

Article

'Mirrored in God': Gramsci, Religion and Dalit Women Subalterns in South India

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Abstract: The Tamil Dalit Pentecostal conversion movement that has been active in Chennai's slums and low-income settlements for the last four decades is also a political movement. It is, moreover, a women's political movement. Normally both Dalits and women are ignored in India, they are considered people of no importance and irrelevant to the issues that grab the headlines. But it is important for us to recognize both the political nature and the importance of this Dalit women's conversion movement, because we are at a time of great peril in India, where, as elsewhere, populist nationalism has swept an authoritarian leader to power and the fascist tendencies of an overbearing state are becoming increasingly obvious. In such a context Gramsci's theorizations provide important suggestions for how to understand religio-cultural movements as political movements and how to evaluate both their importance and what they can teach us about the possibilities for religio-cultural-political resistance to authoritarian populism, and the crucial importance of low-income, low-status women in political processes of grassroots resistance.

Keywords: Dalit; women; Pentecostal; conversion; women's politics; religious politics; cultural politics; Gramsci; proletarian hegemony; Dalit politics; casteism; female-led conversion

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.'

W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*.

1. Introduction

This essay has a simple thesis: the Tamil Dalit Pentecostal conversion movement that has been very active in Chennai's slums and low-income settlements for the last three to four decades is *also* a political movement. It is, moreover, a women's political movement. Further, possibly uniquely in the Indian socio-historical context, this conversion movement is motivated and dynamized by the energy and enthusiasm of Dalit women. Hitherto, conversion movements have always been led by men in India. Both Dalits and women are usually ignored in India, they are considered people of no importance and irrelevant to the issues that grab the headlines. But I suggest that is important for us to recognize both the political nature and the emancipatory importance of this Dalit women's movement, because we are at a time of great peril in India, when the Left parties have lost their way and 'lack all conviction,' while right-wing Hindu-majoritarians 'are full of passionate intensity'. It is important at such a time to recognize that emancipatory political organizing can take very unorthodox forms, that it can have unconventional leaders, and that it can appear in very unexpected places. One assumption widely made about Pentecostalism, is that, as the progeny of US-based Evangelical/Pentecostal Christian

churches (who today are some of Trump's closest supporters), Pentecostalism is necessarily right-wing, neoliberal, patriarchal, and incapable of offering a genuinely liberating spirituality to the oppressed poor. But Tamil Dalit Pentecostalism challenges these assumptions, despite its (attenuated) connections with US Pentecostalism.

Women constitute the vast majority of Dalit Pentecostal converts: conversion has been the chosen means by which they seek a greater say at the private/domestic level, in terms of challenging their gendered subalternity in relation to Dalit men, particularly their husbands. Pentecostalism has also become their means of seeking greater democratic participation, not just in their local Dalit communities but also in rejecting their racist/casteist exclusion from wider Tamil society.

Gramsci's theorizations help us to understand why hundreds of thousands of Hindu Tamil Dalit subalterns, particularly women, have converted to Pentecostal Christianity over the last four decades¹. Most importantly, his insights highlight the profoundly political nature of these largely female conversions, in terms of the politics of gender, race/caste and class. I use the term 'race/caste' because it is still not sufficiently recognized that most non-Dalits/upper-castes have a view of Dalits/'untouchables' that is fundamentally a racist view. Not all, but most 'upper-castes'/non-Dalits see Dalits as intrinsically inferior people who have been 'biologically determined,' through their birth in an 'untouchable'/Dalit caste, to be 'immoral', 'polluted', 'dirty', and 'polluting to others'. The notion of 'caste identity' has become completely normalized in India, where 'the caste-system' is smoothly invoked as an unquestioned part of quotidian life, instead of being challenged for the ghastly monstrosity that it is. That is why 'race/caste' is a useful term: it reminds us of the hideous degradation of human beings that the social normalization of the 'outcasteing' of Dalits actively performs. The term 'race/caste' reminds us that the ideology of 'caste identity' is an insidious and deeply malign *political* construct which, drawing on the profoundly inegalitarian ideology of orthodox Brahminical Hinduism, has, as its political purpose, the legitimation of the oppression and exploitation of the poor majority/working classes of India. 'Race/caste' ideology is essential to protecting contemporary India's structures of caste/class privilege and, unsurprisingly, it is also central to the 'Hindutva' ideology of the ruling BJP party².

This essay draws implicitly on the work of Gillian Hart, who has compellingly demonstrated the relevance of Gramsci to contemporary analyses of race/caste, gender, and class (Hart 2002, 2013a, 2013b; Ekers et al. 2013) in the context of contemporary South Africa. But my discussion here is particularly inspired by the recent work of the eminent Gramsci scholar, Fabio Frosini, who has elucidated Gramsci's key writings on religion. This essay places some of my findings on Dalit Pentecostal women in dialogue with Frosini's illuminating discussions of Gramsci's writings on religion and politics (Frosini 2013, 2016, forthcoming). I also draw on the valuable work of Cosimo Zene, the only scholar to date to study Dalit subalternity from a rigorous Gramscian perspective (Zene 2013, 2016, 2018).

