

Christianity, Women Empowerment and Tribal Welfare – The Role of Missionaries in India

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Abstract

Christianity, as other religions, has a distinct source of humanism. Christian missionaries are working sincerely in different parts of the country in developing economic conditions of the socially excluded and the poor. Many people from the untouchables, outcastes and lower caste groups in India were converted to Christianity. This conversion brought about social awakening of the oppressed groups in the country. Christianity provided opportunities of education, new occupations and a life with personal dignity and social acceptance for many. Dalits are socially excluded, in majority of Indian religions, having unequal access to labour markets and social protection mechanisms through formal and informal institutions, lower access to health and education, and lower returns to education and assets. They are more likely to be poor and socially excluded. This study seeks to find out whether Christianity has really lifted these people from distress, enlightened them, liberated them and brought about an upward social movement for them. Our study shows that the average consumption expenditure on both food and non-food items for all households was higher in Christians as compared to Hindus and Muslims in rural as well as in urban areas in 2009-10. However, scheduled tribes are the most deprived people, in any parameter of development, even among the Christians.

Keywords: Equity, Living Standard, Human Development, Religion, Tribal Welfare

Dalits in every religion, and also among the Christians in particular, are socially excluded in India; having unequal access to labor markets and social protection mechanisms through formal and informal institutions, lower access to health and education, and lower returns to education and assets. They are more likely to be poor, and this likelihood is passed down through generations. Social exclusion being a part of capability deprivation has been instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures. Being excluded from social relations can lead to other deprivations as well, thereby further limiting the living opportunities. For example, being excluded from the opportunity to be employed or to receive credits may lead to economic impoverishment which may, in turn, lead to other deprivations such as undernourishment. In modern India, untouchables, who have been converted to Christianity, constitute about 80 per cent of the Christian population. This study seeks to find out whether Christianity has really lifted these people from distress, enlightened them, liberated them and brought about an upward social movement for them or not.

Christian missionaries are working sincerely in different parts of the country in developing economic conditions of the socially excluded. They have been playing an important role in cultural, social and economic development in India since long. They empower the marginalized people to claim their rights to employment in different parts of India. Deccan Development Society, for example, works with Dalit women in southern India to empower them. Many individuals from the untouchables, outcastes and lower caste groups in India were converted to Christianity. This conversion brought about social awakening among the oppressed groups in the country. Christianity provided opportunities for education, new occupations and a life with personal dignity and social acceptance for these people. In India, Christian Missionaries played a pivotal role in the cultural renaissance of Bengal in the 19th century, which marked the awakening of the people of the country from all backgrounds to come to understand human dignity in a novel way and the emergence of a new cultural identity.

Against the historical development of Christian missionaries as stated below, this paper discusses about the living standards of Christian Dalits in comparison with Hindus and Muslims, and the empowerment of tribal women in India through education and skill development. The constitution of India provides the right for positive discrimination and affirmative action with reference to the tribal people of the country. For this purpose, the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) Strategy has been adopted for the all round development of tribal areas since the Fifth Five-Year Plan. This ensures allocation of funds for tribal areas from State Plan in proportion to the Scheduled tribe population in the state. A significant part of the tribal people is still devoid of modern facilities like education, electricity, proper drinking water, health care, adequate transportation, and so on.

As India is a country with people of different religions, castes, language groups, social and religious factors could be an important determinant of the standard of living of different communities in the country. Socioeconomic indicators, therefore, assume great significance in understanding the nature of poverty at the macro level. In this context, it may be imperative to examine the relative economic status of the major religious groups by states in India. Each religious group is highly heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic characteristics. It is well established that the prevalence of poverty among Dalits is higher than other social groups. Thus, the distribution of population by social groups in any religion affects the poverty estimates for that religion largely. Observing composition of population by social groups within each religion across states in rural-urban division may enable us to interpret better the poverty and inequality within and between religious groups.

Some scholars have focussed on the different aspects of living standards by studying different social and religious groups. By using 28th round NSS data for the year 1973-74, Pal *et al*, found that Muslims were poorer than Hindus in most of the states in rural India, excepting for Assam and Jammu and Kashmir.¹ According to Shariff, the prevalence of poverty in rural India was marginally higher among the Muslims compared to the Hindus, and was the lowest among the Christians in 1994.² Srinivasan and Mohanty, by using data from the National Family Health

¹ Padmaja Pal, S R Chakravarty and N Bhattacharya, "Poverty in Rural India: A Decomposition Analysis", *Indian Economic Review*, Vol 21, No 2, Mumbai, Samiksha Trust, 1986, pp. 149-84.

