



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.1. 2024 (Jan-March)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

STUDYING THE PHENOMENON OF DALIT CONVERSION IN G. KALYAN RAO'S
UNTOUCHABLES SPRING AND PAUL CHIRAKKARODE'S *PULAYATHARA*

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doi: [10.33329/ijelr.11.1.50](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.1.50)



Article information

Article Received:02/1/2024
Article Accepted:29/01/2024
Published online:05/02/2024

ABSTRACT

In this paper, an attempt will be made to study the phenomenon of Dalit conversion in India as a part of protest movement against caste-based atrocities in the context of two select Dalit texts: *Untouchables Spring* by G. Kalyan Rao and *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirakkarode. There have been large scale conversions to different religions by the Dalits in different parts of India mainly in 20th century. One of the important reasons for Dalit's conversion to different religion is the stigmatization of Dalit body as untouchables by the caste Hindu society. However, there are many other equally important factors for Dalit conversion. Unfortunately, the Dalit conversion didn't help to solve much of the Dalit problems as caste-based atrocities and marginalization continued in most cases. Thus, the paper would examine through lens of the select novels, the significance and aftermath of the conversion in the context of Dalit liberation movement.

Keywords: Assertion Conversion Casteism Dalit Marginalization Resistance

Introduction

The Marathi word 'Dalit' means 'broken and oppressed'. The term 'Dalit' was first used by 19th-century Marathi social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule to refer to a specific section of society who were socially, culturally, politically, and physically oppressed. In his early writings, B.R. Ambedkar used the terms "depressed classes" and "broken men" to refer to the untouchable communities. Mahatma Gandhi called 'Harijan' (Children of God) to refer to the Dalits. Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s gave a new dimension to the term 'Dalit'. It became a collective identity and an ideology for asserting the identity of the untouchables across India.

'Dalit Literature' was first used in 1958 at Bombay's first-ever Dalit literature conference. Eminent Marathi writer and Dalit activist Sharankumar Limbale, in *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, defines 'Dalit Literature' as "...writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit Consciousness". (19) The renaissance of Dalit consciousness finds its roots in the writings and social activism of Dr B R Ambedkar. Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer, editor and activist, traces Dalit Literature's origin in Ambedkar's writings. To him, "His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness". (1)

The term 'Dalit' mainly refers to the untouchables of the Indian society. However, it also includes landless farmers and tribals in India along with untouchables. If one observes the Dalit empowerment movement then one would realize that, focus of the movement is not the only improvement of the economic condition of the Dalits. Rather, the Dalit empowerment movement includes abolition of the many prevailing socio-cultural and religious practices. For example, Ambedkar carried out a campaign for the rights of the Dalits to access drinking water which had been hitherto denied to them. Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against untouchability mainly centred on the programmes like temple entry campaign, accessing public drinking water, and encouragement for interdining etc. Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti* text during 'Mahad Satyagraha' (December, 1927) is one of the important events that bear great symbolic meaning in the context anti caste movement. Thus, all these activities are the proof that the question of Dalit empowerment and liberation also rests in the various socio-cultural practices of the mainstream Hindu society.

The factors for the marginalization of Dalits are multilayered. They are marginalized culturally, socially, economically, politically, and psychologically and all these factors complement each other in the marginalization of the Dalits. Therefore, many Dalit leaders and activists were clueless about the starting point to negate the caste based discriminations and it is the reason why there are different methods and means to liberate the Dalits from discrimination and inhuman caste based practices.

The conversion to different religion was a historical necessity for the Dalits, as marginalization of the Dalits in the Indian Society is not limited to economic factors only. Otherwise, sole focus on the up gradation of the economic condition of the Dalits would have solved the problem by now. However, there is no denying the fact that deplorable economic condition of the said marginalized group is one of the major factors of their marginalized state.