2. Changing Economics of Labor, Women's Burden, and Dalit Pentecostal Beginnings

The economics of the manual labor market began to change significantly in Chennai 30–40 years ago, when Dalit and non-Dalit low-caste men began losing their regular manual labor jobs as the economy slowly transformed. These jobs were mainly in headloading and portering—the loading of firewood was almost a Dalit monopoly. Having lost their jobs, many Dalit and low-caste men found themselves trapped in continuing underemployment or unemployment. They suffered psychologically: many felt that they had lost their dignity and their male identities as sole family providers. Though their incomes had been modest, they had enabled most wives to remain at home, looking after the children. But now most women had to start going out to find work to make ends meet. As more men lost

¹ Research has been conducted annually in Chennai on this subject by the author since 2010, based on two visits every year. This is an ongoing research project.

² The Hindu-majoritarian BJP or Bharatiya Janata Party (Bharat People's Party) won the national elections in May 2019 and currently rules India.

their jobs more married women entered employment: many entered quite new kinds of low-paying manual jobs, including ‘housekeeping’ (cleaning) jobs in the new corporate offices that mushroomed in Chennai³. They called on female neighbors or relatives to look after their young children. This changing economics of labor precipitated radical changes in family dynamics, because many Dalit women became equal or even sole breadwinner⁴. But most underemployed/unemployed Dalit men refused to acknowledge this change and continued to assert their absolute supremacy at home. In this they were supported by the strong patriarchal norms upheld by hegemonic upper caste/class Tamil culture. These were norms that urban Dalits had learnt to subscribe to—unlike rural Dalits⁵. The lives of many Dalit women became impossibly stressful—on the one hand they were being forced to become breadwinners, on the other hand they received no social respect or consideration for these new burdens. They still had to perform all their time-consuming household tasks, with virtually no help from men. Worst, they continued to be subordinated and, were often physically abused by their deeply frustrated, unemployed husbands. Many Dalit men had become alcoholics—male alcoholism had grown enormously and had reached epidemic proportions⁶. Routinely subjected to high levels of domestic violence, many Dalit women found the trauma unbearable and the rate of female suicides shot up⁷. These women were desperate for help and support, but had no one to turn to. Traditional kinship support had radically weakened and most Dalit women felt isolated and vulnerable, especially after marriage.

It was at this juncture that Pentecostal evangelists, both women and men, started appearing in the Dalit streets.⁸ They came from the new Pentecostal churches, which were led by Nadar⁹ pastors and largely populated by the Nadar caste and other non-Dalit lower-middle castes. Normally no non-Dalits entered the Dalit streets, because to do so was seen as ‘incurring pollution’ from the presence of the Dalits who lived there¹⁰. Thus, in entering the Dalit streets the non-Dalit Pentecostal evangelists were doing something extraordinary—they were deliberately ignoring the rules of caste-apartheid. Evangelists from the Jehovah’s Witnesses came too, but, unlike the Pentecostals, they gained very few adherents. The Pentecostal evangelists offered something very special that spoke to the immediate needs of Dalit women—they offered well-organized women’s support groups. They invited these beleaguered women to attend women’s prayer-groups (*japa kootam*) that were organized within their own neighborhoods and encouraged Dalit women to meet together regularly to pray for each other. The evangelists claimed that sincere Pentecostal prayer had tremendous power—it would certainly be answered by their Christian god. The women’s prayer groups were an extraordinary innovation, given that in Hinduism priests required payment to pray for you. But here were kind and consoling Pentecostal women, ready to pray for you and to listen to your woes. As street-level organizational structures were built up, Dalit women quickly learnt how to pray for each other in these *japa kootam* (prayer groups) and, particularly, how to do ‘crying-prayer’ on behalf of themselves and others. Many women found mental peace and huge emotional solace (*aarudhal*) in associating with and supporting other women who suffered from the same problems. Their small prayer circles steadily widened and over the years Dalit women’s prayer-groups mushroomed across the Chennai slums. Simple home-based women’s prayer-groups graduated into well-organized ‘care-cells,’¹¹ and Dalit women soon started attending services at the nearest Pentecostal churches too. Sunday services at

³ See Kapadia (2010).

⁴ See Kapadia (2010).

⁵ See Kapadia (1995).

⁶ See Kapadia (2014).

⁷ See Kapadia (2014).

⁸ The Dalit streets were universally, but negatively, referred to as ‘cheri’ (‘ghettoes’) by non-Dalits and as ‘streets’ (‘theru’) by Dalits. ‘Cheri’ has a strongly negative connotation.

⁹ See Caplan (1987) fine account of why Chennai’s early Pentecostal churches were largely Nadar churches.

¹⁰ Even in 2019, it was striking how few non-Dalits ever entered the Dalit streets that I visited.

¹¹ See Kapadia (2014, 2017b).