² Abusaleh Shariff, *India: Human Development Report. A Profile of Indian States in the 1990s*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Survey 1998-99 (NFHS-2), observed that roughly a similar pattern of deprivation across the religious groups existed across the country.³ In our empirical study we have computed the prevalence, depth and severity of poverty for three major religious groups across the states, separately for rural and urban areas in India, with NSS 66th round data for the year 2009-10.

The study is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses the development of Christianity in India from a historical point of view; and section 3 describes the pattern of population distribution by religions across the major states in India as shown in the Census of India 2001. While section 4 is a brief description of the data used in this study. The consumption pattern of food and non-food items across the social and religious groups are examined in section 5. Section 6 investigates the prevalence and severity of poverty among the major social and religion groups and Section 7 draws up the conclusion.

1. Historical Development of Christian Missionaries in India

Christianity marked its beginning in India with the arrival of St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of Jesus, in 52 A.D.⁴ Since then Christianity has spread its roots in different parts of the southern states in India. The southern states together account for more than 55 per cent of the total Christian population in the country. In the North East, the share is over 20 per cent. In Goa, Christians constitute nearly 30 per cent of its total population. The existence of Christianity found in north India since the reign of Emperor Akbar, who had invited the scholarship of Christian priests at his court at Fatepur Sikri from Goa. The first Christian establishment in the eastern region was in 1620 by a Jesuit Missionary, Simon Figueredo, under the invitation and patronage of Mughal governor of Patna, John Maquirrum Khan. Today, Dalit Christian community of Bihar comprises 17 communities of Scheduled Caste origin. Christian presence in Orissa has been traced to the 18th Century by the arrival of Jesuit missionaries. Most of the Christians in the states are tribal. In the state of Madhya Pradesh also Christianity started to expand since the mid eighteenth century. The presence of Christianity in the north-eastern states was initiated with the arrival of two Portuguese missionaries in 1626. Assam had acted as a spring board to Tibetan missions by Christian missionaries. Christianity reached Bengal in the 16th Century. But it had subsided, and later rejuvenated in the 19th century.

In the pre-colonial period Christians were more predominant in the areas of agriculture and commerce. An understanding of the impact of Christianity in India can be had by reviewing the development of the Church institutions. William Carey, the first Baptist missionary arrived at Serampore in 1793, and laid the foundation for welfare activities, especially in health services, in the eastern part of India. In 1802 Bengali translation of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were published by Carey. In 1818 Bengali newspaper was published as a means of social education. Carey pioneered the movement that led to the abolition of the inhuman practice of *Sati*. He relentlessly fought against other social evils such as infanticide and caste system. Alexander Duff played a significant role in the foundation of the University of Calcutta and influenced the thinking of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. St. Xavier's college (1835), La Martiniers (1836) etc. are

³ K. Srinivasan and S. K. Mohanty, "Deprivation of Basic Amenities by Caste and Religion: Empirical Study Using NFHS Data", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 39, No. 7, Mumbai, Samiksha Trust, 2004, pp. 728-35.

⁴ The Syrian Christians of Kerala trace their origin to 52 A.D. while Catholicism in Goa is no less than 400 years old.

the major contributions of the missionaries to the society of Bengal. The modern elementary school system was initiated in India by the Christian missionaries as well.

Christian missionaries contributed in the formation of the democratic government, women empowerment and pro-democracy movement. Young Christian Council of Action established in 1930 which contributed significantly to the Bengal Reform movement through the expansion of education. The Serampore Mission helped in the cultural renaissance in Bengal under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The effective establishment of Indian journalism owes to the missionaries of Serampore. In 1818, missionaries began to publish a weekly newspaper in Bengali and English.

In India the untouchables, the lower caste people and the marginalised converted into Christianity and got opportunities for education and employment. Madras Native Christian Association was established in 1893 and lifted up many of untouchables, economically and socially. The financial resources from American missionaries facilitated the development of medical and social work in India during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1842 they started the first school in the Himalyan Region. The services rendered by Christian missionaries have multiplied today in the shape of the formation of schools, rehabilitation centres, leprosy homes, orphanages, hospitals, dispensaries, colleges, and vocational training centres.

