

Dalit Women and Religious Conversion in Colonial North India: Reclaiming Agency from the Margins of History

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Abstract: This article re-examines the history of religious conversion among Dalits in colonial North India, specifically in the United Provinces, by shifting the analytical lens from the communal and the political to the intimate and the gendered. Moving beyond established narratives that frame conversion either as a mass movement driven by socio-economic aspiration or as a form of collective political protest led by men, this study argues that for Dalit women, conversion was a profoundly personal act of claiming agency over the most intimate aspects of life. By analysing vernacular missionary literature, popular print culture, caste polemics, and police reports from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this paper demonstrates how conversion was intricately linked to a "language of intimate rights". For Dalit women, embracing Christianity or Islam was a strategic negotiation for dignity, a bid to redefine personal identity, and a claim to bodily autonomy within the oppressive, intersecting hierarchies of caste and patriarchy. This act of spiritual and social transition, however, triggered intense anxiety and violent backlash from Hindu reformist and revivalist groups, revealing how the control over women's bodies and desires became a central battleground for community honour in colonial India. Ultimately, this article posits that the history of Dalit conversion remains incomplete without centering the experiences of women, whose journeys illuminate conversion not merely as a change of faith, but as a contested pathway to personhood.

Introduction

Let me begin with a simple but profound question that has often been overlooked in the grand narratives of social and religious change in colonial India: why did Dalit women convert? The historiography of Dalit conversion, particularly to Christianity in the 19th and early 20th centuries, has been substantial.¹ Scholars like John C.B. Webster have meticulously documented the demographic and institutional history of Dalit Christians, while others, such as Gyanendra Pandey, have framed "the time of the Dalit conversion" as a broader movement towards modern citizenship and political assertion.² Geoffrey A. Oddie and others have mapped the regional dynamics and missionary strategies that underpinned these mass movements.³ However, as Charu Gupta compellingly argues, these analyses have largely carried "an implicit focus on men," viewing conversion as a communal decision made by male heads of households or as a collective strategy for social mobility.⁴

This article seeks to correct this gendered lacuna. My focus is on the United Provinces, a region that witnessed significant missionary activity and subsequent social ferment. I contend that for Dalit women, conversion was a distinctly different phenomenon. It was less about abstract theology or communal politics and more about the tangible, everyday realities of the body, the self, and the family. When a Dalit woman chose to convert, she was making a claim—a claim to wear certain clothes, to marry by choice, to access education, and to escape the sexual vulnerabilities imposed by caste. This was a claim to what can be termed "intimate rights". Her conversion was an act that simultaneously embodied personal desire and constituted a form of social resistance. To understand this, we must move beyond missionary reports and census data and delve into the rich, often polemical, vernacular public sphere—into the pages of Hindi journals like 'Chand', the cartoons that inflamed public opinion, the didactic literature of the Arya Samaj, and the anxious reports of colonial police.⁵ These sources, while frequently hostile, offer a unique window into the ruptures caused by Dalit women's actions and allow us to partially recover their suppressed aspirations.

The Established Narrative and Its Limits

The dominant historical narrative of Dalit conversion in colonial north India has been constructed around several key pillars. First, there is the institutional history of missions, detailing the work of societies like the Church Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society, and the American Presbyterians.⁶ Their strategies—establishing schools for "Depressed Classes," providing medical aid, and preaching—are well-documented. Second, scholars have analysed the complex relationship between missionaries and the colonial state, a partnership often fraught with tension over methods and objectives.⁷ Third, and most influentially, conversion has been interpreted through a socio-political lens. It is seen as a rational, collective strategy by Dalit communities to escape the dehumanising rigours of the caste system, to seek education, and to gain a measure of social respectability. In this framing, conversion is a form of protest against Brahmanical Hinduism and a step towards what Pandey calls "conversion to full citizenship".⁸

While not incorrect, this framework renders Dalit women nearly invisible. They appear, if at all, as passive appendages—following their husbands, fathers, or community elders into the new faith. Their own motivations, their experiences of the process, and the specific consequences conversion held for their lives as 'women' remain obscured. This omission is critical because the oppression of caste is deeply gendered. Dalit women bore a double burden: the general stigma of "untouchability" compounded by specific forms of sexual and domestic exploitation sanctioned by caste patriarchy.⁹ Any analysis of social change that ignores this dimension is fundamentally incomplete.

To recover the agency of Dalit women, we must examine conversion at the level of the intimate—the realm of personal life, bodily autonomy, and domestic relations. My research, building on the work of scholars like Gupta, suggests that two sites were particularly charged and symbolic: clothing and romance/marriage.