these churches revealed to them the large numbers of Dalit women who, like them, were turning to Pentecostalism for mental and spiritual solace and, above all, for female moral support. These largely female churches built well-organized networks of neighborhood-based women's support-groups, that not only provided psychological healing, but also imparted the 'good news' that the Christian 'Son of God', Jesus, suffered like them, and "gave his blood on the cross" for their salvation. Interest in joining the prayer groups spread like a steady conflagration down the slum streets, leaping from thatched home to thatched home, as Dalit women told their female neighbors about the emotional and mental benefits they were receiving from participating in prayer-rituals, worship-rituals and Bible readings. Robbins (2009) has insightfully noted how the dense 'ritualization' of spiritual life that Pentecostalism encourages, builds networks of mutuality and cooperation between church members. Those women who could read began to devotedly study their new Bibles; all women began to pray regularly. They were encouraged by their pastors and their Dalit women lay-teachers to know Jesus directly, with no intermediaries, through their own prayers: "Speak to Him as you'd speak to your own father or mother," they were told, "Can a father refuse what his child asks? The Lord will definitely grant you what you ask!" These Dalit women converts were enthusiastic learners: they were encouraged to underline and mark their favorite passages in their Bibles and thus 'make their Bibles their own'. They also often read the Bible aloud together, both at home and in church, and developed the ability to confidently read aloud Bible passages both to women's prayer groups and to their congregations, which comprised both women and men. Most remarkably, many illiterate and semi-illiterate Dalit women decided to learn to read for the first time in their lives, declaring that they wanted to be able to read their Bibles: they slowly learnt to stumble through their Bibles, sparking an extraordinary increase in women's literacy levels (Kapadia 2014, 2017a, 2017b). The Dalit Pentecostal movement in Chennai's slums was under way.

3. Dalit Women's Dynamism Drives the Popularity of Pentecostalism in Chennai

Dalit women have been central to the rapid spread of the Dalit Pentecostal churches in Chennai. Though, for many, their conversions might have originated in their desperate need for the emotional and psychological support offered by the Pentecostal women's prayer groups, their fledgling churches have been driven, above all, by the positive energies, skills, and huge enthusiasm of women. Because women constitute the vast majority of the Dalit congregations, these churches have been practically *female churches*¹². It is significant that a 2014 change occurs as the economic status of a congregation improves: more and more Dalit men are seen in such congregations. So, there has been a slow but steady rise in Dalit male attendance in these churches. Unsurprisingly, a far higher proportion of the well-off Nadar church congregations are male—Nadar men have always played a large role in their wealthy churches, some of which are regularly attended by a few Dalit men and women. Chennai's Pentecostal churches run the entire gamut of class, from very poor to very rich. The wealthy Nadar caste¹³ controls the biggest and most important Pentecostal churches in Chennai, including the churches belonging to the Assemblies of God denomination, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the world. Pre-eminent among Chennai's Pentecostal Nadars is Pastor Mohan who has led Chennai's largest mega-church, New Life AG (Assemblies of God) Church, for decades. Female Pentecostal pastors are allowed in the US but not in India ("It doesn't fit with our customs," I was told), so all Pentecostal pastors in Tamil Nadu are male.

¹² In his study in the slums of north Chennai Roberts (2016) found that Dalit Pentecostalism was described by Dalit men as a 'women's religion'.

¹³ The Nadar caste was historically an extremely low status non-Dalit caste, placed just above the 'untouchable' caste in status. It was able to raise its social status dramatically through gaining education and then totally abandoning its previous low-status caste-occupation and becoming a shopkeeping/trading caste. Today it is a wealthy mercantile middle-ranking caste of relatively high social status because of its wealth. See Hardgrave (1969) on Nadar history; see Caplan (1987) on Christian Nadars.

While the poorest Dalit churches are led by local Dalit pastors,¹⁴ better-off, lower-middle-class/upwardly mobile Dalit congregations are often led by *non*-Dalit pastors. Given that Dalit converts reject caste identity altogether (including the concept of 'Dalit' identity), it is not odd that they welcome non-Dalit pastors to lead them. They also warmly welcome non-Dalit church members—a handful of non-Dalit women were often present. My research focused on a lower-middle-class/upwardly mobile Dalit church, Mercy DJ (Disciples of Jesus)¹⁵ Church. Half the congregation were still quite poor, the other half were, by 2019, upwardly mobile and can therefore be classed as lower-middle-class. The non-Dalit pastor who has led this steadily growing Dalit church for the past 35 years is gentle, benevolent, and very competent. Pastor Benjamin¹⁶ is adored by his large female flock and trusted by his male church members.

The upward mobility of the poor and marginalized is closely connected, in complex ways, with the global popularity of Pentecostal conversion: this has been shown in research worldwide (see Robbins 2009) and is true of Chennai's Pentecostal phenomenon too. Today the church has an active congregation of around 600 members who faithfully show up every Sunday. There are two services, the great majority of worshippers attend the early morning service. On festival days the congregation reaches around 1000 people. But 'Mercy DG' is utterly dwarfed by Pastor Mohan's 'New Life AG' which receives over 20,000 church members every Sunday. They attend multiple services which run throughout the day with large screens set up in overspill rooms. Chennai's thriving and varied Pentecostal population has earned it the soubriquet 'the Pentecostal capital of India' because it has the largest number of Pentecostals in the country. This is primarily due to the large numbers of Dalit women converts who have joined the slum and middle-income Dalit churches in such numbers. And, remarkably, this female-led Dalit conversion movement shows no signs of abating.

4. Gramsci on Religion and Politics

4.1. Orthodox Brahminical Hinduism and the Fabrication of 'Untouchable' Alterity

For Gramsci, "Religions are nothing other than the attempt to attribute a certain 'form' to this universal experience that is the search for coherence of thought and action, for unity of theory and practice" (Frosini 2016, p. 9). Frosini writes, "It is when analyzing subaltern political agency that Gramsci argues that it can also be seen as subaltern religious-political agency. In Gramsci's writing 'religion' refers to the essential unity of politics and religion, in the sense that, for Gramsci, any practical engagement, fueled by and regulated by ideological representations, is a political fact, because it changes the relations of power and, in the course of these transformations, inevitably changes also the subjective representations [of the subalterns concerned] that were the point of departure of the action."¹⁷

It is the extraordinary expansiveness of Gramsci's understanding of what constitutes the political that is so inspiring and important¹⁸. Gramsci's writings reveal the 'political' dimension that is contained in every form of social praxis.

