
A Glimpse into the Plight of Dalit Christians through a Study of '*Gudise Yesobu-Dalita Kathalu*'- a Work in Translation

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Abstract

Seventy one years of freedom hasn't succeeded in annihilating caste from the lives of independent Indians. It seems to have compounded it. Ambedkar's dream of 'annihilation of caste' remains a utopian dream. While the plight of Dalits continues to 'prosper' day and night, the plight of Dalit Christians is even more intriguing. As per the Indian law in vogue, if a Dalit converts himself to Buddhism and Sikhism, he continues to be a Dalit and enjoys the reservation benefits related to the Dalits in India, but if a Dalit converts himself to Christianity, he becomes a Dalit Christian and he is not eligible for reservation allotted to the Dalits. Most of the Dalits consider this rule as unfair and expect a change in the present system. Dalit Christians perceive themselves as people who are neither here nor there. The state claims that it is the church which has to take care of them and the church claims the opposite. The Dalit Christians feel that they are 'doubly deprived'. The '*Gudise Yesobu*' of the past and the present continue to lead lives devoid of social, economic and political status in the society. It is not an exaggeration to say that the quality of their lives hasn't changed much. This paper discusses the lives of *Gudise Yesobu* as depicted in D.Gopi's book in Telugu titled '*Gudise Yesobu-Dalita Kathalu*' and studies the reality of the Dalit Christians in the 21st century. It also discusses various measures that could be taken up in alleviating the pain of being a Dalit Christian in India.

Keywords: Dalit Christians, plight. church, state, *Gudise Yesobu*, pain, alleviating)

I. Introduction:

In the book '*Gudise Yesobu-Dalita Kathalu*' by D. Gopi, one character named Venkatesu from the story titled '*Weep not for me, weep for yourself and for your sons*' depicts the eternal dilemma of the Dalit Christians thus:

'If we embrace Christianity, government will not give our kids admission in their schools and hostels. If we join them in Christian boardings, the children there are being ill-treated by upper-caste Christians' (p.36)

Asprushyas("untouchables"), Harijans' (a glorified term, coined by Narasimha Mehta and adopted and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi), 'Depressed Classes' (a term used by British officials), 'Outcastes', 'Pariahs', 'Chandaala', Panchama (the fifth varna), Avarna (that is, outside the four varnas), Atishudra, Suppressed, Oppressed, Dalits, Scheduled Castes- terms and titles might have changed over the years and the various policies and acts of the government may have brought some kind of a change in the lives of 'a few' people and reformative initiatives of the affirmative leaders may have borne fruit to a certain extent. Yet, has the lot and dignity of these people really improved? This is a million dollar question.

II. Paradox, Thy Name is India:

India is a land of great paradoxes. On one side, India is the cradle of religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism), sacred scriptures (the Upanishads, the Vedas and the Puranas, the Gita and the Adi Granth). It is a land with rich prehistoric civilization, multicultural ethnicity and it is a global IT giant –these facts make every Indian proud. On the other side, there is one aspect of this great nation that should make every Indian feel ashamed of - caste discrimination. On this holy land are carried out the most noble as well as the most evil deeds.

III. Origin of the Dalit Problem-Outcastes and Outcasts:

G. Kalyan Rao, author of 'The Untouchable Spring' declares:

“We are the original children of the soil
We are treated as untouchables”.

India enjoys an image of the world's largest democracy and the country with the noblest virtue of tolerance and temperance. In all these years of this great history, India has never invaded any other country. She has acted as a great host instead. Everybody was welcome to come here and live here. India always played refugee to anyone who sought her protection. Anybody from outside was accepted and protected. Yet, the original sons of the soil were not given the same kind of treatment. History bears witness to this fact.

The origin of the caste system in the Indian society dates back to 1500 BC when the fair skinned Aryans from South Europe and North Asia defeated the dark-skinned indigenous people who were the founders of the Indian Civilization. The Aryans subjugated them and for perpetuating subjugation, they created the caste system.