2. Population Distribution by Religious Groups

The Census of India (2001) indicates that the Hindus are predominantly a rural community in almost all the states. Muslims, on the other hand, are dominating in the urban centres in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Christians are also concentrated in urban areas notably in Karnataka and Maharashtra. About one-third of the Hindus in rural and one-fifth of them in urban India are either Scheduled Castes (SC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST). Christians comprise little more than 2% of both the rural and urban population, of which 49% and 26% are SC and ST respectively. The percentage share of these population groups is very low among the Muslims, in both rural and urban areas. In Orissa, one of the poorest states in India, roughly 2% of both the rural and urban population is Christian, of which over 90% and over 60% respectively are SC and ST. In Bihar also, the incidence of Christianity and its distribution across social groups are roughly similar.

John and Mutatkar (2005)⁵ found that, in urban India, the monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) of Muslims is lower than Hindus in all states, except Tamil Nadu. But in rural areas the MPCE of Muslims is the highest in Gujarat and Orissa, and it is the lowest in Punjab and Haryana. While the average consumption level of Christians is the highest in urban India and higher than Hindus in rural India, in Orissa Christians have the lowest average MPCE among all religious groups in both rural and urban areas where a very high proportion of the Christian population comprises tribes.

However, in Madhya Pradesh, where above 70% of the Christians are Dalits, the average MPCE of the Christian population is significantly higher than Hindus.

⁵ R.M. John and R. Mutatkar, "State wise Estimates of Poverty among Religious Groups in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai, Samiksha Trust, 26 March 2005, pp. 1337-1344.

3. The Data

The household level data used in this study comes from the NSS 50th, 55th, 61st and 66th rounds quinquennial surveys on 'household consumer expenditure'. The 66th round on household consumer expenditure was the eighth and the most recent quinquennial round covering 59,097 samples in 7,428 villages and 41,697 samples in 5,263 urban blocks⁶ for 2009-10. The survey in each round of this type is based on stratified multi-stage sampling. The census villages in the rural sector and urban frame survey blocks in the urban sector are the first stage sample units. The final stage ultimate sample units are households selected by simple random sample without replacement (SRSWOR) in both the sectors. The data set covers the geographical areas all over India, excepting few regions⁷. The cross-sectional survey is roughly representative of the national, state, and so-called "NSS region" level. Schedule 1.0 of these rounds collected consumption expenditure on different food and non-food items and some other characteristics, namely, age, sex and educational level, of every person within a household. The household consumer expenditure survey is the primary data source in estimating poverty in India.

NSS classifies the religious groups into eight categories, namely, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Others. Since the sample size was very small for many of the smaller religious groups in the country, for our analysis they have been regrouped into four categories, namely, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Others. Social groups are divided into four categories in NSS: scheduled tribe, scheduled caste, other backward class, and others. The most religious and social groups in India are heterogeneous in nature with considerable intra-group variations.

4. Consumption Pattern of Dalits and Upper Caste Households by Religion

The average monthly per capita expenditure on food and non-food items acts as a proxy for the average living standard. If consumption is divided into food consumption and non-food consumption, the proportion of overall consumption accounted for by food consumption is higher for the poorer people. Thus the proportion of food consumption to non-food consumption can be used as a proxy for the indicator of poverty at the household level. The higher consumption share in food has been highly associated with higher incidence of poverty.

The examination of consumption pattern of Dalits and upper caste households among Hindus, Muslims and Christians adds an important dimension to the consumption disparity in India. Average consumption expenditure on both food and non-food items for all households was higher in Christians as compared to Hindus and Muslims in rural as well as in urban areas in 2009-10, as indicated by Tables 1 and 2. The level of wellbeing, as indicated by the monthly consumption expenditure, varied widely among different social groups as defined in NSS schedule in every religion, but not following a systematic pattern. Scheduled tribes were

⁶ At all-India level, 12784 FSUs were allocated to the central sample and 15132 FSUs to the state sample. The total number of sample FSUs was allocated to the states and UTs in proportion to population as per census 2001 subject to a minimum sample allocation to each state. A minimum of 16 FSUs was allocated to each state separately for rural and urban areas.

