Caste, Conversion, and Identity: An Ethnographic Study of Bengali Dalit Christians in West Bengal

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Abstract

This research intends to examine the socio-cultural base, orientation and underlying realities behind Bengali Dalit Christians in Nistabdhapur, West Bengal, focusing on the persistence of caste, identity-negotiation, and everyday experiences of marginalization. Although Christianity is widely regarded as an egalitarian faith, this study ventures to problematize that assumption by attempting to demonstrate how caste-based hierarchies continue to influence social relations even after conversion in religious belief and faith. The research sustains itself within broader debates on caste, religion, and post-secularism in India. This study will try to assimilate qualitative ethnographic approaches, in-depth interviews, observation of the participant and auto-ethnographic reflections. It will also engage in analysing narratives of individuals from diverse age groups and occupations to understand how caste and religious identities intersect in shaping their day-to-day experiences. This research will try to examine how Bengali Dalit-Christians experience a dual marginalization, both as members of a historically oppressed caste and as a religious minority often thresholded as "Alien Culture." Despite constitutional proclamations of equality, discrimination still persists in subtle and overt forms, ranging from everyday verbal abuse to structural inequalities. This study will also highlight how individuals strategically negotiate their identities by adapting to dominant cultural norms, often concealing aspects of their religious or caste identity to avoid stigmatization. Additionally, this research will attempt to explore the concept of "Indianization" of Christianity, showing how such cultural assimilation has failed to fully erase social boundaries. Thus, the study intends to come to a conclusion that conversion to Christianity does not dismantle caste hierarchies, rather transforms their expression only. It requires a more nuanced understanding of caste, beyond religious boundaries and to emphasise the need for greater social awareness and policymaking towards marginalized Christian communities.

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Keywords: Dalit Christians, Social Exclusion, Post-Secularism, Cultural Assimilation, Indianization of Christianity.

1. Introduction

The history of the Dalit Communities is debatably complex and often contested because questions of its origin are closely linked to identity, dignity and social status. Narratives that deal about where communities come from can shape both self-perception and public perception. They may become sources of pride and confidence, but they can also be used to justify exclusion, discrimination and inequality. This is especially true in discussions about the caste system and ideas of untouchability in South Asia.

The Dalit theology emerged in the twentieth century, particularly in India, as an effort to interpret religion from the perspective of oppressed communities. It sought to recover, reassess and regenerate histories, cultures, and spiritual traditions that had often been neglected or suppressed within dominant social and religious frameworks. More broadly, Dalit movement has emphasized equality, justice, and the right to define identity on their own terms. However, many Dalits converted themselves into other religions - Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, or other traditions - at different points in history for varied reasons. These reasons included spiritual conviction, access to education, opportunities for social mobility, protest against caste oppression, or a desire for dignity and community, and the like.

Christianity, on the other hand, has often been considered and associated with ideals of equality and the spiritual unity of all believers. However, in India, conversion to Christianity has not always removed the obnoxious effects of the prevalent caste system. Numerous studies and contemporary experiences have cited that caste identities and social boundaries have continued to influence Christian communities in many regions. As a result, the term Dalit Christians came to be used commonly in academic and social discussions to describe Christians from historically oppressed caste-backgrounds. Although caste distinctions are not recognized in Christian doctrine, they often remain present in social practices.

The word Dalit in Sanskrit means ‘thrashed’; with simultaneous meanings of ‘broken’, ‘weak’, ‘economically needy’, ‘untouchables,’ etc. However, on a personal note as a Dalit Christian woman, I have experienced how caste prejudices continue despite religious ideals of equality. People have often assumed my achievements come only from reservation or missionary support.

These experiences made me aware of the deep connections between caste, class, religion, identity, and everyday discrimination in society. These stigmas emerged as a result of stereotypical thought processes about "Dalits" who have always been viewed as brainless and lazy, eventually converted into Christianity. Nonetheless, Dalits belonged to the lower section of the fabricated society-structure as an underprivileged and depressed class (called under the time of British Colonial Rule) and historically oppressed by the upper caste. Our Constitution states that Christians do not have caste, but this paper has used the term "Dalits Christians" because Indian society has a deeply rooted ancient history of caste system. It is so ingrained in the minds of the Indians that it is impossible to escape (Mahendra, 2016; Michael, 2007).

However, the research will try to shed light on the cultural and regional differences that are against homogeneity and singularity. In India, the practice of Christianity is not only different from the West but also it differs from each country, each state, each place and each social group. Individuals adapt Christianity in their own ways. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are Christian religious rituals and practices adapted within the Bengali Dalit Christian community of Nistabdhapur, West Bengal?
2. To what extent has conversion to Christianity influenced the social status, dignity, and agency of Dalit Christians in this community?
3. Does caste-based discrimination continue to shape the lived experiences of Dalit Christians despite religious conversion?
4. To what extent are Dalit Christians aware of their constitutional and fundamental rights?