Manu derives greatly from *Purusa Sukta* which mentions about Brahmins coming from the head of the Brahma, Kshatriyas from the shoulders, Vysyas from the thighs and Sudras from the feet. He refers to the impurity and servility of the outcastes, while affirming the dominance and total impunity of Brahmins. Manu also gives the other varnas namely Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra a second grade treatment. These are caste people and others are outcastes and outcast people.

Richards Glyn in his book *A Source Book of Modern Hinduism* mentions a quote about caste system from a speech delivered by Gopala Krishna Gokhale. He says,

“We may touch a cat, we may touch a dog, we may touch any other animal, but the touch of these human beings is pollution”(1996:104)

People ‘conveniently’ forget that even *Purusa Sukta* was written by a human. *Manu Smriti* was written by a human. There is no need to guess which *varna* that person would have belonged to. There is no denying that if the same work was written by a person of some other *varna*, he would have given his *varna* an undue advantage as *Manu Sharma* has done. All in all, it goes to prove that it is a twisted tale and it is a matter of the ‘survival of the strongest’- a law of the jungle.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar said, “I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of Untouchability. But it is not my fault. I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power. I say to you, abandon Hinduism and adopt any other religion which gives you equality of status and treatment.”(*Depressed Classes: A Chronological Document*, Part II,p.41)

In India, many embraced Christianity and Buddhism in protest against the then prejudiced and biased Hinduism and its rituals. However, their efforts to change to Christianity, a supposedly ‘egalitarian’ religion didn’t bear fruit completely. The caste system is so much intertwined in every sinew of Indian culture that it is virtually impossible to escape from it.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu said, “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.” But in India, the Dalits had neither the land nor the Bible. Their hands were always empty-both before the missionaries came and after the missionaries came and this is the sorry state of affairs.

IV. Historical Aspects:

The earliest known historical people to have rejected the caste system were Gautama Buddha and Mahavira. The Buddha declared that one cannot be considered superior just by virtue of birth. He says:

By mere birth no one becomes a *Brahmana*. By mere birth no one becomes an outcaste. By deeds one becomes a *Brahmana*. By deeds one becomes an outcaste. (Anderson and Smith, 1913:135)

Later, the Bhakti movements and Ramanuja, the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission actively participated in the emancipation of Dalits. In the last two centuries, the foundation of the Dalit ideology for a just society was mainly laid by eminent personalities like Mahatma Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar, Narayanswami Guru Acchutanand and Mangoo Ram.

During the struggle for Indian independence, two different approaches emerged for the improvement of the situation of the people now known as Dalits. The first was led by Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in raising the status of Dalit people (or, as he preferred to call them, Harijans) while retaining elements of the traditional caste system but removing the degrading stigma and manifestations of 'untouchability'. He believed in the concept of Trusteeship and thought that it would change the scenario. The other approach was led by Dr Ambedkar who believed that only by destroying the caste system could 'untouchability' be annihilated. Thus, Ambedkar's project rested on questioning the traditional social order in order to build an equalitarian society, while Gandhi's interest was to preserve the traditional social equilibrium.

The two leaders had their own approaches. The objective of the paper is not to decide who is right and who is wrong but to identify the context of the Dalits and Dalit Christians today.

V. Dalit Christians-The Present Situation

According to 2011 census, it is estimated that out of 2.4 crore Christian population in India which comprises 2.3% of the total population, nearly 70% i.e., 1.68 crore are Dalits.

Dalit Christians find themselves in an unenviable position today. They are twice discriminated; as Dalits and as Christians. They face discrimination from various sources like upper caste lay Christians, upper caste Hindus, Dalit Hindus, State and Government and clerical authorities in the church.

The state discriminates against them and refuses any rights and privileges that their Hindu/Buddhist Dalit counterparts enjoy. The logic behind is once you become a Christian you really can not belong to a caste. Another argument from the state is that the Dalit Christians receive a lot of help from the first world churches. While this may be true to a certain extent, it does not dispense the government's responsibility towards its citizens, no matter what religion they belonged to.