The Fabric of Transformation: In a society where sartorial codes were strict markers of caste and social standing, clothing was a potent medium for Dalit assertion. For Dalit women, converting to Christianity often meant discarding the coarse, minimal garments deemed "appropriate" for them and adopting clothes like sarees, blouses, and even shoes. Missionary reports and photographs celebrated this change as a visible sign of "civilisation" and spiritual uplift.¹⁰ However, for the convert, it was far more concrete. It was an act of claiming dignity, of rejecting the imposed semiotics of inferiority that were woven into their everyday attire. A cartoon from the Hindi journal 'Chand' in 1929 starkly visualised this transformation. It depicted a Dalit family before and after conversion: on one side, in a state of "untouchability," and on the other, after becoming Christian, transformed "from animal to human!".¹¹ While intended as a Hindu polemic against missionary seduction, the cartoon inadvertently highlighted the very material and psychological transformation that conversion promised Dalit women—a chance to be seen as fully human.

The Right to Desire: Perhaps the most subversive aspect of Dalit women's conversion was its connection to personal choice in marriage and romance. Caste norms rigidly controlled Dalit women's sexuality, often leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by upper-caste men. Conversion to Christianity or Islam could offer an escape route. It provided a new social and religious framework within which they could exercise choice. Stories of Dalit women converting to marry men of their choice (sometimes from other castes or religions) feature prominently in police reports and conservative Hindu literature of the time.¹² Publications like 'Chand' were filled with sensational accounts of "stri haran" (abduction of women), framing such acts not as elopements based on affection but as criminal conspiracies by missionaries and Muslims.¹³ For Hindu polemicists, the autonomous desire of a Dalit woman was an unthinkable threat; it had to be explained away as the result of coercion or seduction. In reality, for the women involved, conversion could be a radical assertion of the "right to passage"—a claim to control their own intimate lives.¹⁴

Caste Patriarchy and Community Honour

The actions of Dalit women did not go unchallenged. Their claims to intimate rights provoked a fierce and revealing backlash from dominant caste society, particularly from Hindu reformist and revivalist organisations like the Arya Samaj.¹⁵ This backlash was characterised by a deep anxiety over the loss of control of Dalit women's bodies, which were seen as symbolic markers of community boundaries.

The phenomenon of “shuddhi” (purification/reconversion) became a direct response to this anxiety. It was not merely a theological project to win back souls but a patriarchal campaign to reassert control over women who had strayed.¹⁶ The rhetoric used was telling. Dalit women converts were rarely portrayed as spiritual seekers. Instead, they were depicted as naive, sexually vulnerable, and easily seduced by the material lures (clothes, money) or false promises of missionaries and Muslim men.¹⁷ Their agency was systematically erased; their conversion was framed as “abduction” or moral corruption. This discourse served a dual purpose: it denied Dalit women any legitimate subjectivity while mobilising caste Hindus to “protect” their community's honour, which was inextricably linked to the regulation of women's sexuality and religious affiliation.¹⁸

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the history of Dalit conversion in colonial India cannot be fully understood unless we listen for the voices and acknowledge the agency of Dalit women. Their journey to Christianity or Islam was a different kind of “crossing.” It was a crossing from a state of double oppression into a precarious space where they negotiated for basic human dignity on their own terms. By focusing on the intimate realms of clothing, romance, and family life, we see conversion not just as a change of communal label or a political tactic, but as a profound, personal struggle for personhood.

This struggle, however, was met with intense resistance, revealing that the bodies and choices of Dalit women were a central frontier in the battle for social power in colonial India. Their stories compel us to expand our definition of what constitutes historical agency and political action. It was present not only in organised movements and public protests but also in the quiet, defiant act of a woman choosing what to wear, whom to love, and what to believe. To write a history of social and religious change that ignores these intimate revolutions is to tell only half the story. The conversion of Dalit women was, ultimately, a conversion to the self—a fraught, dangerous, and courageous claim to the most fundamental rights of all.

Endnotes

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4. Charu Gupta, 'Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73(3), 2014, p. 661.
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11. Chand [Moon], January 1929, Cartoon, p. 450. Reproduced and analysed in Gupta, 'Intimate Desires', p. 663.
12. Police and Judicial Records (Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow), files on "Religious Disturbances" and "Abduction", 1900-1930.
13. Chand [Moon], "Stri haran", June 1926.
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17. Shefali Chandra, 'Whiteness on the Margins of Native Patriarchy: Race, Caste, and Sexuality in the Colonial Regulation of Marriage', *Journal of Women's History*, 30(4), 2018, pp. 12-36.
18. Tanika Sarkar, 'Missionaries, Converts and the State in Colonial India', *Studies in History*, 25(1), 2009, pp. 31-63.
19. Richard M. Eaton, "Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971", interview with Ajaz Ashraf, available at <https://raiot.in/conversion-to-christianity-among-the-nagas>. Eaton notes that dramatic religious change often occurred after foreign missionaries had left, urging scholars to consider the "total environment" and world-view of the converting communities rather than the exertions of external agents.
20. Richard M. Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard M. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985). Eaton critically examines and dismisses the popular "religion of social liberation" thesis as an adequate explanation for pre-modern conversions.
21. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Eaton's frontier thesis demonstrates how religious change was deeply intertwined with agrarian expansion and the formation of new socio-economic landscapes, providing a macro-context for understanding micro-level negotiations of identity.