India is widely known for its cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. The 5000-year-old history depicts that the Indian subcontinent celebrated the diversity of various types of people who spoke different languages, celebrated different festivals, and practiced different religions. According to the "Census of India: Religion in 2011", 1210.19 million people are present in India (Michael 1999). The proportion of Hindu is higher among other religions (80.5%); whereas Muslims (13.4%); Christians (2.3%); Sikh (1.9%); Buddhist (0.84%); Jain (0.4%) form less. However, since pre-Independence, India has been intertwined with the Caste system (Michael, 2007). Thus, in the contemporary era, the aspects of socio-cultural and economic development are based on their caste and class positions. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar pointed out that this fundamental principle of the caste system is based on 'Graded Inequality,' which creates hierarchies of knowledge, labour, and

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sexualities. The upper castes benefited and mostly acquired advantageous positions, whereas the lower class or Dalits were deprived of their social and fundamental rights. It prevented the common unity among people of the Indian society. For these reasons, the majority of Christians are coming out of the backward or the depressed backgrounds to escape from the caste exploitation (Thorat & Madheswaran, 2018; Woodburne, 1921). In terms of these, the study draws attention to the norms and practices of Bengali Dalit Christians who are situated in Nistabdhapur, West Bengal.

This research will focus on how the religious rituals and customs of Christianity adapt to this region and how it differs from one place to another. It will also examine whether being converted to Christianity provides limited power to the Dalits. Is there any presence of caste victimization nowadays? And also, are the Dalit Christians aware of their basic fundamental rights? What is the present scenario of the Dalit Christians in this region?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Aspects of Religion

According to theology, religion refers to "any cultural system of worship that relates humanity to the supernatural or transcendental" (Kreiger, 2022). It is a collective belief of the individuals, and they practice religious rituals for mental and spiritual peace. It serves as a foundation for moral beliefs and behaviour (Gans & Stibich, 2022). Emile Durkheim, in his book "Elementary Forms of Religious Life," gave the Sacred Profane dichotomy where one maintains distance from the other. He defines 'Sacred' as something beyond mundane. It is a symbol of holiness, beliefs, morals, and sentiments. Profane, on the contrary, includes mundane things of our everyday life in society. However, in 1976, the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution of India asserted that India is a "secular" nation, which signifies religious non-discrimination and equal liberty for all citizens irrespective of all religion, class, caste, gender, and ethnicity, believers and non-believers. The state does not discriminate between citizens on the basis of their religious convictions. It grants equal civil rights and liberty to all citizens. It dissociates religion from politics (Mahajan & Jodhka, 2010).

But, in the present scenario, the notion of the 'sacred-profane' dichotomy has been dissolved, which creates problems. Where religion started entering into social, economic, and political factors, religion and politics are influencing one another, which leads to conflicts. As Antonio Gramsci said, religion creates hegemony over individuals, where they try to ideologically

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manipulate people (Fulton, 2014; Levine, 2014). Gramsci gave a perspective on religion which influence the societal change in European History.

“Early Christians were a religion of people; more, it gave expression particularly to the demands for a simple humaneness, for equality and respect of all individuals. But when the Emperor Constantine (from 313 A.D.) began to favour Christianity, it steadily developed towards becoming the religion of the Empire. However, it left the basic military structure of the Empire unchallenged, due to the same "passive" religious character. It slowly became a truly popular religion and began to develop a form of hegemony alongside that force” (Fulton, 2014).

2.2. Religion of India

The culture and traditions are intertwined with religion. All kinds of religion have spread all over the world in contemporary times. The Indic religions, namely Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, originated in India, whereas Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc., were the religions of others that arrived in India at different periods of time, and they borrowed the culture of India. However, in India, Hinduism is considered the most powerful and culturally dominant religion but has internal diversity known as the Caste System (Melko, 1998) - divided into four parts - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, where Brahmins were placed at the top and Sudras at the bottom. Their rankings, based on their past life experiences, are termed Karma (quality of actions). For these reasons, Sudras were considered to be untouchables. These classifications started with the mainstream theory of the Aryan invasion in India around 1500 B.C., who practiced untouchability and subjugated the real “Son of Soil” in India. Perrier (2026) argued that the Indian Elites adopted the Aryan perspectives as a new framework for comprehending caste, where it demonstrated that Aryans were considered equal to the Twice-Born and the non-Aryans were considered as untouchables or Sudras (Michael, 2007).

2.3. History of the Arrival of Christianity in India

India has experienced the spread of Christianity from various domains of the world, at various time periods, and out of various impulses. The history of Indian Christianity began with Portuguese traders, who were also known as Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians. According to History, in 345 A.D., the Christians from Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Nineveh came to the Malabar Coast for trade and mercantile business. In 1510, India was under the control of the Portuguese, who introduced Catholicism in Goa, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. These Syrian Christians (Catholics) were mainly the upper

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castes who maintained their high status by strictly following the purity and pollution of the local Hindu community. Their real motive for conversion was to preserve their social and economic privileges. During that period, Protestants had not undertaken any significant efforts for development and conversion in these regions (Robinson, 2010).

