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Caste War and the Indian Church

Dhinakaran Savariyar
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Abstract:

The violent and persistent caste discrimination in India is nothing short of caste war. As destructive to the lives of those in the lowest caste, the Dalits, as international war, caste discrimination must be mediated through peace-making. Peace-making is a necessary step that Christianity can offer to the realities of caste division in India. Acknowledging that Christianity itself has been wrapped up in colonization and caste distinction, this paper ultimately argues that Christians are still called to be an agent for change in India.

Keywords: India, caste discrimination, peace-making

Introduction

The evil of caste discrimination in India has often been approached from anthropological, social, cultural, and religious viewpoints, although the level of adequacy with which it has been treated could still be debated. However, the conspicuous absence of its warlike devastation in terms of violence and cruelty towards the marginalized Dalits has successfully masked the need to bring the millennial oppression under scholarly scrutiny and the subsequent need to employ the discourse of peace-making. Is the notion of caste war far-fetched? I think not. Findings on caste rivalry and mushrooming atrocities against Dalits throw light on an increasingly divided India where caste-based internal enmity has far worsened in the modern times. Because a rendering other than ‘caste war’ would either minimize or belie its pernicious import, I hold that ‘war’ terminology lends credence to locate the social evil of caste with its ghastly grasp on Dalits as victims. As such, ‘caste war’ is not disproportionate but a needed corrective. My intent here is to demonstrate that the warlike hostility that caste has instantiated on a regular basis in the Indian society has to be urgently intervened by Christian peace-making. However, the Catholic Church itself has also sometimes fallen into caste division. To this end, I divide my paper into two unequal parts, with the first part

engaging the notion of caste war and the second concentrating on how Christian peace-making is necessary although complex.

The Notion of Caste as A War

India fought its last war with China in 1962 which concluded with the Indian defeat in 1965. The Chinese aggression then cost the lives of 4000 Indian soldiers.¹ The periodical armed conflicts with Pakistan demonstrate that the tussle with the ‘persistent offender’ continues with no end in sight. The South Asia Terrorism Portal has reported a total number of deaths of civilians and security forces as 14107 and 7397 respectively between 2000-2021 (till May 21, 2022)² due to violent attacks from and armed conflicts with Pakistan. Kargil War (in which 500 Indian soldiers died),³ cross-border terrorism, and Pakistan-incited terrorist attacks within India have certainly proved destructive in terms of collapsing the stability and infrastructural establishments of the country. Nevertheless, what is more ravaging is not what happens across Indian borders as what happens within them. In other words, we need to take our eyes off the overt forms of enmity to focus on covert forms (and overt forms too!) that endanger fraternity among citizens who are supposed to live as brothers and sisters.

With a population of more than 1.3 billion, India is the second most populous country in the world. It has more than tripled in size since the Partition in 1947. Despite its tremendous growth, India remains divided into different castes. The caste system has existed for over 3000 years, and it divides the people of India into hereditary social stratifications which often limit their

¹ See Amrita Nayak Dutta, “On This Day in 1962, India Learnt A Harsh Lesson From China,” *The Print*, October 20, 2018. Available Online: theprint.in.

² See “Data Sheet - South Asia,” South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). Available Online: satp.org.

³ See Ilyas M Khan, “Kargil: The Forgotten Victims of the World’s Highest War,” *BBC News*, July 26, 2019. Available Online: bbc.com.

social circles and occupation advancement. At the bottom of this social hierarchy are the Schedule Castes, or the Dalits, historically termed the “untouchables.”⁴

National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights reports that a crime is committed against a Dalit every eighteen minutes; six Dalits are kidnapped or abducted every week; three Dalit women are raped every day; thirteen Dalits are murdered every week; twenty-seven atrocities are committed against Dalits every day.⁵ *Religion Unplugged* claims that in the recent past “Nearly 46,000 crimes against Dalits were recorded nationwide, with the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh recording the highest number of cases at 11,829, or 25% of the cases.”⁶

Given the data on fatalities resulting from armed conflicts and caste-based violence, one can discover the truth that the terror of caste trumps the terror across the Indian borders. Thanks to its notorious invisibility, more often than not, the warlike devastation of caste is either undermined or deliberately overlooked though the effects of this ‘millennial and modern’ war are heavy and grisly on Dalits as victims. Hence, uncovering the strategic invisibility of caste greatly aids the understanding of the evolution of caste war.

