

Are Christians Backward, Poor and Powerless?

A Reflection on Caste and the Church

Reflections Crossing Every Boundary: God's Love for All People
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I am responding to a text I read in a book: "The majority of the members of the Church of North India belong to the subaltern communities, that is, the Dalits, Adivasi, and Tribal. Like the rest of their communities, the Christians are also poor and powerless." I would take this statement with a pinch of salt, though I agree that the statistics may bear out this view. I am putting down my perspective and explanation, which you may accept or not accept. With this rider in mind, please read on.

Christianity came into existence on the first Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The people of that region were largely of the Jewish community in the time of Jesus. In Jewish Palestine, there were three small but important religious parties that differed from each other in several ways: the Pharisees, the Essenes, and the Sadducees (these communities are mentioned in the Gospel accounts). Those who accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, and began to follow His teachings in their lives, became Christians, and that included people from all the above, and later also from other communities, and even the Romans. When Christianity spread in India, our country too had several castes and sub-castes who embraced Christianity. What we need to keep in mind is the cardinal fact that anyone converting to Christianity becomes a Christian, and should not carry the baggage of his or her previous religious or caste status. Jesus lived a life of racial reconciliation in a world full of racial hate, which we are seeing on the rise in our own country in our own times. Jesus came not only to reconcile us with God, but also to reconcile us with each other: Jews and Gentiles, Armenians and Turks, and Black and White. I would extend this to Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others.

I turn now to the concept of poverty and powerlessness, the notion that Christians in India are poor and powerless. There are two ways to look at this. If you count your rupees in banks and investments, you may find yourself rich, middle class, or poor. If you consider that your social standing cannot influence the lives of others, you may consider yourself powerless. According to my own reckoning, if you allow Jesus to take control of your life, and allow the Holy Spirit to be your mentor and guide, you are richer than the richest in the land. Influencing others is not the same as lording it over them. If you reflect Jesus in your lifestyle, modelled on His teachings, you can have a tremendous

influence on others. Having said this, here are my views on Christians in India:

It is not accurate to say that all Christians in India come from the backward classes. There is a diverse range of social and economic backgrounds among Christians in India, just as there is within other religious communities.

However, historically, Christianity in India has seen significant influence among the marginalised sections of society, including the socially and economically disadvantaged communities. This can be attributed to the way Christianity has spread in India, with missionaries often focusing their efforts on ministering to people from castes and tribal groups who have been historically suppressed, debased, and marginalised. As a result, many Christians in India have come from these backgrounds, and continue to face socio-economic challenges and discrimination arising from their past caste or tribal identity.

It is important to note that social and economic backwardness is not exclusive to Christians, or to any particular religion, in India. Various factors, including historical oppression, structural inequality, and political and religious considerations, contribute to the overall social and economic condition of different communities in the country.