The Dalit Christians suffer inequality, and inhuman treatment within the church as well. Christian educational institutions cater to the affluent and socially higher classes. Dalits suffer discrimination in employment opportunities. The state does not provide employment opportunities for Dalits and the church adds insult to injury by shutting the doors of her institutions on them.

Discrimination by the State

Dalits remain Dalits-the oppressed classes whether they are part of Hindu social matrix or that of Christian/Budhist/Muslim religion. Yet the state claims that Christian Dalits don't/can't enjoy the same constitutional rights as the scheduled castes and tribes generally. The Presidential Order of 1950 states "no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be member of a Scheduled Caste." Subsequently this provision was extended by Parliament in 1956 to include Sikh Dalits, and in 1990 to include Buddhists. Muslims and Christians are still excluded.

Even the Government appointed "Ranganath Mishra Commission" has recommended extending the status of Scheduled Caste to Dalit Christians and Muslims, affirming that the Dalit

Christians and Muslims are no different from Hindu/Sikh/Buddhist Dalits and suffer the same discrimination, oppression, and social and economic backwardness.

When we take reference to the work '*Gudise Yesobu-Dalita Kathalu*', we will find lot of instances being mentioned by the story writer Gopi about the negligence of state machinery and the church. The opinion expressed by the writer may be his own opinions but on a deeper study of the plight of Dalit Christians, anyone will realize the truth with factual evidences.

In the story titled '*Pattu Parupu*', there is an incident where the nun who is in charge of the hospital asks the villagers to take Yesobu's wife who is in her labor pains to the government hospital because in the missionary hospital "there are no needles and medicines"(p.17). She even refuses to send jeep saying, "Today, the driver won't come" (p.17)

The woman is then shifted to government hospital where the peon doesn't permit them in unless they gave him Rs.10/- Later, a nurse comes and demands Rs.10/- Yesobu says,

"Only for namesake, it is *Dharmasupatri*. Nothing is free here. You will be taken care of only if you bribe everyone from peon to doctor."(p.18)

Despite Yesobu's persistent requests to give treatment to his wife immediately, the doctor refuses saying his duty time is over. Then enters the nurse into the story saying,

"There is no use in talking. Your wife is in a critical condition. Doctor's time is over but if you give Rs.100/- your work will be done."(p.19)

Yesobu gives her the money and then nurse asks him to get two saline bottles. He gets the bottles with just Rs.30/- that he was left with after bribing peon, nurse and doctor (He gets Rs.150/- from Peddi Reddy after pledging his son's life to him as life-long servant.). By this time, it is too late. The nurse says,

"Do you have sense? Take these bottles home and drink by mixing in water. You can take your wife with you."(p.19).

Yesobu requests her to keep her in the hospital and take care. Then the nurse says,

"Why should we keep her here? Take your wife to your house and make her lie on your bed and do puja to her for giving birth to a dead child" (p.19)

In another story '*Maayadaari Thufaanu*', the writer mentions that the government servants came in cars and said that no aid will be given to them as they are Dalit Christians. They said, "Out of our generosity, we are giving you money" (p.28) and gave Rs.100/-

“Whenever there is cyclone, nothing happens to the houses of the landlords. Our houses fall down and the trees of the landlords also fall down. And the government gives more money to the fallen trees than the fallen houses.”(p. 28).