Later on, from the 19th century when the British started invading India, the people inhabiting the north-eastern parts experienced a significant growth of the activity of Christian missionaries. They being protestants, their ideology diverged slightly from Catholicism. During this era, there grew an obscure relationship between power, authority, and religion. The East India Company wanted to rule over India; for these reasons, their relationship with Catholic missionaries was complex in the beginning. But during the late 19th century, the religious identity was politicised by the British Administrators because the creation of connections with colonial rule had been aided by the missionaries through moral improvement and the motif of the civilization of the depressed class. It demonstrates that Christianity was mostly the result of conversion that occurred during the 19th and 20th centuries in the north-east region, where Protestantism dominated (Robinson, 2003; Robinson, 2010).

Moreover, in these regions, the British came into contact with the tribals of forest and hilly regions, whom they considered to be brainless, primitive, savage, and uncivilized. It was thought that the missionaries would only be able to civilize the primitive people through evangelism and education because they were considered superior, modern, and more progressive than others. Perhaps, they tried to emulate the idea that the world of the West and the rest could never co-exist in the same time frame. These were the ways of thinking that emerged in the age of enlightenment. However, the government took an interest in engaging in educational activities of the missionaries through funding (Valvi, 2021).

Though on one hand, the British exploited indigenous people by extracting raw materials, on the other hand, they attempted to uplift the social and economic mobility of the underprivileged class, castes, and ethnicities because in traditional India, the lower castes were in a vulnerable position, but the conversion disrupted the stereotypical rules and dogmas of the Hindu religion. (Hertzke & Shah, 2016; Valvi, 2021).

2.3.1. Socio-Political Scenario of 19th century Bengal

Every society has some degree of superstitions, which are widespread illogical beliefs resulting from the influence of religion, fear of the unknown,

or from a false conception of reality. These practices were sometimes man-made for their own personal purposes. For these reasons, various types of violence or exploitation prevailed all over the world. In India, social evils existed in the forms of casteism, superstitions such as Sati Pratha, Child Marriage, sacrificing newborns into the river Ganges, and so on. However, during the age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, the traditional socio-political ideas were rejected, and scientific, secular, and rational ideas came into the forefront. Thereafter, the theory of the Enlightenment throughout the world, with the help of British Colonial Rule, came into existence. During the 19th century, India gave rise to the Bengal Renaissance, which challenged the idea of the Orthodox Hindu System by the British as well as many Social and Religious reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Syed Ahmad Khan, and many others who tried to abolish Sati and child marriage. Rammohan Roy established Brahmo Samaj (1828) with attempts to modernize Hindu civilization as a means of revolt against the evils of Hindu society, and enacted widow remarriage and women's education. Thus, the first Girls' school was set up by Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule in Pune in 1848. J. Phule also fought against Caste Discrimination. According to him, Sudras were the native inhabitants of India who were exploited by the Aryans because they were responsible for the formation of the caste system (Michael, 2007; Mistry, 2014). But in 1875, Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded Arya Samaj in the then Bombay, which was the first Hindu organization to overtly deal with the issue of Christian evangelism, because during the 19th century, due to a series of Bengal famines, the number of people converted into Christianity posed a significant threat to the Hindu faith.

2.4. Indianization of Christianity

Christianity is considered to be a Western and Colonial religion, but the Christians of non-Western countries were the product of colonial rule. These Christians were mainly converted from a Hindu background, but their identities contextually differ from one place to another. However, Gaurang Jani said, "Conversion of Hindus to other religions has increased due to increased atrocities on Dalits and Tribal people, due to lack of development opportunities given to them and due to their lack of social acceptance by upper caste Hindus."

Christianity is not a single entity. The classifications of rituals and cultural norms of Christianity in India are not only different from the West but also different from each country, each state, which means they are categorized according to the space, language, class, caste differences, and each social

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group represents itself in its own individual ways (George, 2012). Indian Christianity is socially and culturally constructed, and it has internalized the cultural norms of its indigenous community. Their way of living has not completely changed in order to fit in with the neighbourhood. Moreover, to create their own identity, their ideas of belonging and locatedness are reflected in the everyday life of Dalit Christians by way of normal community interactions (Mio & Dasgupta, 2018).

2.4.1. Bengali Christians

According to Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations', civilizations are "cultural phenomena" which were distinct from one another by their shared history, norms, language, culture, and religion. The British anthropologist, after the First World War, started studying the society of "others" culture. They considered other cultures as "primitive", "indigenous," "traditional," whereas their culture and religion (Christianity) was considered as modern because it was devoid of superstitions and other irrational ideas (Asad, 1973). However, it became a white man's burden in propagating Western ideologies in order to civilize the "Others". In this instance, many lower castes converted themselves into Christianity in order to escape their caste.

In India, culture affects religion and vice versa. However, in the matter of Bengali Christians, even if they practice different faiths, they have not been able to escape their cultural heritage because of their socialization. Consequently, to integrate into the Bengali community, Christians modified their religious rituals and customs in accordance with Bengali culture. Therefore, in this instance, there was a clash of civilizations and cultures.