By Gramsci's criteria, therefore, Dalit women's Pentecostalism is emphatically a *political* movement. It is a practical engagement, involving a preponderance of Dalit women and fewer Dalit men, fueled by

¹⁴ Compare the tiny Dalit-pastor-led churches in the north Chennai slums discussed by Roberts (2016). North Chennai is far poorer than south Chennai where my study was located.

¹⁵ Mercy DJ Church is a member of the Disciples of Jesus denomination, one of the largest global Pentecostal churches, originating in the US.

¹⁶ All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

¹⁷ Frosini, personal communication, 13 April 2017.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall made a similar observation, "So one of the most important things that Gramsci has done for us is to give us a profoundly expanded conception of what politics itself is like, and thus also of power and authority. We cannot, after Gramsci, go back to the notion of mistaking electoral politics, or party politics in a narrow sense, or even the occupancy of state power, as constituting the ground of modern politics itself. Gramsci understands that politics is a much expanded field; that, especially in societies of our kind, the sites on which power is constituted will be enormously varied" (Hall [1988] 2016, emphasis added).

their new Christian ideology which declares: (a) that all human beings are *equal* in God's sight, (b) that, because Jesus' central message is to 'love your neighbor,' 'fellowship'/*fraternity*, and 'loving-kindness' ought to exist between all believers and (c) that the promise of spiritual salvation through Jesus Christ is also a temporal promise of emancipation/*liberty* from the caste system's shackles and brutal inhumanity. Thus, the political ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity are, Gramsci argues, at the very heart of Christianity.

We must briefly note, however, that the gulf between Christian ideals and Christian reality can be very large indeed. This, sadly, has been the case in Tamil Nadu where, historically, casteist discrimination was strongly entrenched in both the Tamil Catholic and the Tamil Protestant churches, which the dominant upper caste Christians controlled and where Dalit Christians were marginalized in various ways. This casteist discrimination has continued even to the present day—there are continuing news reports of public protests, especially by Dalit Catholic priests, against discrimination within their churches—Madurai has been a hotspot for these unfortunate controversies. It is both the newness of Pentecostalism, which started to flourish in Chennai only in the 1970s, and its striking lack of institutionalized hierarchies, that has enabled it to claim that, unlike the mainstream, long-established churches, that it is free of casteism. This has been crucial to its attractiveness to Dalits—it is also why Dalit Pentecostal churches can be set up so easily. Virtually any Dalit male, who can gather a few supporters together, can set up as a pastor in his own humble 'house church'—financial independence is central to the Pentecostal organizational model. Thus, thousands of independent Dalit churches exist, especially in Chennai's slums/low-income neighborhoods. It is only in the much larger, often global, Pentecostal denominations that hierarchies have developed, but even these denominational churches still remain self-financing and very independent, when compared to the Catholic or Church of South India/Protestant hierarchies.

Frosini (forthcoming) offers an important summary of Gramsci's perspective on religion:

As such, religion should therefore neither be accepted nor rejected, while it should in fact be investigated with reference to the practical life it can actually generate and shape, and not to the truth it claims to reveal or teach. As any other cultural element, *religion needs to be translated into political terms, and assessed on the basis of the effects it produces.*

(Emphasis added)

This statement is extremely relevant to my argument here—it is precisely because *the effects* of Pentecostal conversion are clearly so liberating for Dalit women in terms of their own gender politics, and for both Dalit women and men, in terms of Chennai's race/caste politics, that I am arguing that we should see Dalit Pentecostalism as constituting not just a religious movement but also an emancipatory political movement.

Frosini points to Prison Notebook 4, § 45 and Notebook 7, § 35 as containing the most interesting texts concerning this issue. Here we will focus on Prison Notebook 4, § 45 (Gramsci 2007) where Gramsci observes:

The philosopher . . . cannot affirm . . . a world free of contradictions without immediately creating a utopia. This does not mean that utopia is devoid of philosophical value, for it has a political value and every politics is implicitly a philosophy. Religion is the most 'colossal' utopia, that is, the most 'colossal' metaphysics history has ever known; it is the most grandiose attempt to reconcile, in mythological form, the contradictions of history. *It really affirms that humans have the same 'nature,' that there is such a thing as man in general, that man is created in the likeness of God and is therefore the brother of other men, equal to other men, and free amongst other men; and that he can conceive himself as such, mirrored in God, the 'self-consciousness' of humanity—but, it also affirms that all of this pertains not to this world but to another (utopia).*

(Emphasis added.)

Not surprisingly, Gramsci assumes in this discussion that ‘religion’ means Christianity, because he is analyzing the European socio-political context. But the humane and inspiring Christian principles that he highlights, which happen to coincide with the universal political ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, are a world away from the deeply inegalitarian principles of orthodox Brahminical Hinduism which invokes notions of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ and declares certain categories of people to be ‘outcaste’ merely due to their birth in ‘untouchable’/Dalit castes. Other people are seen as particularly ‘pure’ due to their birth in so-called ‘pure’ castes—e.g., Brahmins. Thus, there is certainly no assumption in orthodox Brahminical Hinduism that “*humans have the same ‘nature,’ that there is such a thing as man in general, that man is created in the likeness of God and is therefore the brother of other men, equal to other men.*” Quite the contrary—we can safely say that orthodox Brahminical Hinduism emphatically declares that humans do not have the same nature, that there is no such thing as ‘man in general’, and that humans are neither brothers nor equal.

