



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Social Work

CASTE, GENDER & FAITH: CASE STUDY OF CONVERTED PULAYA CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN KANNUR DISTRICT OF KERALA

KEY WORDS:
Caste, Gender, Religious conversion, Marginalisation

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ABSTRACT

Pulaya women, historically marginalized as outcastes, faced significant socio-economic challenges shaped by both caste and gender. Conversion to Christianity offered potential social mobility but often failed to dismantle culturally rooted patriarchal norms. Many women continued to follow male-led decisions, reinforcing their subordinate status. This qualitative interviews revealed that while Pulaya women actively participated in church activities, their contributions were undervalued, reflecting broader societal stereotypes of women as passive. This dynamic highlights the persistent challenges Pulaya women face in overcoming caste and gender barriers. By using social role theory, the study examines the intersection of gender, caste, and religious identity, offering a refined understanding of their complex experiences.

BACKGROUND

The Pulaya community, one of the largest outcaste groups in Kerala, has a history marked by social marginalization, economic struggles, and cultural resilience. Traditionally engaged in agricultural labor, Pulayas were subjected to the oppressive caste system, which dictated their social status and access to resources (Ahammad, 2019). In this context, conversion to Christianity emerged as a significant phenomenon during the colonial period, particularly from the 15th century onwards (Stanley, 2018). The arrival of European missionaries brought new religious ideologies, motivating many Pulayas to embrace Christianity in search of social mobility and a better quality of life (Kanjamala, 2014).

While religious conversion often signifies a profound personal and communal shift, the motivations behind the Pulayas' embrace of Christianity were deeply intertwined with their socio-economic realities. The quest for stability, security, and acceptance drove many Pulaya women to seek refuge in a new faith, as they faced relentless cycles of poverty and discrimination (Kumaradas, 2024). Transformative journey of Pulaya women who converted to Christianity, explores the complex interplay of social, economic, and gender dynamics that shaped their experiences.

The conversion process was not just an individual act of faith but a collective endeavor reflecting broader societal changes. Initially, missionaries focused on the upper-caste communities, believing that converting high-status groups would facilitate the spread of Christianity among lower castes (Sengupta, 2011). As resistance from upper castes grew and understanding existing caste based social hierarchy, missionaries focused on marginalized communities in Kerala, eager to erase caste discrimination (Dutt, 2024). Therefore this shift of marginalised communitie's revealed that conversion was as much about navigating social identity and power dynamics as it was about adopting new beliefs (Steigenga & Cleary, 2027).

The chapter also investigates the gendered dimensions of conversion. While Pulaya women sought to redefine their social standing through Christianity, their agency within religious contexts remained constrained by patriarchal norms (Garvais, 2018). Being multiply discriminated, the experiences of Pulaya women sheds light on the complex relationship between religion, caste, and gender in their converted Christian life.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employs a descriptive research design, which facilitates an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Pulaya Christian women in Kannur district of Kerala, in the age group of 55 to 65. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to gather comprehensive and nuanced data that addresses the multifaceted aspects of the participant's social and cultural lives. By examining themes such as health,

livelihood, socialization processes, traditional practices, and cultural expressions, the research aims to uncover previously unexplored dimensions of the Pulaya women's conversion experience. Along with the 33 participants, 5 volunteer informants who possess expertise in the subject matter were also interviewed. Purposive sampling was utilized to select respondents, ensuring that specific inclusion criteria were met. Primary data were collected through direct, in-depth interviews with the selected respondents, allowing for extensive face-to-face interactions. This method enabled the researcher to capture the nuances of the participants' experiences and observe their emotional expressions during the interviews. An interview guide was employed as a tool for data collection, ensuring that all essential areas related to the research objectives were addressed during the interviews. Secondary data were sourced from published literature, including books, articles, and government reports, which provided contextual background to the study. Thematic analysis method was employed to analysis data which facilitated in organizing data set in pattern and drawing the informed conclusion.