One of the manipulative strategies of dominant castes was to stifle the horror of caste to make it elusive but perpetual. Commenting on the asymmetrical reality of the hypervisibility of the lower castes and the invisibility of the upper castes, professor and activist Satish Deshpande remarks that, “Caste can be understood only if we pay as much attention to it when it is invisible or infra-visible as we do when it is hyper-visible or ultra-visible.”⁷ This sociological asymmetry exposes clearly the discrepancy between the abolition of caste and its intensification. Journalist

⁴ “Population Growth and Religious Composition,” Pew Research Center, September 21, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/population-growth-and-religious-composition/>

⁵ See National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). Available Online: ncdhr.org.in.

⁶ Hanan Zaffar and Danish Pandit, “Violence Against India’s Marginalized Dalits Rising, New Data Shows,” *Religion Unplugged*, October 26, 2020. Available Online: religionunplugged.com.

⁷ Satish Deshpande, “Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the ‘General Category,’” *Economic & Political Weekly* 48, no. 15 (2013): 33.

and writer Aatish Taseer highlights this modern paradox: “The spread of modernity in India has certainly undermined caste, but it has also made the need to assert it more vehement. And the unfolding story in India is not one about the disappearance of caste, but rather of its resilience.”⁸

In the modern India, caste owes its success to its adaptive framework. Cultural anthropologist Deepa Reddy highlights two important and intimately related features of caste in contemporary India: “Its *fluidity*, in contrast to its presumed doctrinally-given rigidity, and *therefore* its capacity to strategically deploy established, essentialized notions of itself in a movement that seeks less to undermine caste than to restore dignity to re-claimed caste identities.”⁹ Likewise, to describe the subtle workings of caste, Amrita Ghosh, a researcher of cultural and postcolonial studies and Arun Kumar, a UK-based historian employ the concept of *habitus* by French philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. As a normative world and set of dispositions, *habitus* shapes the instant cognitive response and bodily behaviour of individuals who practice it in order that such responses are natural, given, and unproblematic despite the division witnessed in the context.¹⁰

Successfully masking the divisive inworking of caste, then and now, the majoritarian consensus about the millennial evil is that caste discrimination (not caste as such!) is the unwanted side of the Hindu article of faith. Arundhati Roy in her essay on *Doctor and Saint*, an introduction to Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, brings out the heart of disagreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar over what they each respectively advocated relentlessly. When Ambedkar exposed the real violence of caste as the “*entitlement*: to land, to wealth, to knowledge, to equal opportunity,”¹¹

⁸ Aatish Taseer, “India’s Eternal Inequality,” *The New York Times*, 2016. Available Online: nytimes.com.

⁹ Deepa S. Reddy, “The Ethnicity of Caste,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2005): 547.

¹⁰ Amrita Ghosh and Arun Kumar, “Casteism Continues to Thrive Among Indians Abroad - Through Surnames,” August 28, 2020. Available Online: scroll.in.

¹¹ Arundhati Roy, “The Doctor and the Saint,” in *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand (London: Verso, 2014), 98.

the Hindu reformers elided the question of entitlement and cleverly narrowed the question of caste to the issue of untouchability, citing the practice as an erroneous element of the religion in need of only reformation and not annihilation.¹²

Both kept elusive and sanctified by religion, caste spreads its vicious tentacles from policy making at the top-level of governance to a village level administration across India. One example could be the field of education. With the current push for unprecedented nationalism, Hindu ideologues intend to overtake Indian higher education and the ‘saffronization of education’ is already a project underway with most of its work already complete. Beginning with the death of Rohith Vemula,¹³ integral to ‘purifying’ the Indian higher education is abolishing caste reservations, the single channel of justice for Dalit representation in the Indian civil service and education.¹⁴ As a lecturer in colonial and post-colonial history, Shalini Sharma opines that the Hindutva activism has made possible an ideological sea change that not just accuses caste discrimination as a colonial construction (by Christians) but also minimizes the contribution of Muslim minorities to Indian history.¹⁵

Moreover, the push for aggressive Hindu nationalism rings a death knell for Dalits by its commitment to perpetuate the caste system with no respite. Seth Schoenhaus cautions how Hindutva strategies that target Dalits as its vote bank could well limit their role as just ‘voters’ and

¹² See Ibid., 100-101.

¹³ See Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD candidate committed suicide on January 17, 2016. When the local unit of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of Modi’s BJP lodged a complaint against Rohit Vemula and four others for raising issues under the banner of the Ambedkar Student’s Association (ASA), the young scholar’s fellowship of INR 25000 at the University of Hyderabad was suspended and they were removed from their hostel rooms. Finding it difficult to manage their expenses, they set up a tent on the campus and began a relay hunger strike hoping to win justice for their cause. However, when Vemula’s hopes had vanished following the dominant politics at the university against Dalits, he left behind a searing note that talked of his unfinished dreams and lamented “My birth is my fatal accident.” From then on, Vemula has become the symbol of victimization of Dalits in Indian higher educational institutions. See “My Birth Is My Fatal Accident: Rohith Vemula’s Searing Letter Is an Indictment of Social Prejudices,” *The Wire*, 2019. Available Online: thewire.in.