Pierre Bourdieu argued on habitus, which referred to "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class." (Gillespie, 2019), which means all members of the community in specific places learnt certain behaviours, skills, habits, lifestyles through socialization, which were ingrained in our identities. The reason for intermixing two cultures was that the converted Christians' major goal was to gain respect and equal rights in society and to assimilate into the culture. They desired to regain their self-respect. The lower caste fought against the rigid caste stratification of the society in order to achieve their self-respect. For instance, in 1925, E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker of Tamil Nadu, who is commonly known as Periyar, started the 'self-respect movement'. It was intended to completely dismantle the Hindu social order and bring about a change in the society where the depressed class would have equal access to human rights and encourage the

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marginalised or backward caste to value themselves in a caste-based society (Mukherjee, 2021).

2.5. Transition from Secular to Post-Secular Nation

The idea of Secularism came in the age of Enlightenment, where religion and religious institutions became less significant and had less influence over both social and personal affairs. Religion became more privatized and would essentially be a question of personal choice, whereas scientific institutions and rational ideas were more prevalent in the public domain. According to the Enlightenment thinkers, religion was the main source of social stratification and social conflicts in every society. After three years of Independence, on 26th January 1950, the Constitution of India declared that India is a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic state by replacing the British Parliament. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution (Mahajan & Jodhka, 2010; Mohammad, 2020). The rules and regulations of the Constitution aim to provide equal rights to each and every citizen regardless of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and race. It also provides positive connotations for the majoritarian Hindu religion as well as minority religions such as Muslims and Christians (Chatterjee, 2011).

However, the framework of the Constitution is only present in the book but not fully applicable in Indian society. As Thomas Hobbes's "Leviathan"(1651) argued, the absolute power of the sovereign was collectively formed by the people of the nation. This singular body would ensure justice, liberty, equality, and serve the interests of the community as a whole. But this theoretical perspective was mythical in practice. Likewise, India's conception of secularism was different from that of Europe and America. It did not adopt complete separation between religion and politics (Mahajan & Jodhka, 2010).

In the post-Secular Country like India says, according to Article 15 of the Constitution, the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of race, caste, sex, ethnicity and religion in papers but in reality in this nation, the right-wing political leader did not believe in secular ideas they were against secularism and promote Hindutva ideology, which safeguards the authentic Hindu culture and traditions from the alien cultures such as Islam and Christianity (Chatterjee, 2011). Moreover, they developed a campaign of mass "Purifications" or the "Shuddhi Movement" in order to reconvert the people who were converted into Christianity and Islam. This socio-political movement was first started by the Arya Samaj and many Brahmins helped to fulfil this ideology.

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2.5.1. Media and Politics of Religion

In the Post-Colonial era, the violence against Christians and Muslims increased, but Hindu-Christians' tension had not received scholarly attention as Hindu-Muslim violence had in India (Bauman, 2013). The contemporary writings of the media illustrated the specific era and visual culture made responsible for the growth of popular religious nationalistic imagination. The political parties utilised the media as a tool to manipulate and instigate animosity between the religious communities. The reproductions of negative portrayals of Christians and Muslims spread hatred against other communities.

In 1987, television like Doordarshan cast an epic series called Ramayana, which impacted on the political culture of India. On 6th December 1992, the Babri Masjid was destroyed, a large mass was killed by the Hindu Activists to build Ramjanmabhumi Mandir (Pinney, 2004). There were many protest movements formed all over India against this incident. However, despite being viewed as a "foreign" religion and suspected of dual loyalties of Indian Christians, they were almost untouched by brutal violence till the end of the 1990s. But the violence against Christianity dramatically increased in the late 1990s. According to the "United Christian Forum for Human Rights" report, only thirty-two cases of communal violence against Christians were reported between the years 1964 and 1996. Slowly, these cases had been subsequently increased to ninety within 1998 (Bauman, 2013). However, in 2007 in Orissa, the RSS tried to construct an anti-conversion movement by destroying churches, lands, businesses, homes, and other kinds of violence against Christianity. Recently, on 5th October 2022, RSS or the Hindu nationalists, forcibly stopped the Catholic Youth Program and publicized the false accusation of illegal conversion against Christianity of socially and economically depressed class people and tribal people in Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh. According to Father Joseph, Madhya Pradesh is one of the first states in India to enact an anti-conversion law and recently amended it to introduce more severe penalties on individuals who decide to change their religion.

Nevertheless, there were many cases of violence happened throughout the country, the exploitation and violence against Muslim and lower caste Hindus has been recognized by the mainstream media but in case of Christians, the news of exploitations and violence published in the local media or in their private news channel called "Veritas Bangla" but not shown and never got published in the popular newspapers because media was mainly controlled by different political parties for their own needs.

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3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Methodology is a strategy that a researcher follows for their research. Research methodologies include the political, theoretical, philosophical, and ethical ramifications of selecting research methods (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2006). My study is based on qualitative analysis, which includes in-depth analysis and participant observations. However, qualitative analysis gives a better understanding of the field because the questions are unstructured and open-ended.