In 1939, Ambedkar announced publicly that he would convert his religion because without it he couldn't see any emancipation of the Dalits. In his much discussed book *Annihilation of Caste* he writes, "People are not wrong in observing caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of caste..." (Ambedkar, 86). But even before Ambedkar's announcement, Dalits in different parts of the country were already changing their religion. Thus, changing one's religion became imperative for the Dalits for their desired goal for attaining self respect, social position and quality of life. Leaving Hindu religion meant destroying the power which gave legitimacy to marginalize Dalits on the basis of ritual power and socio-cultural practices.

But, did conversion really help Dalits changing their marginalized state? In the following paragraph, an attempt would made to look into the phenomenon of Dalit religious conversion and it's ensuing results in their lives and the society in two south Indian Dalit novels namely: *Untouchable Spring* G. Kalyan Rao and *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirokarraode. In the present article, a critical examination will be made in the two select Dalit novels to understand and relate the ideas discussed above. Dalit novels can be read as an alternate history where Dalits authors try to represent the reality of Dalit marginalization from Dalit perspectives. The emerging area of Dalit literature provides a very compelling narrative for dialogic engagement on the discourse of Dalit oppressions and Dalit liberation movement. Along with Dalit autobiographies, the novels provide a wider and more nuanced picture of Dalit world which give the readers multiple perspective to understand the caste based oppressions. Thus, the paper looks into the various factors of Dalit conversions and resulting impact on their lives aftermath of the conversion. It critically examines why mere religious conversion is not enough to liberate the Dalits from many layered marginalization.

Analysis

The story of *Untouchable Spring* is based in fictional village named Yennela Dinni in Andhra Pradesh. Yennela Dinni consisted of various caste groups, and their dwelling places are arranged in hierarchical order. The village proper is called *Ooru* where Mala and Madiga's are not allowed to live. The villagers who belonged to four castes are only allowed to live in the *Ooru*. The place where *Malas* lived are called *Malapalli* and the place where *Madigas* lived are called *Madigapalli* are outside the *Ooru*:

There could be thirty houses of Reddys. Only one Brahmin house. That was the Karanam's house. Washerman, barber, balija, cowherd, potter-together all would probably make the same number of houses. Two on the Reddy's mound, two on the brahmin's lake bund-yanadi houses. At a distance, twenty mala houses. Further off the same number of madiga houses. The place where those who belonged to the four castes lived was ooru. The place where malas lived -malapalli, where the madigas lived -madigapalli. Amazingly, all those parts put together formed Yennela Dinni. (Rao, 6-7)

Space plays an important role in maintaining hierarchy among different caste groups in the novel. Space defines who high castes are and who untouchable castes are in a particular village. Space plays a key role in sustaining power relationship among different caste groups. Gopal Guru in *Cracked Mirror* talks about how space plays an important role in sustaining Oppressor/ Oppressed relationship:

Taking a cue from Lefebvre, I argue in this chapter that space provides this necessary condition for the tormentor, who then uses these spaces for producing a particular kind of experience that can morally paralyse a victim. The tormentor reconfigures spaces accordingly, so as to seek the ultimate regulation of the victim into hegemony and domination of the former. She defends domination, either using spaces to enact unprecedented violence or by using them for marginal cooption of the victim in the symbolic universe of the tormentor. (Guru and Sarukkai, 73)

The power equation in the village and caste hierarchy is regulated through restricting certain spaces for the untouchable castes. For instance, temple is a space where Mala's and Madiga's are restricted. *Ooru*, the village proper of the Yennela Dinni is another space where Dalit's movements are restricted. This act of restriction on the Dalits creates inferiority in Dalits. Thus, when National Congress members of the village carried out Dalit empowerment movement, temple entry programme was one of the major steps they took. In the village congregation, like theatre performance in the village, even sitting arrangements are made according to the status of different castes. Dalits are made to sit in the last row far away from the people of other castes.