¹⁴ Shalini Sharma, “India: How Some Hindu Nationalists Are Rewriting Caste History in the Name of Decolonization,” *The Conversation*, 2019. Available Online: theconversation.com.

¹⁵ See Ibid.

not as ‘Hindus’ who have found perfect communion like any other upper caste Hindu.¹⁶ The causal relationship between Hindu nationalism and the sustaining of caste system as its predominant agenda is clear from how Dalits are instrumentalized to oppose the fellow Dalits who fight the social evil. Representing quite well the automated, divisive, and hegemonic command of the workings of caste, American writer Isabel Wilkerson analogously speaks of it as “the wordless usher”¹⁷ whose voice carefully monitors that we belong to where we should be, thus ensuring that we not just occupy ‘only’ ‘our’ seats but consciously refrain from occupying those of ‘others’ who symbolize the occupants of higher rungs in the social ladder.

Dalits have had some success in education and economics, but some of this has only stirred more anti-Dalit tension from the dominant upper castes. On the side of caution, we cannot feel overly optimistic about Dalit resurgence for the simple fact that Dalit life continues to remain vulnerable to ideological marginalization and vicious atrocities in the name of caste. Seth Schoenhaus maintains that “Caste tensions and even warfare, while nothing new in Hindu society, were undoubtedly exacerbated with the affirmative action policies toward the end of the twentieth century.”¹⁸ Echoing the same, the British social anthropologist David Mosse believes that the idea of Hindu nationalism is a reaction to the liberative missionary practices towards Dalits in the Indian context.¹⁹ The upper caste anger that is directed against the minority Christians is thus the ‘earned reward’ for Christian liberative praxis within the context of India.

¹⁶ Seth Schoenhaus, “Indian Dalits and Hindutva Strategies,” *Denison Journal of Religion* 16, no. 1 (2017): 65.

¹⁷ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 17. It is fascinating to note that in her seminal and sensational work, Wilkerson talks of racism employing the category of caste as she finds the term ‘race’ inadequate to capture the misery of the people of color in all its magnitude. For this reason, including the title of her work, she replaces race with caste.

¹⁸ Seth, Indian Dalits and Hindutva Strategies, 60.

¹⁹ David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India* (California: University of California Press, 2012), 199.

The phenomenon of caste war is thus twin-faced: that when Dalits are left unempowered, they are oppressed; and when uplifted, they still encounter the hostility of the dominant castes. As Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit writer rightly says, “There is a conflict between the past and the future that younger Dalits envision for themselves.”²⁰ But in the event of sustained antagonism which manifests the bitter truth that “The aspirations of the Dalits are often resented by upper-caste Hindus,”²¹ how can Christianity be the catalyst for change? In my opinion, the upper caste resistance to Dalit empowerment is an adequate indicator that something constructive and liberative that disturbs the *status quo* is happening in the lives of Dalits. As long as the everyday resentment to Dalit life haunts them, the Christian agenda of social justice and preferential option should be robustly advanced.

The Struggle Within the Indian Church

To understand the phenomenon of caste war and the way in which Christian peace-making can effectively work, a brief analysis of the history of conversions in India could be of vital help. Historically, the conversion to Christianity in India occurred in at least three different phases, each having a different target group. The first phase was the conversion of the Syrian Christians of Kerala, also called St. Thomas Christians who were caste Hindus, some of them belonging to the Namboodiri Brahmins.²² The second phase occurred during the Portuguese colonial period and the converts were a mixed group of upper and lower-caste people including the Brahmin Catholics of Tamilnadu.²³ The later colonial period witnessed two types of conversion movements under the influence of Anglo-Saxon, and other Western Protestant and Catholic missions which included

²⁰ Nirmala George, “India’s Angry Dalits Rise Against Age-Old Caste Prejudices,” *Associated Press*, 2016. Available Online: apnews.com.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See C.K. Mattom and C.K. Maltom, “Foreign Contribution to Kerala Culture Till the Islamic Period,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 21 (1958): 602–6.