3.2. Research Design

Research design refers to the strategy of shaping the research. It includes aims, purposes, and intentions of the research (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2006). My research has been conducted on Bengali Christians of Nistabdhapur. West Bengal. The qualitative ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews were used in this research. Questions are prepared on the basis of the purpose and objectives of the research, which are classified in different categories, in accordance with the nature of information required. This study collected life histories and narratives of everyday experience of 10 respondents belonging to different occupations and different age groups, who are NGO workers, Teachers, Local dwellers, as well as school and college students, to find out different experiences of caste victimization faced by Bengali Christians of different age groups. The topic being a sensitive one, an attempt has been made to make the interviews as comfortable as possible. Informed consent has been taken from the interviewees prior to conducting the interviews. Close observations were made during my field visit on different social and religious practices, rituals, and festival ceremonies.

3.3. Sampling

In qualitative research, the goal of sampling is to emphasise the significant aspects of the complex social reality. According to Neuman (2014), sampling can help to disclose new theoretical ideas. It reveals numerous aspects of the people and the social context. For interviewing my community, convenience sampling has been used. It is a type of non- probability sampling technique; this sample is taken from a population based on convenience and ready

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availability. In my research, interviews were taken of those who agreed to it. The respondents are primarily located in our locality. To have a proper representation of the group, I have used Stratified Random Sampling and Cluster Sampling. In stratified random sampling, I divided the two religious groups. The first group consists of Christians (both Catholics and Protestants) discussing their everyday experiences. The second group consists of Hindus (both Higher and Lower castes) who discuss the perception of Christianity among Hindus and how they accepted Christianity. The division was just meant to observe the different viewpoints about customs and stereotypes of Bengali Christians.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data has been analysed on the basis of field reports and an auto-ethnographic method which addresses the daily experience of the respondents, and I also include my personal experience as a member of the Bengali Dalit Christian community who locates herself among them.

3.5. Limitations

The limitations of this research are:

1. The sample size is small because of a lack of time.
2. Due to a shortage of time, field work is restricted to smaller areas.
3. Due to lower participation of women than men, gender discrimination was not discussed in this study.
4. As a member of a marginalized group, I felt insecure and unable to ask several questions.

4. Analysis and Findings

This study reiterates that, in India, culture affects religion and religion also influences culture. It will examine how Bengali-ness is present among the Christianity. However, in the case of Bengali Dalit Christians, even if they practice different faiths, they still value the cultural heritage as it would help to create neighbourhoods and make them more acceptable among Indians. Food, attire, and behaviour played a most significant role in this, but more significantly, to create a sense of belongingness, the rituals and practices are more or less similar to the Bengali culture.

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My research analysis highlights the everyday life of the Bengali Dalit Christian of my community, which is connected with the pleasant and unpleasant collection of memories scattered throughout their existence. It will also analyse how they foster harmony with their neighbours, friends, and others who belong to other religions. It will also demonstrate through their brief narratives of local people about the current state affairs, which makes the Christian Community terrified due to antagonism towards them.

However, this study also analyses the socio-cultural ideas, ideological beliefs, and practices of the people about our community and whether there have been any changes in attitudes and behaviours over the course of several generations. I also have to study the social, cultural, economic, and political life of the community. In the field of education and job opportunities, they had to deal with xenophobia and caste oppression.

I have been collecting data extensively through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and qualitative ethnographic methods over a period of about six months. These data will be analysed on the basis of field reports and auto-ethnographic methods under the following chapters.

4.1. Encountering Fear and Aversion in the Field Work

Everyday life has some significance in the academic writings of Sociology now. Earlier grand narratives only focused on macro social structure as a part of their study rather than analysing micro social perspectives. After that, post-colonial and post-modernist scholars started questioning the grand narratives because it generalising the structure of society. Post-colonial scholars argued that individuals' daily experiences vary on the basis of their class, caste, religion, and ethnic background. Sociologists such as Mead, Blumer, and Cooley discuss the subjective meanings that they ascribe to events and behaviours examined by the Symbolic Interaction Theory (Mead). People act in accordance with their objective and generalized beliefs; hence, society was constructed on the basis of individual interpretation (Crossman, 2020). The hate speeches, taunting, and bullying can be considered as forms of slow poison because it exhibits animosity towards some particular caste, ethnicity, religion, and community, which have an adverse effect on people’s everyday lives. However, religion is a collective entity that helps to cope with pain and

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other crises because it spreads positivity, but on the other hand, religious experiences and religion are also used to spread hostility, violence, and revenge by many people (Martin, 2007). Farah Bashir (2021) shows in her autobiography called “Rumours of Spring- A Girlhood in Kashmir” that fear and everyday life are two sides of the same coin. It does not always provide security and comfort. It is brimming with anxiety, tolerance, struggle for existence, and acceptance (Basir, 2021).

