



Untouchable Spring (2000) offers conversion to Christianity as a means of Dalit resistance in Andhra Pradesh in contradiction to the conventional process of emancipation adopted by the lower castes

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Abstract— *Untouchable Spring* as a novel epitomizes the struggle of Dalits and their assertion for self-identity through the means of revolution. Religious conversion was seen as a primary source to gain social ascendancy hence large number of untouchables, specifically the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh converted to Christianity however it still did not provide them the deserved status. The novel presents how this means of resistance is radical and revolutionary as compared to the conventional forms of revolution undertaken by the Dalits. It not only exposes the plight of Hindu Dalits but also the humiliation faced by the Christian Dalits when they converted. Hence while recording the uprising of the Dalits, the novel also portrays an alternative history of generations of oppressed people and the means adopted by them to attain liberation. This paper aims to study the issue of Dalit oppression even after conversion and understand the impact of Ambedkar in adopting conversion as a solution.

Keywords— *Ambedkar, conversion, Christianity, resistance, Dalit oppression, Malas and Madigas*

Untouchable Spring (2000) is a novel attributed to G. Kalyan Rao and was originally written in Telugu as *Antarani Vasantam*, translated to English by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar. Rao, who himself is a Dalit, believes in revolutionary ideology and attempts to challenge the oppression on the lower castes through this novel. It is both a memory text and historical document which aims to capture the agony of generations of a Dalit family in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. It rewrites their artistic and literary history, and also their history of struggle for social justice as well as upliftment.

The novel examines multiple forms of Dalit resistance and their potential for relative good. It also talks about the heroic act of an individual's struggle against multiple forms of exploitation. However the forms of resistance undertaken in the novel are contradictory to the conventional forms of revolution used by the lower castes. It uses conversion to Christianity and boycotting Hinduism in order to free

themselves from the tag of being “untouchables” as a means of liberating themselves.

The Malas and Madigas comprise of the lower castes in Telangana. The social structure of the village of Yennela Dinni is deeply entrenched in the caste system. Brahmins live at the centre; the lower castes live at the periphery while the untouchables live on the outskirts of the village—“There could be thirty houses of Reddys. Only one Brahmin house. That was Karanam's house . . . 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 madigas lived-madigapalli.” This reflects the extent of alienation for the lower castes of the village. The Malas and Madigas did not even own land, instead they worked on the Karanam's field, who exploited them for their personal profit. They were alienated from the conventional caste system and were not given any individual rights to practice their choices. Thus, such atrocities forced the characters in

the novel to adopt conversion since they saw it as a possibility for their social upliftment and empowerment of the community as a whole.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, Protestant missions rose to its peak in India wherein Christian missionaries spread the word of Christ among the Hindus and urged them to convert to Christianity since earlier it was only a minority section in the country. These missions enjoyed the greatest success in Andhra Pradesh among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Movements began at a mass level among the Malas and Madigas in the starting of the twentieth century and continued through the 1930's. In his essay *Christ's way to India's Heart*, J. Waskom Pickett showed that the bulk of caste conversions occurred in areas where the mass movement among Malas and Madigas was strong. Later, influenced by these conversions, some of the upper-caste Hindus also converted to Christianity however their oppression over the lower castes did not come to a stop. Women were also influenced to a great deal by these conversions.

Untouchable Spring seriously engages with the complexity of Dalit conversions and explores the live experiences and struggle of Telugu Dalits and Dalit Christians during the colonial times in an epic fashion. Sivaiah, Yellana's son was the first person in the novel to convert, from being a mala to Christianity. Martin, a Christian missionary and also an untouchable, urged him for this conversion. Sivaiah changed his name to Simon who had a great influence in the Bible as Martin explained him, "It was then that Simon was seen. A villager from Cyrene. They forced Simon to carry the Cross along with Christ. He would carry the Cross. You too have that Simon's name. Sivaiah, your name too is the name of that Simon who carries the Cross." (p.165) Not only the Untouchables, but Brahmins and the upper castes in the village also converted to Christianity. Soon there were John Paul Reddys, Immanuel Sastrys, Joshua Choudharys. Post this, large number of Malas and Madigas converted themselves to Christianity as if they were a part of a movement. All of them sought social upliftment and a life of dignity.