⁷ (i) Leh (Ladakh) and Kargil districts of Jammu & Kashmir, (ii) interior villages of Nagaland situated beyond five kilometres of the bus route and (iii) villages in Andaman and Nicobar Islands which remain inaccessible throughout the year.

the most deprived people, in any parameter of development, among the Christians. Average consumption expenditure on both food and non-food of the scheduled tribe families was significantly lower than the expenditure of the upper caste families among Christians. The economic condition of the tribal people was the most severe in Christians as compared to other religious groups particularly in urban locations in India. Muslim tribes, on the other hand, were in better condition as compared to tribal people among the Hindus and other religions. The scheduled tribe households in Hindus were also more deprived than the other social groups in this religion in the countryside. But the average expenditure of the tribal Hindus was significantly higher, particularly on non-food items, than the average spending of scheduled caste families living in urban areas. Surprisingly enough, the tribal people in Muslims were relatively better off than the upper castes both in rural as well as urban areas.

Table 1 Mean food expenditure (in Rs.) among social groups: 2009-10

Social group	Rural			Urban		
	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity
Scheduled Tribes	2523	3515	2783	3534	6623	3230
Scheduled Castes	2618	2593	3090	3237	3404	3611
Other Backward Classes	2901	3233	2905	3447	3912	3813
General Castes	3355	3154	4231	4330	3953	4414
All groups	2849	3124	3252	3637	4473	3767

Source: Author's estimate from NSS 66th round unit data

Table 2 Mean non-food expenditure (in Rs.) among social groups: 2009-10

Social group	Rural			Urban		
	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity
Scheduled Tribes	1346	2158	1368	3748	5258	2425
Scheduled Castes	1545	1720	1553	2888	2288	3584
Other Backward Classes	1932	2202	2362	3628	3242	4757
General Castes	2629	1665	5128	5964	3158	6388
All groups	1863	1936	2603	4057	3487	4289

Source: As for Table 1

5. Prevalence and Severity of Poverty among Social and Religious Groups

The comparison of average consumption levels among different religious groups provides some indication of the relative economic status of these groups, which needs to be further examined by analysing the poverty estimates in combination with the inequality estimates. In an earlier study, Das (2012)⁸ estimated the incidence of poverty by using relative poverty line at different thresholds to analyze the economic dimensions of different groups of people defined on the basis of caste and religion in the country. The risks of poverty have been worked out at 75% and 50% of the median expenditure per capita on monthly basis (mpce) across the major social

⁸ Panchanan Das, "Relative Deprivation among Religious and Social Groups in India: Measuring Prevalence, Depth and Severity of Poverty with NSS Unit Data", in *The Journal of Income and Wealth*, 34 (2012), 1, pp. 47-56.

and religious groups in India, with unit level data of household consumer survey at 50th, 55th, 61st and 66th rounds conducted by the NSSO. As we move towards lower threshold levels the risk of poverty will increase. The main findings of this study have been reproduced in Table 3.

Historically in the Indian society, occupations are closely linked with caste and religion. In many parts of the country access to education, health and also other social rights are mainly confined to the upper castes. The ethnic minorities have suffered from social and economic exclusions because of their geographical isolation and cultural differences. Scheduled tribes among the social groups and Muslims among religious groups are mostly deprived in terms of head count measure at 75% median expenditure as poverty line and there has been no improving trend in poverty incidence among them.

Even, among the tribal people, the head count ratio at this threshold increased over time and it still remained at over 44% in 2009-10. The extreme poverty measured at 50% of the median expenditure per capita has also been significantly higher for scheduled tribes. The poverty ratio for this group of people at this poverty line increased significantly during 1993-94 and 2004-05. While it declined during the period between 61st and 66th NSS rounds, the rate was higher in 2009-10 as compared with the situation in the early 1990s.

Although the poverty rates at 75% median expenditure were higher for Muslims than for Hindus and other religious groups over different NSS periods, the incidence of extreme poverty was higher for Hindus than for Muslims during the same period. The Christians have relatively better access to education and the relative poverty among them was lower as compared to other religious groups both at 75% and 50% median expenditure as poverty threshold.