4.2. Casteism Is Racism

Orthodox Brahminical Hinduism quite literally takes the opposite view to Christianity, because (a) it asserts that humans are born radically unequal, because birth determines social status, and (b) there is consequently no notion of ‘universal fellowship’/fraternity in orthodox Brahminical Hinduism—on the contrary it legitimates the total exclusion from Hindu society of those born in the so-called ‘untouchable’ race/caste category. Thus, it fabricates an absolute alterity between ‘untouchables’ and all other Hindus. But at the same time it very actively exploits the labor of these so-called ‘outcastes’—they have no rights and can therefore be enslaved (as, indeed, south Indian Dalits were agrarian slaves historically) and condemned to do all those arduous, disgusting, insanitary, and unpleasant tasks that no one else wishes to perform—especially work that involves dealing with human corpses, work involving human waste and sewage, transporting animal carrion, as well as the most back-breaking agrarian field labor. Orthodox Hinduism decrees that ‘untouchables’ can do nothing to get rid of their ‘inherent pollution’—they cannot ‘purify’ themselves. This is in sharp contrast to all other castes, who are allowed to rid themselves of their occasional ‘pollution’ through ritual ‘purifications’. Only Dalits/‘untouchables’ are not allowed to do so and therefore—according to this perverted logic—remain ‘polluted’.

This ‘absolute alterity’ of ‘untouchables’/Dalits alerts us to a crucial fact that is often overlooked: the construction of the ‘caste’ identity of Dalits/‘untouchables’ is utterly different from that of any other ‘caste’ group. ‘Caste’ identity is *relational* for all non-Dalit castes—they are allowed some degree of upward mobility within the caste system, which they very actively seek. Only the Dalits/‘untouchables’ are imprisoned rigidly at the bottom of the social hierarchy, only they are allowed no upward mobility within the system. Thus, what caste identity *means* is very different for Dalits and for non-Dalits. For non-Dalits their caste identity is often one they are proud of—this is especially true for those belonging to the various Brahmin castes and the ‘warrior’ castes. But no pride is allowed to Dalits/‘untouchables’—they remain socially shunned and avoided by ordinary Hindu non-Dalits because their presence is viewed as ‘polluting’ to others. Historically Dalits/‘outcastes’ had to jump off roads and hide themselves in the bushes if ‘caste’-Hindus walked these roads, otherwise they were thrashed¹⁹. Historically Dalits/‘untouchables’ agrarian slaves were bought and sold, and just as in the American Deep South, historically, Dalit women slaves could be sexually assaulted at will by their ‘upper-caste’ masters. The historical parallels between ‘untouchables’/Dalits and African-American

¹⁹ Ambedkar (2016) himself tells us about this: “Under the rule of the Peshwas in the Maratha country, the Untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow . . . In Poona, the capital of the Peshwa, the Untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind himself the dust he trod on, lest a Hindu walking on the same dust should be polluted.” Things were not so different in the US south until some decades ago—there too African American men were liable to be thrashed if they walked on the same sidewalk as a white person—they were expected to get off it if they saw a white person approaching.

slaves on the Southern plantations are so close²⁰, that the term race/caste is useful as a heuristic term by which to remind ourselves, especially within the Indian context, that *casteism is racism* because it is the brutal negation of the humanity of others. Yet this denial of the equal humanity of Dalits continues in modern India—their humanity and their right to a decent life, to good education, and health-care are simply not recognized by most educated, jet-set, upper-caste Indians, employed in multinational corporations, at the pinnacle of Indian society, who view it as perfectly legitimate to define themselves and others by their ‘caste’ identities and to have a complete disregard for the appalling poverty, social exclusion, and lack of opportunity of the majority of indigent Indians, particularly Dalits.

Gramsci emphasized that there was no separation between the state and civil society. His insight is ironically confirmed by the sublime unconcern about the plight of poor Dalits that is reflected at all levels of the bureaucracy and government. There is widespread (and quite unjustified) resentment among most non-Dalits, regarding the very limited affirmative action/‘reservations’ that Ambedkar was able to include for Dalits, when framing the Indian constitution. But Ambedkar had himself experienced the grotesque cruelties of caste/race discrimination and was profoundly aware that the social realities of India were a world away from the legislative provisions of the new constitution. Though caste discrimination was outlawed in 1950 it flourishes vigorously in India even today. Ambedkar would not have been the least surprised—he had no illusions whatsoever about the narrow self-interest of most non-Dalits, observing, “Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic” (Ambedkar 2016).

Even today, every day, Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis²¹ are denied accommodation by ‘caste-Hindu’ landlords in every Indian city. Every day the brutal harassment and even murders of ‘uppity’ Dalits who try to assert their ordinary civil rights are catalogued in the newspapers. India’s apartheid flourishes even in its cities, where more enlightened attitudes ought to prevail. Racism/casteism is alive and well and non-Dalits who discriminate against Dalits go scot free in the universities, in the government-owned public sector enterprises, in private firms, and in the global corporate sector. Racism/casteism is everywhere in contemporary India: it is the miasma that Chennai’s Dalits have to breathe every day. Is it surprising that, subjected to these continuing humiliations, they wish to break free?

