste in Catholic life in the Indian context is deeply contested. Similar to the discussions of race across the world, people of upper caste birth comment that caste is a matter of the past that comes into view only to receive reservations. Quite contrarily, people affected by it can recall myriad incidents that suggest that caste is a significant element of the so-called Indian culture. Thus, caste has like in every other realm of Indian living plagued the interpretation of the verses from the Bible. This situation is quite ironic as such attempts to establish superiority fall against the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Bible, which is the core text of Christianity portrays Jesus as a simple man who loved all humanity devoid of biases. His disciples were the common folk and not once is it known of him discriminating based on any sort of social hierarchies. The sharp turn of events that led to the transformation of Christianity into a casteist religion in India shows the influence of local social practices. Such adaptations to meet the requirements of the Indian society bent the teachings of Christ to accommodate caste discrimination.

### **Situation in Kerala**

Kerala being one of the most literate states of the country, discrimination towards the Dalits is generally not very violent. However, they are discriminated at by denying them opportunities and means to rise up in the social hierarchy. Though converted to Christianity, the traditionally lower caste communities remained as daily wage labourers and were allowed to do menial jobs only. A similar bias was shown by the wealthy converts (generally Syrians) towards Latin Catholics owing to the unnecessary stigma attached to their fisher folk community legacy. The

discrimination was carried out by making them sit or dine separately, not allowing them to use plates or glasses used by the others and not allowing them to receive education. Inter-caste (even after conversion to Christianity) marriage was treated as taboo or even as sacrilege. Caste names such as Pulayan, Parayan, Chovan etc. were added to their Christian names after conversion, thus making it clear that conversion did not change their status within the social structures.

### **Other Major States in India**

However, in the other states of India caste based discrimination among Christians was quite vicious. Here, conversions did little to remove the caste based structures. Ample evidence is available of such accounts in the form of anecdotes and experiences. Segregation in worship places supported by the clergy led by non-Dalits continue to this day. The common belief that caste ceased to be one's marker of identity after conversion could not be more flawed. Caste remains as a social institution that invades life in multiple spheres. Marked by birth and lineage, a Dalit continues to be nothing but his caste. Caste boils even become terrifying riots where the upper-caste Catholics attack Dalit families. Their complaints though are not considered as atrocities against Dalits as they are Christians technically. Renowned Tamil author Bama's autobiography *Karukku* is a manifestation of her multi-layered identity – as a Dalit, a Christian and a woman. Her life as a Christian and a nun showcases the real face of Dalit Christianity in India. Though some sections of Dalits are recognized and receive reservations, most of the sections remain suppressed. Goa too which is known as the most westernised area in India is notorious for the age-old caste practices. Its Catholic community retains the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. The Brahmins became Bammons, Kshatriyas became Chardos, Shudras became Sudirs and the Dalits remained as Mahars and Chamars. They maintain most of the caste practices but on a Christian plane. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), the top policymaking body of the Christian community in India made a frank admission that it is vulnerable to caste-based discrimination. The document is a well-studied analysis of the influence of caste in its power structure and activities. This will support the demands to extend the positives of reservations to Dalit Christians.

### **Arranged Marriage**

Another manifestation of the caste discrimination is associated to the arranged marriage scenario. Matrimonial advertisements seeking 'suitable' alliances mention the caste, sub-caste and all such details that are required to discriminate. There is a trend of preference Dennis 6 to marry within one's caste and religion, further upholding the caste practices. A general assumption that the Dalits are inferior is propagated through such acts. In the Kerala Christian setting, there is a very obvious preference for the Syrian rites to marry within their caste. There is a silent reluctance to marry across the rites of Syrian and Latin traditions, though it is not uncommon. Thus, caste invades the matrimonial realm paving way to its inheritance into the next generation. Caste relationships provide a cultural feature which, within the modern societal structures, still reign over certain frontiers making space for more divisions. While examining caste in various spheres, i.e., rituals, marriage and everyday life, we discover that the expanse of this evil handicaps the integrity and virtue of the church. This paper tried to focus on the visible and normalised caste practices within the body of the Catholic Church. With voices rising against this evil catalysed by the advent of education and upward mobility, the case of casteist Catholicism has emerged as a major issue. No more a problem of a minor community, it has been embraced as a case of Dalit oppression.

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