²³ See Joseph Tharamangalam, “Whose Swadeshi? Contending Nationalisms among Indian Christians,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 32, no. 2 (2004): 232–46.

members from the upper-caste and urban communities who were in close contact with Western Christians in the metropolitan cities. Also this period witnessed the mass conversion movements among the lower castes and the Adivasis.²⁴ The predominant missionary strategy in all three phases was the idea of percolation which signified that the lower-castes will follow the upper-caste converts. This was true of Robert de Nobili who targeted the upper-caste Brahmins and described them as the “wise” of the Indian society.²⁵ Nevertheless, the move to convert caste Hindus (Brahmins) through the method of adaptation or accommodation²⁶ overlooked the need to challenge some of their social and civil customs like caste which were inherently discriminatory.²⁷ Noting how Nobili’s method of adaptation that made Christians of Indians ensured the continuation of social and civil customs including caste, Tharamangalam comments that the “Type of Brahmin Catholicism was achieved at a high-cost acceptance of caste at the very heart of the church, and physical segregation of Catholics by caste.”²⁸

Regarding the conversion of lower castes to Christianity in the successive phases, scholars agree that although Dalits were converted *en masse* to Catholicism and Christianity, the success cannot be solely attributed to the efforts of missionaries and their strategy. On the contrary, Dalit scholars insist on an internal awakening among Dalits to embrace non-Hindu religions as a protest movement that began in the second half of the 19th century.²⁹ Although one cannot underestimate the agency of Dalits in opting for Christianity in their bid to liberate themselves from the clutches of the caste system, the historical accommodation of caste system within Christianity has

²⁴ See Ibid..

²⁵ See Peter Phan, “An Asian Christian? Or A Christian Asian? Or An Asian-Christian?: A Catholic Experiment in Christian Identity in Asia,” in *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 20–35.

²⁶ See Ibid.

²⁷ See Tharamangalam, “Whose Swadeshi? Contending Nationalisms among Indian Christians.”

²⁸ Ibid, 237.

²⁹ See Joseph McQuade, “Protestant Missions and Dalit Mass Movements in Nineteenth Century India,” *Saeculum Undergraduate Academic Journal* 7, no. 2 (2012): 1–12.

manifested itself at various levels of Indian Christian life. Segregation in churches and cemetery, exclusion in leadership and administration, and backwardness in empowerment are some of the evident forms of discrimination actively practised against the Dalit Christians across India.

Voices within Catholicism and Christianity are highly critical of Christians adhering to any divisive agenda or ideology like caste. Pope John Paul II condemned caste as a counter narrative to the gospel values when he uttered that “Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church’s mission of evangelization. Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce caste division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become an expression of the solidarity of the whole Christian community.”³⁰ Likewise, Pope Francis cautions against discriminatory structures that alienate and marginalize a section of the human community. “Those who look down on their own people tend to create within society categories of first and second class, people of greater or lesser dignity, people enjoying greater or fewer rights. In this way, they deny that there is room for everybody” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 99).

Despite such fervent calls to put an end to the evil of caste system, a radical recognition of Dalit marginalization and rendering it in a transformative and liberative praxis have encountered an internal pushback through expressions of inexplicable divide between belief and practices. “Caste is older than the Church”³¹ writes Lancy Lobo. The rootedness of caste in the culture does not render Christians immune in order that it is fair to say “Christianity has no caste but Christians have caste.”³² There are disturbing accounts that ascertain that caste discrimination is extant in

³⁰ John Paul II, “Address of John Paul II to the Bishops of India on Their “AD LIMINA: Visit,” November 17, 2003. Available Online: vatican.va.

³¹ Lancy Lobo, “Vision, Illusions and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India,” in *Dalit Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2001), 251.

³² *Ibid.*, 251.

context manifesting itself in upper-caste Christian organizations³³ and in outright denial of rights and privileges to the marginalized Dalits.³⁴

As I am critical of the existence of the caste system, it is good to acknowledge the constructive steps taken by the Indian Church to counter the evil. On December 8, 2016, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) released *Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India: An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities* wherein it declares that "The term 'Dalit' does not indicate a negative connotation or a caste identity. It rather seeks to restore an affirmative, humanizing, and empowering identity which is a demand of our faith. Thus, it is not only a matter of sociological and cultural category but a theological category as well" (*No. 81*). Sincere efforts are underway to promulgate the policy of Dalit empowerment in the context through affirmative action programs at diocesan, regional, and national levels. However, with clear vision and trajectories outlined, the message of the official Church still has a long way to go before it becomes fully internalized and integrated with the life and faith of Indian Christians.