My field work is based on the Bengali Christian Community of Nistabdhapur, who were converted to Christianity in the year 1825, and made an effort to shed their Dalit identity. In this instance, though conversion followed the kinship lines, his wife and children had also undergone a conversion process, and they subsequently became Christians across generations. For these groups, Christianity became a way to strengthen their community identity. But this conversion preserved the privileges of the upper caste landed group because it disrupted the caste hierarchies.

However, as a member of this community, I confronted some verbal abuse almost on a daily basis. Not only do I experience this, but people of our community did as well, which are ignored or unacknowledged, and slowly it has become a routine and normalized event. The liberal democracies of the nations are increasingly being represented as “post-secular” societies, because religion has entered into the public sphere rather than entering politics. (Mahajan & Jodhka, 2010).

In this context, India, even after Independence, an individual's identity remains more or less strongly dependent on caste, religion, and ethnicity (Thorat, 2017). Though graded inequality has changed substantially over time, the lower classes are allowed to enter schools, colleges, and the working sectors with or without reservations in SC/ST/OBC quotas. Moreover, according to the constitution, “Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes (prevention of atrocities) Act 1989 provide special courts for the trial of such offences and for the relief and rehabilitation of the victims of such offences and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto” (11th September 1989), “Article 25 guarantees the freedom of conscience, the freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion to all citizens”, “Article 26 propagate

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that every religion denomination has following rights, subject to morality, health and public order" and "Article 30 says, Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions" (As on 26th November 2021) but still who belong to the margins of the society are mentally and physically exploited (The Constitution of India, 1950).

The respondents who stay in Central Kolkata belong to the Bengali middle-class Brahmin background. She is educated, speaks English fluently and always embraces her Bengali Bhadramahila heritage, but her statement demonstrated that the urban area is the centre of the caste system:

"Our family respects the norms and the rules of Christianity, because they have worked for the betterment of society… by introducing an education system for the people in our country…. But, we don't like lower castes, they do not have any manners, have no brains…" and she also targeted me by saying that "Your surname is Pramanik, that means you are Dalit too. Also, my father said these Dalits converted to Christianity in order to uplift their status. They try to reach our position!!!....." (Rima, Age-22).

Another respondent, a Hindu Dalit female who lives in the village, Nistabdhapur village, says:

"My father is quite open to other religions, as a carpenter, he had to go many places, yet he refuses to eat and drink from the Christians' households…. Because Christians are Melaccha, he avoided drinking and eating because he would lose his Hindu identity…" (Sumona, Age-19).

These statements indicate that the thought process is almost the same whether it is urban or rural people humiliated through their normal and daily conversation, body language, behaviours, keeping their caste identities in mind. The depiction of hate comments creates fear of belonging around them and creates a sense of stigmatized identities, but for others, it appears to be a normal and casual conversation of everyday life. However, the third statement demonstrated, for Dalit Hindus, conversion entails transgressing the boundaries of their religion and culture, which is considered more polluting. Moreover, conversion is not a viable method of getting out of the caste

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system. Caste is not left behind after conversion, and even if we acquired skills and education, we belong to lower standards than others. Hence, my respondents said, “Amra Dalit er thekeo Dalit” (we are more Dalit than the Dalits) (Abhisekh, Age- 40).

In this contemporary scenario of India, conversion became the most important and terrifying issue. One of my respondents who lived in North Kolkata assumed me as a Hindu girl due to my Indian surname, but when he learned about the fact that I am not just a Christian, but a converted Christian, his attitude towards me suddenly changed. He expressed extreme anger when he allegedly made hateful remarks towards my community. He says,

“... Converted Christians are destroying the Hindu Culture; Unity has broken down because of the disloyal, like your community. At first, the British tried to forceful conversion when they were not satisfied, they used another trick …. Here Mother Teresa was also under the conversion conspiracy, she tried to manipulate poor people in the name of charity….” Moreover, he demonstrates that “caste exploitations are myth… It is the atrocity against Hinduism spread by the colonial rulers. But if it exists, it means it is required to maintain the order of the society, but Ambedkar has disrupted the system by bringing reservation… because of this, brainless students with 40% marks got a chance of being admitted to popular universities, whereas we do not….” (Anirban, Age-23).

After taking this interview, a feeling of insecurity about the identity emerged and concerned about what might happen to us in the future. The mainstream media has broadcast numerous news which spread hostility towards Christianity. This hostility is not new; rather, it began during the emergence of Hindu Nationalism during the early 20th century. The Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parisad (VHP), and others had the sole aim to uphold the Hindu dharma by preserving the moral and spiritual ideas. These factors lead to attacks on the minority religions in attempts to prevent the conversion of Dalits and Tribals into Islam and Christianity. They argue that missionaries used false promises of material and educational rewards to manipulate and convert lower caste Hindus. In the year 1995, RSS had introduced a reconversion scheme called “Ghar Wapsi- Returning

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Home". They chose 50,000 villages of India, which were mostly Tribal and Dalit areas, to convert Christians and Muslims into their original religion. After that, in the year 2014, in Uttar Pradesh, the Sangh Parivar forcefully reconverted more or less about 4000 Christians and 1000 Muslim households under the "Ghar Wapsi" scheme (reconversion scheme) (Thekaekara, 2000).