When referring to an incident in some other village, John, a priest himself but one who is for the rights of the Dalits says,

“The officers pocketed half of the money that was to be actually distributed to the cyclone victims. The victims refused to take Rs.200/- that was being given to them. They demanded total payment. The police lathi - charged them.”(p.30)

Discrimination within the Church

While discrimination by the state continues, there is greater discrimination existing in the Christianity being practiced in India and the segregation being practiced in the church which is led mostly by the higher caste converts. Yesobu, the protagonist in the stories “ *Gudise Yesobu Dalita Kathalu*” says,

“The ground we dug, the stones we carried and the school we built became poison”(p.16)

“Kids studying in that convent are the kids of a Brahmin doctor, Karanam, Reddy and Shop Owner. There is not even a single kid of the laborers” (p.15)

In the same story, for construction of the school, the local church authorities made use of these Dalit Christians but for giving jobs in the school, they prefer outsiders. Yesobu says:

“How good it would have looked if this job of a security guard of the school is given to one of the villagers who did ‘sramadanam’ for building the school.”(p.16)

The Superior of the Convent insists that if Gudise Yesobu’s son has to get a seat in the convent, he has to fulfil so many requirements. She says,

“First, you have to pay admission fee, buy uniform, shoes and cycle. You should teach English at home. You can’t do all this. If I give admission to children of people like you, they will fail and bring bad name to our convent.” (p.16)

In another story titled “*I won’t go to that boarding*”, a brother (here, hostel warden) says,

“Rascals! At your home, you won’t get even a little food to eat and you come here and behave like fools. You can’t study. You were born to take care of sheep in the fields but out of our generosity we bring you here, feed three times a day and take care of your education. Don’t you understand this, useless fellows”(p.26)

The author claims that these stories are based on real incidents in Krishna, Guntur, Prakasam and Nellore districts. These stories depict the lives of Dalit Christians. When something happens to a Christian from a higher caste, church comes out into the open to condemn it, but when a Dalit Christian woman is abused or when Dalit Christians are massacred, the same church doesn't come out to even voice its opinion.

The Dalits within the Church in India have been discriminated for centuries across all churches. Out of 156 Catholic bishops in India, 150 bishops belong to the upper caste community. Only 6 bishops belong to Dalit community. Out of 12,500 Catholic priests, only 600 are from Dalit community. 25% of the Upper caste Christians (clergy, religious and laity) has complete control over 75% Dalit or untouchable Christians.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar may be regarded as the first known Dalit critic of Indian Christianity. A man who had great hope in Christianity for the liberation of the oppressed in India, and wished to become a Christian, moved away from it. He declared, "the services rendered by Missions in the field of education and medical relief" do not benefit the Indian Christians (mostly untouchables). "They go mostly to benefit the high caste Hindus." (Qtd. In Massey 1995:107)

VI. Acts exist but whither Implementation?

After independence, the Indian constitution abolished untouchability in law. Today Dalit politics largely centers on the just dispensation of the affirmative action benefits in employment, education and electoral representation granted to them under the constitution. There are many policies and acts but there is no protection whatsoever for Dalits. If Hindu Dalits themselves are treated this badly, one can imagine the plight of Dalit Christians, who are deprived and disowned by the state and the church.

VII. Conclusion

Even to this day, in many places, the Dalits are the modern day slaves and holocaust victims through the cruelest system of the caste. The Afro-Americans suffered slavery for some centuries. The Jews suffered holocaust and martyrdom for some time. The Dalits have been suffering humiliation, martyrdom and unspeakable horror for the last three thousand years of our human history. Dalit Christians are still carrying the cross of humiliation, exploitation, oppression etc.

Even within the church-run institutions, schools and hospitals, jobs go in favor of the upper caste people, acting in collusion with the clergy. They suffer day after day ethnically, linearly, racially, socially, economically, culturally, vocationally, geographically, relationally, contextually and emotionally.

It took our Sikh and Buddhist friends long years of struggle to regain their just rights: the long, painful struggle of our Dalit Christians continues. Gudise Yesobu says,

“What can we do? Didn't Jesus ask us to weep for ourselves and our children? What more can we do?”(p.39).

Should the present day church believe the sentiment of Yesobu or do we have hope for the future? Martin Luther King Jr. says,

“ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of the former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood”,

Only time will seal the fate of the Dalits and Dalit Christians. Yet, echoing the eternal words of Martin Luther King Jr., let us proclaim, “We shall overcome”.

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