

Indian Dalits find no refuge from caste in Christianity

Contributed by Correspondent
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(Editor's Note: All India Christian Council do not authorize generalizing the practice of caste in the Indian Church, Even though there are few Churches practice caste, those who converted to Christianity brought their caste prejudices with them. We are trying our best to get rid of them) Chennai, September, 14 : In the town of Trichy, situated in the heart of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, a wall built across the Catholic cemetery clearly illustrates how caste-based prejudice persists.

Those who converted to Christianity from the formerly "untouchable" Hindu caste groups known as Dalits are allocated space for burial on one side of the wall, while upper-caste converts are buried on the other side. The separating wall was built over six decades ago. Continue reading the main story

"This violates the Indian constitution. It is inhuman. It's humiliating," says Rajendiran, secretary general of Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam, a small socio-political group that has announced a protest demanding the removal of the wall.

The Catholic Church in India says it does not approve of caste discrimination. But it says it is helpless in resolving this issue. "The burial ground is owned by private individuals, so we are not able to do anything about this. Even the local bishop is not going to the cemetery to perform rituals," says Father Vincent Chinnadurai, chairman of the Tamil Nadu state Commission for Minorities.

He says there is a new cemetery in the town, where bodies are buried without any discrimination. Yet burials continue to take place in the controversial cemetery, presided over by Catholic priests. For centuries Hindus from different castes have been cremated or buried in different places, according to their caste.

This practice is fading in the big cities and towns, but in some places in rural Tamil Nadu, caste-based graveyards are still in operation. Dalit Christians are demanding more proactive steps from the Church to remove the wall.

Father Lourdunathan Yesumariyan, a Jesuit, practising lawyer and Dalit-Christian activist, says the Church has the legal power to remove the wall. Even though the cemetery is on privately owned land, he says, a recent high court judgement ruled that the Church has full responsibility as it administers the graveyard.

"The failure to remove the wall only helps cement caste feelings," he adds. Some years ago two Catholic priests demolished a small part of the wall. But the influential land-owning upper-caste Christian group rebuilt it.

The Church is meanwhile accused by critics of refusing to give "just representation" for Dalits in its power structure, even while it campaigns for a separate quota for the Dalit Christians in government jobs.

Fr Yesumariyan says: "In Tamil Nadu, over 70% of Catholics are Dalit converts. But only four out of 18 bishops are from the Dalit-Christian community." "In many places influential caste groups have lobbied and made sure that only the person belonging to their caste is being appointed as bishop in their diocese."

He says that in places where Dalit Christians are the majority, they often struggle to get the top job. Even though the archbishop of Tamil Nadu region is a Dalit Christian, he has been unable to improve the situation much for other members of his community in the Church.

In recent years a fixed number of jobs and seats have been earmarked in Catholic-run schools and colleges for members of the Dalit-Christian community. But this is being challenged in the court on the grounds that "there is no caste in Christianity".

Fr Yesumariyan continues: "The Indian constitution says it has abolished untouchability. But it is everywhere. In the same way, the Catholic Church says there is no caste bias but caste discrimination is rampant in the Church.

"There are hardly any inter-caste marriages among converted Christians. Until recently, Church-run magazines carried matrimonial advertisements containing specific caste references. Only after our protest they stopped it."

A few churches in Tamil Nadu have even been closed after Dalit Christians demanded a share in the administration. "We say there is no caste in Christianity," says Fr Chinnadurai. "But in India, Christianity was not able to get rid of caste. "Those who converted to Christianity brought their caste prejudices with them. We are trying our best to get rid of them."

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