The brief discussion on the internal struggle of the Indian Church to overcome casteism leads to an allied problem of external threats from the secular Indian society which has been resentful of the conversion of Dalits to Christianity, especially in the recent vogue of Hindu nationalism. From early on, the evangelization to convert caste Hindus, especially Dalits was resented by the majority Hindu community. If on the one hand, those converted were ostracized from the community,³⁵ the missionaries themselves encountered fierce opposition for their

³³ See TA Ameerudheen, "Is the Caste System Deep-Rooted among Christians in India? A Kerala Bishop Stirs Up a Hornet's Nest," *Scroll.In*, April 20, 2018.

³⁴ See "Discrimination Within the Church," *The Hindu*, June 6, 2016. See also Swaminathan Natarajan, "Indian Dalits Find No Refuge from Caste in Christianity," *BBC News*, September 14, 2010.

³⁵ See McQuade, "Protestant Missions and Dalit Mass Movements in Nineteenth Century India."

constructive mission among the downtrodden.³⁶ One can only say that the hatred towards Christians continues unabated - with the gruesome killing of the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his sons by burning them alive,³⁷ freezing of the accounts of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity,³⁸ and the orchestration of the custodial death of the 83-year old Jesuit tribal activist Stan Swamy,³⁹ to cite a few. The modern version of antagonism towards Christianity cannot be better expressed other than through these current examples. The continued threats to religious freedom only indicate how difficult it is to live as religious minorities in India.

Partly due to the colonial past, the historical prejudice against Christians as converters hampers any meaningful interreligious interface that should otherwise be possible and relevant in a multi-religious context like India. The element of distrust expressed towards Christians is thus a potential threat to engage in any interfaith exchange.⁴⁰ If the element of suspicion is one reason, the fear of Dalit Christians towards any aspect of inculturation or inter-religious dialogue is another. When Indian Christianity was experimenting inculturation in liturgy and theology, the Dalit and Adivasi Christians grew sceptical of "Sanskritic" and "Brahminical" brands of Indianization be it in theology or liturgy, but strongly espoused by the upper-caste Christians. Noting the symbols of Sanskritic Hinduism as symbols of oppression, Dalit scholars promoted a counter theology reflecting the experiences and aspirations of Dalit Christians.⁴¹ Beyond the symbols of oppression, what they suspect is that the Church that is, at least, ideally opposed to the

³⁶ See Chakali Sekhar, "In Search of a Touchable Body: Christian Mission and Dalit Conversions," *Religions* 10, no. 644 (2019): 1–14.

³⁷ See Reuben Joe Joseph, "'The Graham Staines Story' A Grim Reminder of Horrors of Religious Persecution," *The Week*, April 1, 2019.

³⁸ See "Missionaries of Charity/ Why Did the Government Freeze Their Accounts?," *Outlook*, December 27, 2021.

³⁹ See Stanislaus Alla, "The Multiplier-Effect of Stan Swamy's Sufferings," *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, September 2021, catholicethics.com.

⁴⁰ See Ashok Chowgule, "A Modern Hindu Concept of Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Journal of Religious Culture* 71 (2005): 1–6.

⁴¹ See Tharamangalam, 240.

evil like caste system cannot join hands with a religion that considers it foundational.⁴² With such ideological differences present, any interfaith exchange is doubtful although one can find the genuine attempts in the past and present to converse with other religions as ideal conversational partners.

Conclusion

Caste war is a multi-faceted issue that requires a careful study of its history in order to understand its pervasiveness in the Indian society and within the Church. The agenda of Christian peace-making should therefore aggressively pursue social justice, promotion of Dalit agency, and ultimately the annihilation of caste itself. The dream of a casteless society begins with the abolition of caste-based imparities and the virtue of recognition is a needed help to achieve the desired objective. “Reverting our gaze”⁴³ towards Dalits to find them as equal humans with *Imago Dei* forms an integral part of the moral response to the issue of caste within the Indian Church and society. Echoing the truth Lisa Cahill writes: “In the real world, peace-making or peace-building must *usually* proceed in circumstances where it is precisely justice, equal respect, and human rights are sorely lacking or entirely absent. To act when oppressive power makes action risky, or to take risks for those who have no power, is a hallmark of God’s inbreaking reign.”⁴⁴ In addition, the full-scale implementation of the Kingdom vision is only achievable when Christians disown caste identity before passing on the rhetoric to the secular society. Thus, the ideal way in which caste war can be resolved is by tirelessly advocating a casteless society where peace would reign supreme.

⁴² See Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, “The Dalits, Religions, and Interfaith Dialogue,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 7, no. 6 (1994): 13–19.

⁴³ James F Keenan, “The Color Line, Race, and Caste: Structures of Domination and the Ethics of Recognition,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2021): 73.

⁴⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 362.

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