Casteist/racist ideology (which continues to enjoy widespread legitimacy among the Indian diaspora too) decreed that Dalits were to be kept out of the temples of Hindu orthodoxy, so that the gods were protected from pollution. This was made illegal in 1950. But even in March 2019 three Dalit women described to me how the Brahmin priests in the major temples in Chennai discriminated against them. Sacred ash is normally given by Brahmin priests into the palms of worshippers after puja. Instead, deducing that these impoverished women were Dalits, the priests would drop the sacred ash into their palms from a great height, to emphasize the perceived ‘uncleanliness’ and ‘pollution’ of these women. Other worshippers, who were better dressed and were therefore assumed by the priests to be non-Dalit, were given the sacred ash very differently, with the priests almost touching their palms²². These three women lived in the same Dalit street. They complained passionately and

²⁰ For a compelling account of life for plantation slave labour see Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad* (Whitehead 2016).

²¹ Adivasis are the so-called ‘tribal’ indigenous peoples of India, they are also called Scheduled Tribes (STs). Hindu Dalits are similarly termed Scheduled Castes (SCs). Christian Dalits are not considered Scheduled Castes and are therefore denied the benefits which are given to SCs through affirmative action/reservations in higher education and government/public sector jobs. Christian Dalits have been lobbying the central government for years to remove this injustice and to allow them to benefit from reservations as Hindu Dalits do. It is a sign of their extraordinary determination and courage that Dalits who convert to Pentecostalism do this *even though* they realize that they and their children will lose the potential opportunities in education and jobs conferred by SC reservations.

²² For more evidence of the continuing discrimination that is openly practised against Hindu Dalits in contemporary orthodox Hinduism see Gorringe (2008, p. 138): “Laxmanan pointed to inequalities enacted in a ritual fashion: ‘When the common God is worshipped or carried on a bier we cannot even go near. We have to stand ten feet away from its path. If we want to give a garland or an offering to the idol, then we have to give it to a caste Hindu to do so. Even the God does not accept us according to this procedure’ (Interview, March 1999).”

bitterly about this humiliation and saw it as part of the quotidian discrimination practiced by ‘the upper-castes’ against them. All three women had recently converted to Pentecostalism.

It is significant that the ire of these Dalit women focused not on any Hindu doctrine but on the priests’ practice of excluding them—specifically, on the priests’ public ‘performance’ and dramatization of the perceived lack of belonging of these impoverished women in a major Hindu temple. Social cohesion requires close association: it needs the public, ritualized, repeated display of fellowship and mutuality. It is precisely this mutuality, fellowship, and association that are denied to Hindu Dalits by orthodox Hinduism—and which are offered to them in plenty in Pentecostalism.

It is important to note, however, that the Brahmin priests had assumed that the three women were Dalit because they were dressed shabbily. The women’s skin color was the same as that of those around them. The assumption made by the priests was that if you look impoverished you are very likely to be of Dalit caste. This is important because it signals the close correlation between class status and caste that continues to exist. It also indicates how important one’s appearance is for social respect. Dalits are therefore careful to dress well wherever they can afford to do so—the cheerful congregations at the Dalit churches were always quite literally dressed in their ‘Sunday best’.

4.3. Religion Is Non-Rational and Mythic

Frosini (2016) highlights Gramsci’s interest in the motivation that spurs religious/political engagement. He notes that Gramsci’s characterization of the motivation at the basis of any practical engagement is that it is ‘totalitarian’ (all-inclusive) and pervasive. Here he refers to the writings on myth by Georges Sorel, for whom ‘the final struggle between Christ and the Antichrist’ was the quintessential myth. Frosini (2016) emphasizes that Gramsci saw religion as non-rational myth: in this Gramscian sense, all myths can be described as ‘religious’, even if they have no relation to religion at all, because they are non-rational.

Significantly, Gramsci emphasized the power of the emotions and of the irrational in politics, and viewed ‘very strong convictions’, ‘moral/political beliefs’, and ‘faith’ as far more important than rational arguments in inspiring mass mobilizations (Frosini 2016). This is extremely pertinent to our present times, with the rise of authoritarian demagoguery. This observation is also relevant, in a different way, to Pentecostalism, where emotionality and faith are in abundance. We are justified in regarding Pentecostal lay-leaders of the Dalit churches as organic intellectuals, not least because of their abundant passion and emotional engagement with their cause: Gramsci asserts that the (organic) intellectual cannot *know* unless she/he feels and is impassioned:

The error of the intellectual consists in believing that one can know without understanding and, above all, without feeling or being impassioned [*essere appassionato*]: in other words, that the intellectual can be an intellectual if he is distinct and detached from the people. One cannot make history-politics without passion, that is, without *being emotionally tied to the people, without feeling the rudimentary passions of the people*, understanding them and hence explaining [and justifying] them in the specific historical situation . . . (Gramsci 1996, p. 173, Q4 §33)²³.

(Emphasis added.)