However, the Dalit Christians did not get the desired status in the society even after the conversion. Gail Omvedt, in the book *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond* termed them to be "doubly marginalised" post conversion, both in terms of caste and religion. Several attacks on Dalit Christians illustrate these two bases of victimisation. The converts were beaten, jailed and humiliated by the upper caste Hindus and were asked to give up their faith and worship Krishna. Martin raised his voice against these atrocities and condemned the attacks-"they are those who attack. Their hands will become impure with

blood. Their fingers will become impure with flaws...They conceive evil in their womb. They gave birth to sin."(p.171) However, Martin faced similar attacks on raising his voice and was beaten up to death by the upper castes. When Simon reached Valasapodu while holding the bloody body of Martin on his shoulders, he saw a terrifying scene with upper caste people chasing and killing the Malas and Madigas through spears and crowbars. The sight was horrible-"Did not know how many they killed. Did not know how many fled and in what direction. The thatched huts burning. The smoke from flames that touched the sky..." (p.176)

The only person saved in this massacre from Simon's family was his child whom he named Ruben. He was given to an orphanage to prevent him from revealing his identity, that of a Dalit Christian, to save his life. This represents the extent of atrocities done on the converted lower castes as they had to give their children in orphanages to save their lives.

Ruben grew up to become a gentle and compassionate man despite having witnessed humiliation. Even after so many encounters with death due to his profession as a pastor in the hospital, he still became a peaceful person. He seems as a Christ-like figure in this sense. Christ's suffering was very active and radical because he sacrificed his life for peace. Christianity, as a religion, began on radical-privileging compassion. Thus, Ruben holds on to the beautiful values of Christianity- compassion even in the face of violence. Hindu Dalits and Christian Dalits face similar discrimination in India, they stand in a radical position just like the character of Ruben- even after suffering like Christ, they still practice compassion and preach it.

In the early phase of conversion, the Christian Dalits faced immense humiliation and atrocities however with the course of time, some of them managed to gain access to education and lead a better life. The character of Ruth, a writer, represents this section of the community. She is a second-generation Christian Dalit and her name is an embodiment of love, compassion, safety and security. She practiced as a nurse along with her husband and also became a writer later. Ruben was a first-generation convert and Ruth belonged to the second-generation hence Ruben did not have access to education but he gained it through the oral tradition. Ruth penned down his stories since she was literate. Ruben represents the denial of access to literacy whereas Ruth shows how Dalits gained access to education somehow due to Christianization. She chose the profession of writing to preserve Ruben's stories and to show the world the amount of oppression Dalits have faced since none of them had the privilege to write. Thus, Ruth is a part of a 'colonised heritage of being a Christian dalit'.

Conversion of the untouchables to Christianity thus proves to be a radical method of resistance to outrage and injustice within the Hindu caste system. This act proves to be contradictory to the conventional forms of revolution which include mass protests, entering into social gathering by untouchables and the attempts of changing the system through legal and constitutional aids. Often, these attempts have gained little success but the lower castes still remained the part of the vicious system. Conversion of religion seems to be the only option of getting out of it and gaining access to education, employment, healthcare and mobility.

Dr. B R Ambedkar, the champion of the Dalit movement in Indian history, also took to conversion after excessive attempts of gaining respect and privileges for the untouchables. He chose to convert to Buddhism. He did not choose Christianity after witnessing similar violence on the first-generation Christian converts. His argument behind the conversion was that “as long as we remain in a religion which teaches man to treat man as a leper, the sense of discrimination on account of caste, which is deeply rooted in our mind, cannot go. For annihilating castes and untouchability from among the untouchables, change of religion is the only antedote.” Thus, he converted to Buddhism with a mass number of Dalits in 1956. His choice of religion was based on the non-existence of any caste or sects in Buddhism which has the tendency to result in a hierarchy among people.

The religion of Christianity is divided into sets of Protestants and Catholics which are based on difference of ideologies, however according to Ambedkar, this religion is not as rigid as Hinduism and is open to reforms. For him, any other religion than Hinduism is liberal in terms of its exploitation of people on the basis of caste. *Untouchable Spring* also depicts the same as during the beginning phase of conversion, Dalits had to face violence and humiliation but with the course of time, Christianity offered them better and dignified lifestyle with access to education and social acceptance. This proves that religion is open to reforms and acceptance.

Therefore, it can be concluded that in *Untouchable Spring*, conversion to Christianity is used as a tool by the Dalits to resist the oppression of the upper castes. It was an attempt for social upliftment and mobility but in case of Simon and Martin, it also seemed to be full of illusion. Their case shows that untouchables still face the same humiliation even after converting themselves but the character of Ruth who is from second-generation portrays that after some time, the converts were accepted by the society. Even Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism is an example that conversions an escape from the dreaded institution of caste and untouchability.

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