
**Dalit Women's Missionary Education and Destabilization of Identity: a study of
*Karukku and The Elephant Chaser's Daughter***

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ABSTRACT

Dalit identity is a strong social marker, when a Dalit converts into another religion he/she attains a new identity that opens doors for a new consciousness. Life as a convert does not erase the stigma of Dalit identity, though it improves the social prospect to a certain extent the class struggle and caste based discrimination still persist. This paper shall talk about the life of Bama and Shilpa Raj and discuss the life of Dalit Christian women. The paper shall also discuss the impact of missionary education on the life of Dalit girls and how attainment of education creates an impact in personal, social and professional aspects of a woman's life.

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Introduction

Being born a Dalit means that one is bound to face some sort of discrimination and degradation because of one's identity as a Dalit. Some Dalits face more of such caste related atrocities because of their social and financial standpoint whereas others might face more subtle forms of discrimination. Hence, to break free from one's identity of a Dalit and the stigma attached to the same, a number of individuals opt for religious conversion. A converted Dalit carries a whole new identity because such a person ceases to belong to the religion that gave it the tag of a Dalit and yet the individual is not completely accepted into the new religion. A converted individual finds it out, only too late, that the tag of being born a Dalit does not dissolve easily. The stigma, the discrimination seeps into the new religious identity as well.



The best way to cope with caste based discrimination is by getting educated. Education makes a person independent and also makes him/her aware about their basic rights as humans. The education of girls has been a crucial task in the Indian Subcontinent as the education of boys has always been prioritized. In such state of affairs missionary played a vital role, it helped women by educating them. Missionary education was accessible to all, however, they preferred educating poor individuals especially Dalits who were willing to convert to Christianity.

This paper shall discuss the lives of Dalit Christian women who got educated in missionary institutions and how this education made them an outsider within. The paper shall discuss how such women feel a disconnect with the members of their community because of the education that they have received in the missionary set up. Furthermore, the paper shall argue how life in a missionary institute destabilizes the identity of a Dalit Christian woman as she relates to two different communities – Christians and Dalits, both in parts and none in its entirety.

Methodology

To make my point regarding Dalit Christian women's education I shall use Bama and Shilpa Raj's memoir *Karukku* and *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* (respectively) as my primary texts. I shall analyze these texts from the sociological perspective of religious conversion and identity politics. Also, I shall look into these life narratives from Dalit Feminist Standpoint, the 'Outsider Within' perspective.

Background

The phenomenon of Dalit conversions in post –independence India represents a complex and dynamic interplay of socio-cultural, political, and religious factors. It undermines the importance of religious conversion as a means to gain social equality, liberty and dignity, an attempt made by Dalits to get rid of the stigma attached with their existence. It serves as a transformative process that redefines not only religious identities but also societal power dynamics, ultimately contributing to a more egalitarian and inclusive social fabric. (Lal 293) The idea of religious conversion for Dalits was suggested and propagated by Dr. BR Ambedkar. He himself initiated mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956. However, in the case of Dalit Christians the question of conversion is not very simple since Christianity and conversion to Christianity is strongly associated with the arrival of the British and Missionary education.

Mass conversions and individual conversions are two very different practices. Where on one hand, mass conversions happen when a large population decides to convert into another religion, unanimously,



individual conversions take place when individuals, in isolation, feel the need to change their identity. Mass conversions happen for the larger good of a community, whereas individual conversions showcase a personal change of heart. Gender plays an important role in conversion and its outlook in the society, men converting to other religion is not seen as something problematic however women converting to any other religion, is seen as a big issue. Charu Singh explains this as follows “Dalit men were anxious about individual conversions by Dalit women, particularly to Islam. These were seen as bringing “shame,” since Dalit women were perceived as part of a network of relationships within a community.” (Singh 674)

Andrew Wyatt describes the lives of Dalit Christians as “twice alienated” as they suffer discrimination both within churches and in the wider community. Dalit Christians have criticized church authorities because they feel they have been virtually excluded from the ranks of the clergy even though they constitute a majority in most congregations. (Wyatt 17) Despite renouncing their original religion they still continue to face discrimination. They are treated as untouchables within the Church, their kids are discriminated against in schools, and they still struggle to cover their day to day expenses. Furthermore, since they have renounced their religion, they do not get the benefits of the policies and programs made for the upliftment of Dalits, as they don’t quite fit the description of ‘Dalit.’ They are excluded from the caste based reservations provided in government institutions, they also cease to get monetary help from the government because their changed identity.

Dalit Christian women are a special group within the group of Dalit Christians. These women face challenges that are different from Savarna women as well as Dalit women. Unlike their Dalit counterparts they receive education, and most of them are educated within Missionary schools, and it is in these educational institutions that they come face to face with caste based discrimination, a caste that they were scarcely aware of. Dalit children are discriminated against in these institutes, Bama’s biography stands as a testimony to how she and her peers were humiliated at school because of their caste, making the Dalit students feel shameful because of their caste. (Bama 21) On the contrary, Shilpa Raj, the author of *The Elephant Chaser’s Daughter*, did not face discrimination at school, rather it was her safe haven. She came face to face with the harsh realities of her caste identity when she returned home from hostel. Back home she realized that being a Dalit meant being poor, and being uneducated meant living a life of dependence on others, just like her mother.