Recently, in this year 2023, Victoria Gowri, a judge of the High court who, spread hate speeches towards Muslims and Christians. For instance, Gowri stated in an interview from 2018 that "Christianity is white fear, just like Islam is a green terror." She further asserted that Christianity was threatening "the national security and peace of India" (Poddar, 2023). In another news story, a Hindutva leader, Mahamandleswar Swami Bhakt Hari Singh, in Delhi's event, asked Hindus to stock weapons to kill Muslims and Christians (Scroll Staff, Feb 5, 2023). Since our childhood, we have read unfavourable things about Christianity in the classroom. Individuals failed to recognize the difference between British and Indian Christians as a result of such internalization. Atrocities committed by the British against Indians during colonial rule, the RSS is now attempting to spread hatred towards Indian Christians. For these reasons, the majority of this community's people face enormous challenges and difficulties in their mundane lives. However, in such a situation, if the Indian Government does not take any action to protect minority communities, then it would be pretty uncertain, and the fear factor would always be at play, even in a secular nation like India.

However, the responses were of the more interest throughout the fieldwork. The study encountered that the respondents gave general and socially acceptable accounts about the social and political scenario of that place, and portrayed their bonding with Hindus as good. But whenever asked about their experience of caste and religious oppression, they remained silent or tried to avoid that, also some of them lowered their voice when they were speaking about the violence and bigotry. Moreover, the majority of them prefer to give their interview in an enclosed place; some of them are hesitant to let me conduct an interview at their home, instead, they would prefer to give the interview in my house. Since we live in a Panopticon society, we believe that someone is always monitoring us. This creates fear and anxiety that prevent us from overtly discussing the facts, these irrational fears about politics and

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the political actions termed as Politicophobia (Fritscher, 2020). This modern form of power is discussed by Paul Michel Foucault in his book "Discipline and Punish" where the body becomes docile and internalises the rules and norms of the society rather than protesting against it (Best and Kellner 1991).

4.1.1. The Opportunities of the Other Backward Classes

In the year 1979, 1st January, the Mandal Commission was established by the Indian Government led by the Prime Minister Morarji Desai. This commission was officially known as The Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of India (SEBC). Their main aim was to end caste-based discrimination by providing reservations and quotas for the Other Backward Classes. Despite having the opportunity to acquire education and other minority rights of the lower caste Bengali Christians, they were unaware of their rights till 1994. "Bangiya Christiya Pariseba" (United Forum of Catholic Protestants in West Bengal). They raised their voice on behalf of the Christian community of the state to educate people about their minority rights and to safeguard the socio-economic and educational rights of the Other Backward Classes (Bangiya Christiya Pariseba, 2023).

However, according to a respondent,

"…. The reservation process is so difficult and lengthy, you have to find who your ancestors are, your conversion history… not only me, but many Christians don't want to avail themselves of the facilities... You know!! I applied for OBC many years ago, but I got this certificate after I got a job…." (Lob, Age 30).

Another respondent argue,

"……Reservation is not required…we will get a chance according to our abilities. We don't want to humiliate…and yes!! It would take a lot of time, even if a generation may pass, but the next generation surely gets that opportunity..." (Ramen, Age 45).

However, these narratives demonstrate that many minorities refused to get their caste certificate due to fear of humiliation and social exclusion.

Reservation became a social stigma. Due to this fear of social exclusion, minority people deny their opportunities and the rights that the majority of people have (Kadun & Gadkar, 2014). According to my observation, there is a false perception that Christian means OBC, but not all Christians have an OBC quota. Based on my observation, India has a wide variety of reservations and quotas, such as the Ladies quota, the Physically Handicapped quota, the SC/ST and OBC quota, the Sports quota, and so on. Nonetheless, individuals who are mainly selected based on caste or religious criteria are humiliated and ostracized. Since in India the higher caste is considered "pure" and the lower caste is considered polluted". Therefore, when the "polluted" caste mixes with the "pure" caste because of reservation, the hierarchical stratification gets hampered.

4.1.2. Hiding Identities to Avoid Stigma

"Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity," written by Erving Goffman. His theory of stigma was developed to explain that individuals engage in various forms of discrimination that limit opportunities in life for the stigmatized subjects (Goffman, 1963). There are several stigmas attached to Bengali Dalit Christians; firstly, they are converted from the Dalit or the lower caste background, and secondly, they converted to a foreign religion. In a respondent's opinion:

"….We are demonised by both Hindus and Muslims because of our food habits…. because we consume both beef and pork, so we are actually doubly discriminated against both religions...! Many often assume that Christians are teetotallers because we taste wine during communion in the mass…! I am telling you this for some specific reason, though! I wanted to buy this house many years ago but my owner was not allowing me to take this place because he assumed that all Christians are beef eaters. So I stopped eating after knowing that!... furthermore, I grew up in a Muslim locality where we consume beef but not pork, because we must adapt their culture if we want to keep good relationships with our neighbours…" (Soumen, Age 69).