DISCUSSION

Religious Conversion among Pulaya Women

The motivations behind the conversion of Pulaya women to Christianity were complex and multifaceted. In this study involving 33 respondents, 22 cited ongoing financial struggles as the primary reason for conversion, viewing Christianity as a means to access resources and community support (Renjini, 2021). Social mobility also played a significant role, as conversion was seen as a way to transcend caste identity. However, decisions to convert were often male-dominated, with women expected to follow their husbands (Guptha, 2004). This reflects a broader pattern where conversion did not necessarily emancipate Dalit women but perpetuated norms linked to upper-caste Hinduism and Victorian Christian values.

Gender Dynamics and Religious Conversion

Gender dynamics played a crucial role in the Pulaya community's conversion to Christianity. While conversion offered hope and stability in building social identity, it did not guarantee true emancipation for Pulaya women (Mathew, 2020). Many women viewed their commitment to Christianity as rooted in respect towards Christian missionaries rather than genuine spiritual transformation. Despite this, there was a deep internalization of Christian ideals, as evidenced by hymns reflecting the community's desire for liberation (Mohan, 2017). However, practices such as loud prayers, used as a coping mechanism to exorcise perceived impurities, highlight the complexity of their spiritual experience.

Participation in Church Activities

Church-related activities taken by the participant reflected traditional gender roles. All the women were typically involved in leading the Holy Rosary, Bible reading, and

writing prayers, though only one respondent reported actively writing prayers. Their responsibilities in community were predominantly vested caregiving, such as cleaning and cooking, rather than taking leadership roles (Edgardh, 2020). The exclusion of women from significant Church administrative roles, in the locality reflects broader societal norms that limit women's participation in decision-making processes, perpetuating marginalization within religious institutions (Hora, 2014).

Social Groups and Empowerment

Despite limitations, these women's participation in church spiritual and social groups was more prevalent than that of men. These groups provided opportunities for them for community service, financial savings, and charity work, allowing women to gain confidence and assume leadership roles. However, even within these groups, traditional gender norms often limited the scope of women's activities, confining them to caregiving tasks and religious activities rather than fully empowering them within church administration (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010).

Experiences of Discrimination and Identity crisis

The churches constructed for outcaste communities often reflected a blend of traditional beliefs and Christian teachings. While Christian canon promotes social equality (Macelaru, 2014), caste-based discrimination persisted within the church. Respondents reported improved relationships with priests and nuns over time, but they still faced discrimination within their religious communities. This persistent discrimination led to feelings of inferiority among women who initially embraced Christianity seeking social mobility and relief from their outcaste status.

Findings

The conversion of Pulaya women to Christianity was primarily motivated by economic hardships and the pursuit of social advancement. However, the decision-making process was predominantly controlled by men, and conversion did not necessarily lead to liberation for women, as traditional gender roles and caste-based discrimination persisted within the church. Women's participation in church activities largely reflected societal norms, with caregiving roles being more common than leadership positions. Although church groups offered some empowerment opportunities through community service and financial activities, these were constrained by entrenched gender norms. The adoption of Christian ideals among Pulaya women was significant, though often more cultural than spiritual. Despite improved relations with church authorities, women continued to face discrimination, resulting in an ongoing identity crisis and unfulfilled aspirations for social equality. This complex relationship of religion, gender, and caste highlights the nuanced experiences of Pulaya women in their conversion journey.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the experiences of Pulaya women in the context of religious conversion reveal a multifaceted interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and gender dynamics. Their journey towards Christianity was often motivated by a desire for social mobility and economic stability; however, the reality of their conversion frequently perpetuated existing inequalities rather than alleviating them. While some women found empowerment within church social groups, traditional gender roles and discriminatory practices continued to limit their opportunities for leadership and full participation. The case of Pulaya women illustrates the complexities of religious conversion within marginalized communities, where the intersection of caste, gender, and faith creates a unique landscape of challenges and opportunities. As they navigate these complexities, the voices and experiences of Pulaya women remind us of the ongoing struggle for social justice, equality, and empowerment within religious contexts.

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