Millennialism and the doctrine of Christ’s imminent return are teachings of great importance in Dalit Pentecostalism. It is a remarkable coincidence that Sorel happened to use the example of ‘the final struggle between Christ and the Antichrist’ as the quintessential myth. This refers to the doctrines of the early Christians concerning the ‘Last Days’ and Christ’s Second Coming on earth. Here Frosini notes: “A general comparison between the early Christians and the socialist movement was also made

²³ Quoted in Zene (2016, p. 11).

in Engels's *Introduction* to the 1895 edition of Marx's *Class struggle in France 1848–1850*.²⁴ References to the 'early Christians' are common in the discourse of the more educated Dalit women Pentecostals who explicitly identify themselves as being 'like' the early Christians. They make this analogy partly because they see themselves as a beleaguered Christian minority. But they also make this analogy because Dalit Pentecostals take great pride in their literal reading of the Bible, thus deliberately differentiating themselves from both Tamil Catholics and Tamil Protestants. Unlike these mainstream Christians, Pentecostals believe very literally in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming and in the doctrines of the Last Days.

4.4. Religion as Utopianism

These millenarian beliefs have a powerful effect on those Pentecostals who take them to heart. Several Dalit Pentecostals—including a thoughtful young man who had a casual contract-job as a bus driver—told me that when they felt depressed or despairing, they prayerfully recollected that Christ could return at any moment, and that they were assured of salvation through him in those Last Days. This gave them comfort when their lives were difficult: they looked forward to the imminent utopia that the Bible promised, when injustice would vanish and Christ would rule on earth. This faith of many Dalit Pentecostals in a coming utopia is closely relevant to Gramsci's view of religion as politics, because, as Frosini explains, "for Gramsci, religion in general, and, above all, *Christianism, is a utopian form of political thought*, and, on the other hand, utopia is a form of politics. Gramsci 'reduces' or 'translates' critically religion to politics or, in other words, he reveals the 'political' dimension that is contained in every form of social praxis."²⁵

4.5. The Revolutionary Power of Religion

Frosini continues: "From the peculiar nature of the [religious] myth follows the totalitarian character of its motivations. Actually, *any* argument that pushes a mass to action, and that identifies itself with the 'convictions' of the protagonists of this movement, cannot but be 'totalitarian', in the precise sense that it leaves nothing outside itself, or, in other words, that it lies at the heart of these convictions and redefines all other parts of their ideology. Thus, for the early Christians, it is solely in the light of the final struggle of Christ against the Antichrist that *all* the details of their ethical, political and intellectual life in the present world acquire their meaning"²⁶. This 'totalitarian' attitude characterizes 'fundamentalist' religions of all ilks and is why Pentecostalism is often viewed as a form of Christian fundamentalism. More importantly, Frosini's discussion suggests *why* a fundamentalist religious form—whether Islamic, Christian or Hindu—can be so irresistibly attractive to the dispossessed²⁷. Its revolutionary power lies in the total rupture²⁸ that it generates—'it leaves nothing outside itself' and it redefines, for the group, 'all the details of their ethical, political and intellectual life'. This is nothing less than a revolutionary transformation, wrought through deliberate and radical change in the beliefs and practices of a community. And this thoroughgoing revolutionary transformation, is, surprisingly enough, what hitherto obedient, acquiescent Dalit women are signing up to.

4.6. Every Moment Is Eschatological

The most devout Dalit Pentecostals, who appear to be a minority, make quiet time for solitary prayer and reflection every day, no matter how busy they are. They also prayerfully contemplate the precariousness of life. This comes very easily to poor/lower-income Dalits whose lives are often very insecure in terms of their jobs and their family's welfare. As Shanthy put it, "The fact that we

²⁴ Frosini, pers. comm., 22 April 2017.

²⁵ Frosini, pers. comm., 13 April 2017, emphasis added.

²⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

²⁷ Davis (2006) was one of the first researchers to note the ubiquity of Pentecostalism in slums across the world.

²⁸ See Kapadia (2014).

wake up and *are still alive each morning*—isn't that a gift from God? That's why we pray to Him every night to protect us—don't we hear of those who died while asleep?" Among Dalit Pentecostals this practice of grateful alertness is specifically nurtured by the tenet that 'every moment is eschatological' because Christ may return at any moment. For the devout, it is partly this belief in this imminent return of Jesus that generates urgency in their self-disciplined lives of personal holiness. This sense of urgency, the sense that everything may end soon, also helps to inspire the tremendous energy that Dalit Pentecostals, both women and men, put into their evangelism. Here their rationale is that it is their duty, as compassionate Christians, to rescue as many souls as possible through evangelizing, so that these souls are not lost in the final moment of Judgement. Haste is of the essence, hence the urgency and the great importance of participating in evangelical activity.

4.7. Class Differences between the Lay-Leaders and the Led in Dalit Pentecostalism

Most Dalit Pentecostal church members are relatively poor and have enough to do facing the challenges of daily survival. It is therefore usually the better-off, better-educated, upwardly mobile Dalit women who take on formal church responsibilities as lay leaders, lay-preachers, and care-cell leaders. The Pentecostal churches are entirely self-run by the pastor and the female and male lay leaders. A number of church leadership positions are available, thus involving a wide range of church members. As already noted, each church is self-financing and therefore very independent. Every member is expected to give 10% of their income monthly to the church as their church tithe and, astonishingly, even quite poor families ensure that they actually do this. Major fund raisings are held from time to time—to repair the church roof or to buy essential furniture or new electronic equipment (the church has an elaborate loud-speaker and video-screen system). But, above all, Dalit women give of their time, energy, and competence, taking it in turn to lead various aspects of church work as lay-leaders, lay-preachers, and care-cell leaders. A few dedicated Dalit men participate as lay-leaders too, especially in street-evangelism, which is the main arena in which men take the lead, but also as church treasurers. These lay leaders constitute the organic intellectuals of these Dalit churches. They include women and men who are self-taught Bible scholars, who today enjoy teaching others about the liberating message of the Bible. Together with the pastor they plan church strategy and development.