However, even if they adopt Bengali culture. Bengali Christian's responses proved that there is a sense of untouchability still present by other

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communities because he is converted from a lower caste background, he experiences discrimination from his peers. He said:

"A few years ago, my friends and I visited my colleague's house…so his wife serves "Mazza" to everyone in a glass. However, she gave me Mazza in a broken cup…!!!!! We were all aware of the reason why she did that… but nobody has any objection…!!! (Sourjya, Age- 40).

These narratives present the idea that, whether we are seated next to our friends or live beside our neighbour who practises another religion, someone still retains a feeling of untouchability. However, many Christians who resist their own culture and identity for fear of being ostracised and shorten the gap between "us" and "them". One respondent says,

".....Since we have tea shop.. we don't go or even stand near any meat shop, though we consume meat sometimes… so people know that we are Christians but we don't have pork and beef…see why I am telling you this, if customers came to know that we consume these…they may not come…" (Monohar, Age 30).

This narrative shows that individuals subordinate their individual desires and hide their identities to meet the needs of the dominant culture of a particular community. Castes and religions are somehow constructed as a barrier, even if we have reached the same level. Hence, we continue to be untouchable in their eyes. For these reasons, many people hide their identities. Early Bengali Christians were given Baptismal names during Baptism in the church, although this created some problems when it came to employment. One of the respondents said,

"....I did not get a job in the school because of my Baptised name, they did not tell me what the problem was with that!! So when my child was born, I did not give him any Baptised name…." (Francis, Age- 55).

It is unjust that people make judgments about someone's ability to teach based solely on their names, but according to the observation, a person does not necessarily need to have a baptismal name to be a Christian. There are many

people in our locality who hardly use these names to be a part of Bengali Culture. Another respondent, who is an NGO worker, said,

"…..I never sought to differentiate myself from the other people. You have to adapt to the culture wherever you are, okay, so I want to tell you one incident, when I was young, my sir and I travelled to a village because of our work. My sir was Brahmin. He said 'ki amar sathe khabe na alada khabe?' (Will you eat with me or want to eat separately?) I said 'apnar sathe' (I want to eat with you) so he told me not to expose my identity otherwise they will not allow you to sit beside me. Therefore, I changed my name and observed other people how they are eating because little mistakes can bring trouble …. ". (Dilip, Age 50).

These narratives discuss the adaptation of culture and norms to avoid social exclusion. However, the sociological theory of Dramaturgy was first introduced by Erving Goffman in 1959 to describe the context of Human interaction. He distinguishes between the front stage and the back stage. In the front stage, individuals engage in the everyday acts visible to the audience, which are socially acceptable, whereas in the backstage, individuals engage in the actions that are not visible to the audience. Due to the absence of social regulations, rules and norms, individuals engage in the activity according to their choices (Goffman, 1956).

5. Conclusions

This research is, nonetheless, based on my own community. The study have tried to cite that Christianity cannot be caged under a homogenous or monolithic category. Although it originated from the West, it has been adopted and adapted by various communities in their own ways throughout the world. Another reason for conducting this study is that, according to my observation, in academics, when discussing Dalits in general, it only refers to the Hindu Dalits. The everyday life of Dalit Christians is less included in academics. This study demonstrates that the experiences of Dalits vary depending on their class and religion. The research chose the field side of Nistabdhapur, West Bengal, which is primarily a Bengali Dalit Hindu and Christian settlement with a smaller number of Brahmins in that area. The

contemporary situation of Bengali Christians under this political scenario is covered in all the chapters. Dalit Christians deal with Xenophobia and verbal abuse in public places; they are subjected to double discrimination from both the upper caste and lower caste Hindus because of their conversion history, which creates fear. On the other hand, Dalit Christians established a hierarchy with Dalit Hindus since they are better educated than the lower caste Hindus. However, it demonstrates that dominance and hierarchy have not only persisted in one group but might also change depending on the situation.

Moreover, this study reiterates that with a view to creating a sense of belongingness and good relationships with the non-Christian neighbours, they adapted the local culture. For these reasons, there is a Bengali-ness present among these Christians. Food, attire, customs, and behaviour played a significant role in society. Moreover, Bengali Christians adopted Kirtan, which is known as 'Shree Khristo Kirtan,' where the singing and chanting are dedicated to Jesus. But it was first introduced by Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533). It is a tradition in the Indian religions that originated through Hinduism, involving a group of people chanting and singing with many instruments, mainly dedicated to Lord Krishna (Nagar Kirtan, 2022; Middey, 2022).

Hence, the research presumably proved the false conception that people hold is that lower castes are more likely to accept Christianity to eradicate the caste system. Yet the study found they continue to experience discrimination and fear because of their ancient roots of Hinduism, which may lead to isolation. For these reasons, Christians adopt these rituals and practices in their religion to create a sense of "we-ness" rather than alienation and isolation from the dominant local culture. Nonetheless, all of these create positive relationships with other groups through these activities.

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