Dalit Christians and Missionary Education

The attempt to change one's religion is a desperate attempt to seek equality and respect in the society, however, in the case of Dalit Christians it remains a farfetched possibility. The fact that a converted Dalit still has to add the term 'Dalit' to its freshly acquired Christian identity is testimony to this fact. The term Dalit Christians stands for a unique standpoint, a person who identifies as a Dalit Christian, is someone who resides in a buffer zone, who is not a complete Hindu, and neither is he a complete Christian. The term itself stands for a sort of political and social identity and less of a religious identity. People who describe themselves as "Dalit" Christians, rather than as any other sort of Christians indicate that they have begun to reconstruct their identity with reference to material previously considered to be outside of their religious traditions. This is a move towards the formation of a new identity and not simply a return to an old caste allegiance. (Wyatt 20)

After attaining education at missionary institutes both Raj and Bama tend to feel a disconnect with the members of their family. This happens primarily because of three reasons. One, that once a person gets educated they tend to build their own identity around their ideology, and learned way of life, when such a person returns to their family they cease to remain on the same page ideologically. Furthermore, by living a life in a convent, an individual coming from a depraved family setting learns new manners and customs, such things that their family is completely unaware of. Missionary education makes way for a major lifestyle shift which makes it very difficult for pupil to cope in their home setting. Shilpa Raj mentions in her memoir, "my siblings would tell me to go back to my special school and leave them alone. Though I knew they didn't mean it, I couldn't help seeing myself as an outsider and that realization made me terribly sad." (Raj 161) She points out how she could no longer adjust with her siblings when she came home for her summer break.

The life in a convent is luxurious as well as elitist. The individuals in such a setting believe that they are better than others because they know better and because they lead a life of more dignity, because of their education and form of service. This elitist mindset seeps into the mind of any individual residing there, Bama talks about how she felt like an elite while in the convent and how she started to feel different from the ordinary people around her. "When I was in the convent, it always seemed to me that we were alienated from ordinary people and that ordinary people had become foreigners to us. And this was because we had a number of elitist attributes such as status, money and a comfortable life, and so they never could be close to us." (Bama 120) Such a disconnect stops Bama from identifying with the people whom she had vowed



to help, people like herself. This feeling of elitism becomes the reason why she leaves the convent and decides to work for her people on the grass root level. The influence of the convents was so strong that it rubbed off on her wherein she had pledged to change the dynamics of the institute instead.

Dalit women's life narratives explicate that women of the Dalit community are at the lowest level of the Indian social ladder and bear the brunt of sexist, casteist and classist oppression." (Sharma 11) Dalit women form a unique cohort, they have a unique standpoint, their problems are not like the problems of Savarna women, or white women, neither like the male members of the society. The issues that this group faces are unique, their life could only be studied from the lens of intersectional marginalization (Creshaw) Dalit Christian women also fit in the bracket of Dalit women, (with the difference being in their education and few perks that the Christian identity brings their way) their existence too could be studied with the lens of intersectional marginalization as the tangents of subjugation remain the same – caste, class and gender based marginalization. In case of the two life narratives analysed in this paper, both Bama and Raj had to face a number of obstacles on their path to education. Apart from lack of financial resources, these girls were discouraged from studying by members of their own family. While Bama's father was furious because she was getting educated at a missionary institute (Bama 75), Raj's grandmother wanted Raj to discontinue her education and marry her uncle (Raj 129). These girls faced a lot of challenges in their path to education and most of them came their way because of their identity as Dalit women.

Conclusion

The lives of both Bama and Shilpa Raj are lived in a buffer zone, wherein they do not completely connect with their roots of a Dalit and neither do they feel completely welcome in Christian households. This paper finds that missionary education creates a significant impact on the lives of these women. They feel empowered and develop a rationale based on their education, yet the feeling of disconnect and isolation cannot be undermined. The most remarkable and significant aspects of the conversion of Dalits in Southern India were self – respect, confidence, dignity and justice. The converts, especially the women who were educated, found employment as medical workers, school teachers, bible women etc. and were empowered by the church. (Satyanarayan 384) Raj and Bama's education empowered these women in such a way that they became capable of helping people with similar circumstances as them. Yet it also sensitized them to their own suffering, they become more conscious of the discrimination around them.

In the case of both these women the wounds of depravity and discrimination are still afresh. Bama remembers the hardships of having a childhood with lack of means, coming from a marginalized



community and thus she has a strong urge to help people like her, she wishes to help people from her community and educate the underprivileged pupils. Consequently, Shilpa Raj finds the need to live close to her family and help them in every way possible. Despite being away from their families and their cultural roots there is something that connects these women with their family and community very strongly, that is the reason why they return to their hometown and wish to serve their own people despite having brighter career prospects elsewhere.

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