Table 3 Head count measures at different threshold by social and religious groups in India

Threshold level	75 percent median mpce				50 percent median mpce			
	1993-94	1999-00	2004-05	2009-10	1993-94	1999-00	2004-05	2009-10
Social group								
Scheduled tribe	43.2	47.7	52.5	44.4	12	12.9	24.4	13.3
Scheduled caste	38.4	37.1	42	36.1	9.3	7.3	14.9	7.7
OBC		27.5	30.4	28.1		4.2	10	5
Others	21.6	13.9	18.3	14.4	3.8	1.8	5.6	2.2
Religious group								
Hinduism	27	26.8	32.4	27.7	5.8	4.9	11.6	5.7
Islam	29.6	26.2	24.5	29.5	4.9	3.7	7.5	5.1
Christianity	20.5	18	23.9	11.9	4.8	3.7	8.3	1.6
Others	22.2	27.9	42.4	34	2.5	5.4	15.1	15.1
Total population	26.8	26.1	30.8	27.1	5.6	4.7	10.8	5.5

Source: Das (2012)

The poverty gap index adds up the extent to which households on average fall below the poverty line. It shows how much would have to be transferred to the poor to bring their incomes up to the poverty line. This index measures average poverty gap and the extent to which individuals fall below the poverty threshold. The numerical value of poverty gap index

is normally lower than headcount index of poverty. Average poverty gap, both at 75% and 50% median expenditure, was significantly higher among the tribal people than other social groups in India in every NSS round. People belonging to the scheduled and other backward classes are far lagging behind those of general castes in terms of depth of poverty. However, Christians were relatively better off compared to other religious groups. Although higher levels of severity index are normally associated with higher levels of headcount index and poverty gap index across social groups, the situation is somehow different across the religious groups in India. The severity index of poverty was also low for Christians as compared to other religions irrespective of the social group.⁹

The incidence of poverty among different religious groups varied widely across the major states in India. Hindus were the poorest religious group in rural areas in the majority of the states, excepting for Kerala and Bihar, where the Muslims and Christians respectively were poorer than other religious groups. In Assam, the poverty index for Hindus is much lower than that of Muslims and Christians. On the other hand, the poverty index for Muslims is perceptibly lower than Hindus in states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. In Orissa, Maharashtra and West Bengal, there were wide differences in prevalence of rural poverty across all the religious groups. In the urban areas of most of the states, on the other hand, the Muslims were poorer than other religious groups. There is also a notable difference in the magnitude of their poverty as compared to other religious groups across different states in India. A wide variation exists in the poverty levels of urban Christians of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The incidence of urban poverty among Christians was significantly higher in Andhra Pradesh than in Karnataka.

In interpreting the rural-urban differences in the incidence of poverty by religious groups, particularly for Christians, the presence of SC and ST population in each religious group needs to be considered. In Assam, over 50% of rural Christians are below the poverty line, while the proportion of urban Christians below the poverty line is zero, and the proportion of tribes is roughly equal among the rural and urban Christians in the state. In Uttar Pradesh, rural poverty is higher than urban poverty among Hindus, but the reverse is true for the Muslims, while prevalence of poverty among rural Christians in Bihar exceeds that of their urban counterparts by 30%. Urban poverty among Muslims is considerably higher than the corresponding rural poverty in states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Orissa.

6. Conclusions

This paper is by no means an attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the process of social exclusion as such, but to look into the extent of deprivation in terms of consumption expenditure and poverty risk faced by socially excluded people. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) provides household level information for different social and religious groups. This study focuses mainly on adivasis (STs) among Christians, Hindus and Muslims, the most excluded ethnic groups in India.

Education enhances the level of competence to cope up and have better living standards and social milieu. Further, education ensures opportunities for functional employment thereby empowering rural folk for more economic opportunities, growth and development. The better the skills in terms of human capital, higher is the income leading toward a better living standard

⁹ Panchanan Das, *op cit.*

and socio-economic structure. India has the second largest tribal population in the world and its women continue to be under-represented in formal training programmes limiting their gainful employment in a significant manner. As discussed in this paper, Christian missionaries played an important role in the expansion of education among the underprivileged class of people. The Christian missionaries in the sphere of education helped in elevating the status of women by giving the lead in female education as well. Probably for this reason the incidence of poverty among Christians has been lower than Hindus and Muslims.

The missionaries have rendered services in the field of education, medical aid and social aid. Most of the tribes were under the clutches of money lenders causing them to dispossess their land, lose control over their own community based socio-economic structure and indigenous culture. Missionaries have undertaken different steps towards making the tribes self-sufficient. The contribution of the church in the field of health services has been well appreciated by all sections of the people as well as by the government. Health centres run by Christians originally meant to serve the poor. Many well-equipped and well-established hospitals render service in rural areas too. However, the structural discrimination still remains among different social and religious groups, particularly among the weaker and marginalized sections of the society.