There is a description of the long history of caste based oppression on Mala and Madiga's of Andhra Pradesh in the novel before the author narrates the Dalit's conversion to Christianity. The author narrates 6 generations of a Dalit family in 18 chapters and detail about their everyday struggles for survival. The author shows us how *Malas* and *Madigas* have been fighting in every generation for basic human rights and dignity. Still they couldn't escape from the firm evil grip of the caste. Finally, they decided to convert themselves to Christianity in the early part of 20th century. The fundamental reason for conversion is to escape the evil clutches of the caste based practices like *untouchability*. The author stated the reason of the conversion in the novel in the tone of a historian: "Martin and Siviahs believed in Christ to get rid of untouchability. They believed in them to appease their hunger. More than anything else they believed in Christ to save themselves from being hunted by men. Whether Chinnodu became Martin or Siviah became simon, they did so only for this reason." (Rao, 160)

Dalit's conversion to Christianity appeared to make caste based rules and practices obsolete at first and in some cases it was successful. However, the casteist mentality is deeply rooted in the psyche of the different caste groups. The hierarchical structure is recreated even in different settings. Most of the Malas and Madigas opted for conversion in the hope of escaping from the caste based atrocities. The conversion was thought to be effective step for Dalit emancipation. The act of conversion might be beneficial for Dalits in some respects, yet it could not solve the real problem. The Dalits couldn't escape the caste based atrocities even after the conversion.

The novels shows why conversion alone could not solve the fundamental problem of Dalits i.e. escaping the caste based atrocities. The fundamental structure of the Hindu society is hierarchical. Although, the root cause of this hierarchical structure is thought to be religious, but the elements which sustain the age old institution are various socio-cultural practices that are normalized by the upper castes. These socio-cultural practices which may vary from region to region in India, sustain the hierarchical divisions of the Dalits and non Dalits. For the Dalits, to liberate themselves, it is quite imperative to violate these age old customary practices but for the upper castes it is very important to keep alive these practices to maintain their superiority. The author

narrates how upper castes of the village try to prevent any attempt by Dalits to break down these age old socio-cultural practices:

“In the vicinity of Cheemakurthi, they hounded and caught hold of a madiga youth. He had committed two crimes. He had a Bible in his hand. He had slippers on his feet. Besides, he was walking in the *Ooru*. An untouchable ought not to walk in the village. If an occasion arose to walk, he ought not to wear slippers. He ought not to have a head cloth. He ought not to hold an umbrella in his hand. He ought not to raise his lowered head. He ought not to look sideways, even accidentally. If at such an instance, an upper caste woman came out and looked at him, that was the end of him. That was why in some *Oorus* they had to walk making a strange sound.” (Rao, 169)

The proposed argument of the paper is summed up in the above lines. In the above lines, the author points out the important reasons why conversion alone couldn't solve the problem of Dalit oppressions. Although, Dalits moved away from the Hindu folds yet there were no drastic change in their economic status, geographical locations and socio-political status. All the socio-cultural practices and customs which segregated them and oppressed them remained the same in most cases. The above passage is a testament to how the uppercastes of the Yennela Dinni try to keep the traditional practices intact which ensured the inferior position of the Dalits. For instances, the wearing of slippers, holding of an umbrella, lowering of heads while walking all these customs ensured the hierarchical difference between Dalits and the uppercastes.

The author also brings out the double standard and ambiguous nature of the dominant castes regarding the empowerment of the Dalits. When Malas and Madiga's converted to Christianity they were also reforming their lives by avoiding certain practices that made them inferior. For instance, after converting to Christianity, they gave up the practice of skinning and eating the meat of the dead animals. But, upper castes of the village forced them to eat the dead animal so that they can be associated with this demeaning practice. Sharankumar Limbale in his *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* states: “The work of the Dalit is essential for maintaining the upper caste Hindu'd purity. If they didn't clean latrines, skin dead animals and remove the carcasses, the social life of the upper caste will be unclean, polluted and diseased....Dalits enable the purity of the upper caste society, and became impure in the process.” (3) However, when Gandhi's *Harijan Seva Sangam* carried out reformatory programme in the village, they urged them to give up eating beef so that they can be included in the Hindu fold and continue to keep them in the periphery:

Strange. When malas and madigas converted to Christianity and said they wouldn't eat the meat of the dead cattle, it was they who forced them to it. There are many such incidents in villages...This isn't in fact the upliftment of Harijans. This is protecting Hindu religion. It's to ensure that powerful castes and classes don't move away from it. There too there are restrictions on malas and madigas. In the name of purification, to cage them in a frame. (Rao, 195-196)

Here, the author talks about how Gandhi's ideology regarding the abolition of the untouchably and upliftment of the Dalits had many shortcomings. Gandhi urged the uppercaste Hindus for moral and ethical purification of their soul by avoiding the discriminatory practices like temple entry, interdining, intermarriage etc. But technically, there is no possibility for Dalits to be a part of the four fold Varna. Even after ritual purification of the Dalits, there is no way Gandhi could accommodate Dalits in a respectable position in the Hindu caste structure. As, Hindu caste structure is sustained by the logic of hierarchy and relativity. Therefore, even if they are accommodated, they would always find the bottommost position in the hierarchy because no other caste and sub-caste would vacate their position.

Pulayathara by Paul Chirrokardde vividly describes the insiders account of the aftermath of Dalit conversion to Christianity in Kerala. In the novel, the people of the untouchable *Pulaya* community live in extreme poverty where they are enslaved by their landlords. They are made to toil in a very hostile environment and the product of their labor was snatched away from them. The author shows how these untouchable communities are enslaved generation after generation. Since, their labour was exploited by their landlords, they don't have any material possessions: “But Thevan Pulayan is a harmless soul. I am not able to do anything when

I think of the old Pulayan.' Raghava Kurup agreed. Thevan was his father's trustworthy servant. He had often seen the old Pulayan standing in the customary humble posture before his father; a father who could tame his servants and keep them in line." (Chirakkarode, 11-12)

The above paragraph shows the master-slave relationship between Dalit and the Powerful upper-caste landlords. By imposing various customary caste laws the upper-castes make the untouchables loyal to them. If Dalits can't be made loyal to them, they turn into coercive means to subjugate them to their place. Thevan pulayan represents old generation of Dalits who are submissive, docile and follow all the customary caste laws without questioning them. They believe their identity and servile state as a divine ordain.

To escape such ill treatments and the economic exploitation by the upper caste landlords, the Pulayans of the Kerala converted themselves to Christianity. But they are exploited and ill treated by the uppercaste Syrian Christians in a new power configuration:

No matter to which religion conversion took place, conversion was always problematic as caste was invariably carried over to other religion, and the upper castes within every religious community were the ones who continued to exercise power. Also the tasks assigned to them in schools, missions and other such bodies were a continuation of their mental occupations. (Abraham and Barak, 107)

Despite technically changing themselves to a different religion, their identity as untouchable caste refuses to die down. Thus, caste based identities can't be changed only by changing one's religious identity since a caste identity entails lot many things. A caste identity is not formed overnight, it is sustained not only by religious practices but also by social, cultural, political, and economic relations and practices in relation to other caste groups of a particular region.

Although, economic deprivation and the exploitation seems to be the main cause of suffering for the lower castes yet the novels shows that caste ontology is beyond economic condition of the untouchables. The novel brings out the discrimination against the newly converted Dalit Christians in Kerala. On the guise of liberating the lower castes from the upper castes, they have lured them into Christianity only to exploit them economically and culturally in a new environment. 'That is the truth, Koch'amra. Why do they make us join the Church? To enslave us.' He stopped to gulp down the rest of his coffee. Replacing the glass he said, 'But that's not it, Koch'amra. We, too, have our gods and deities. Then how can we join the Church?' (Chirakkarode, 44)

Space always plays an important role in the continuation of caste based hierarchy. The author narrates how even inside the Church, discrimination between untouchables and Upper castes are maintained by making segregated seating arrangements:

"However, right in front, woven mats were laid for the low-caste Christians. Their fate was to sit on the floor. But they had no complaints about it. That was because they had never considered this a grievance at all. For them, even to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of those upper castes was a privilege. From among the 'believer' women rose a song of praise: There is no fairer Bridegroom than he ..."(Chirakkarode, 55)

Thus, discrimination against the Dalits continues even inside the Church premises. In the novel, Pathros was rejected as a preacher despite having all the quality of becoming a preacher. The caste based discrimination forayed into the Christian community in Kerala where Pulayan's are not treated as equal with the other uppercaste Christians. "Against that dark background the forms of his ancestors seemed to grow huge, like mountains. The forms were becoming clearer. They said in one voice, 'Please do not bring a Pulaya preacher to speak in the Church!' The words gained echoes like the thick sounds flowing out of a cave. Were these just fanciful thoughts?" (Chirakkarode, 39-40).

It is no denying the fact that, the Untouchables joined the Church for a purpose. They definitely were not seeking some deep spiritual enlightenment, rather Church and missionaries provided them some basic facilities that they were grateful for. The new Christians were provided a piece of land to build a *thara* (a hut), were given new society where they don't have to face the continuous rage of their uppercaste masters, a

crematory ground and other facilities like healthcare, educational opportunities: "The Parayan and Pulayan who did not own even a tiny bit of land joined the Church for a reason. It was not the dream of going to heaven. If there was a heaven, there too the upper-caste Christians would dominate. One could not expect them to give up their dominance in the other world! Who knew that God would not take their side? No." (Chirakkarode, 186-187). In the end of the novel, the Pulayans regret by becoming the members of the Church. There was also organizational works carried out by the Dalit Christians so that they could fight against the prevailing discrimination of the Church. Their growing interest for the Marxism was the result of the existing hierarchies in the Church. The novel ends with a positive note as they found new hope in the unity of the Dalits and Dalit liberation activisms in other parts of India. The new Christians realized that the Uppercaste Christians would continue to dominate them even inside the Church if they don't unite among themselves and fight back. When they were converted, there were great zeal and enthusiasm as if they got new life. But their search for self respect and dignity eluded even in the new religion: "The new Christians sat on the two mats spread in front like a flock of tame sheep. The old songs continued to be sung, but they had lost their vitality. The hope and zeal in the hearts of the Pulaya women, which had once given the songs their rhythmic vitality and sweet melody were dead. They had understood that the Kingdom of God would not arrive all that soon!" (Chirakkarode, 167).

The above lines summarize the harsh realities of the newly convert Christians. They have understood that only changing religion wouldn't give them dignity and upgrade the quality of their life. In the end, the newly converts get themselves united and organized among themselves to carry out a long fight against the oppressive systems.

Conclusion

In the above brief discussion, it is seen that 'Religious conversion' may be one of the most significant steps taken by the Dalits to negate the caste based discriminations and practices. However, it is not an all inclusive remedy for the caste based discriminations and atrocities. Conversion definitely had a great impact on the discourse of Dalit empowerment. While it was a significant historical move by the Dalits in their search for dignity, self respect and escape from caste based atrocities and discriminations. It created great uproar among the Hindu leaders like Mahatma Gandhi since it threatened very structure of the caste. Dalit conversion also bring to the notice that structure of caste system is not solely religious neither it is solely economic. It is a very complex structure, which operate in day to day basis on the conscious and unconscious realm of the society. The various socio-cultural practices, restriction of Dalits in certain spaces, economic deprivation and psychological barrier among all caste groups together contribute to the subjugation of the Dalits. Thus, Dalit novels can be called as an important part and parcel of the Dalit empowerment movement in modern India. If Dalit autobiography gives the reader the authenticity of the narration, Dalit novels offers the larger picture of the important Dalit issues like –conversion. These kinds of writings already provided a fertile ground for the Dalit writers to continue the counter narratives through their literary narrations. The novels provide much denser and more nuanced picture of the society where they are being discriminated.

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