Unlike poorer church members, who are focused on earning their daily bread, lay leaders (women and men) have the education, the time, and also the financial resources required for church leadership positions. A hospital-mission woman lay-leader needs a source of income (or access to a husband's income) because she is expected to 'look after' her group of women evangelists. After they have spent around four hours walking the corridors of a hospital, comforting patients with their 'crying prayers' to Jesus for healing (with many Hindu patients requesting these prayers), the woman lay-leader pays for snacks and coffee for the group at the hospital canteen. The hospital evangelizing-mission takes place every Sunday afternoon. About 25 women take part, virtually all of them are married women.

Women lay leaders, women lay-preachers, and women care cell-leaders—in other words, all those Dalit women (and fewer men) who perform the role of Gramsci's organic intellectuals—tend to be significantly better-educated than the majority of church members and of markedly higher economic class than them. But this real socio-economic division is not easily visible, because all church members (except the poorest, elderly widows) dress very smartly for the Sunday services and for all church-based events. Only in their care-cell groups within their neighborhoods do women dress simply, often in faded, threadbare saris. Here they are among friends—there is no one to impress.

4.8. Building a Pentecostal Utopia on 'an Undemocratic Indian Soil'

Frosini (forthcoming) observes that Gramsci is concerned not merely with the ways in which subalterns might resist dominant class (caste/race) hegemony, but also with the ways by which subordinated groups can actively construct their own oppositional political culture, in other words, their own proletarian hegemony. Such an activity, Gramsci declares, is the 'most concrete' activity and the most genuine form of democracy (see Gramsci 2007, Notebook 8[b], § 26).

Frosini's comments here are very instructive: "In this respect it is not enough to say 'no' to authoritarianism, or to separate from a false community. It is now necessary to create a different civilization [/culture] according to the internal criteria and parameters that emerge from the form of life of this [proletarian] civilization [in this discussion, Dalit Pentecostal culture in Chennai], and to make sure that this form of life actualizes in its (national and international) articulation the entire and permanent movement of the relations on which it ultimately rests. This is also expressed in the following definition of democracy by Gramsci:

'Hegemony and democracy. Among the many meanings of democracy, the most realistic and concrete one, in my view, is that which can be brought into relief through the connection between democracy and the concept of hegemony. In the [proletarian] hegemonic system there is democracy between the leading [proletarian] group and the [proletarian] groups that are led, to the extent that the development of the economy and thus the legislation which is an expression of that development favors the molecular [individual] transition from [subaltern] groups, that are led, to the leading group.' (Notebook 8 [b], § 26; Gramsci 1975, p. 1056; Engl. transl. in [Gramsci 2007](#))".

(Frosini forthcoming)

What exactly does Gramsci mean here? Frosini explains:

First of all, hegemony means, for Gramsci, a balance between force and consent, or more concretely between the force exerted by State apparatuses (the judiciary, the police, the bureaucracy, etc.) and the consent that is gained in the associations (political parties, associations) of civil society. Gramsci insists on the fact that in general, in the modern world ... power cannot be exerted exclusively by resorting to force. This impossibility follows from the fact that in modern times in Europe the bourgeoisie conquered power, changing the whole structure of society. The caste system of Europe's Middle Ages was abolished [but the genuine 'abolition of caste' has not happened in terms of actual social relations in India as yet], and all members of society were unified under a common juridical system. In this [modern, European] political space, it is not possible to govern exclusively through force, because force alone does not enjoy any authority and would necessarily descend into violence and terror [by the powerful rich against the vulnerable poor, which is the case in the impoverished areas of rural India even today], and constant terror offers no solid basis for power.

Thus, hegemony appears in all those cases in which power is strengthened by something that lies beyond force [in the present discussion, the racist/casteist hegemonic ideologies of orthodox Hinduism which legitimate casteism/racism], that is, beyond the area of the 'State' in the narrow sense of the word (government, parliamentary system, State apparatuses, administration, bureaucracy and so on). However, civil society as the space where the members of the dominant class struggle to gain the consent [of the subaltern classes] in no way lies outside the State: on the contrary, civil society is decisively 'part' of the State, since there is no public power without the implication of the private sphere into the logic of hegemony.²⁹

Therefore the 'public' and the 'private' are not actually separate—they are only separate conceptually, so that Tamil cultural beliefs and values, behavioral norms, gender rules, and race/caste ideologies do not stop at the walls of the home or at the perimeters of neighborhoods, they overflow these private spaces into the public realm. Thus domestic/private values and norms pervade the

²⁹ Frosini, pers. comm., 22 April 2017.

corridors of power and saturate the echelons of bureaucracy and government. They configure the world views of washerwomen as well as chief ministers. In other words, *the private is the political*, as feminists have consistently argued. Gramsci totally concurs with this feminist tenet.

Gramsci sees the values of civil society as permeating state politics, always and everywhere. But Gramsci made his analysis in relation to European modernity: a world where the medieval 'caste-system' had given way to a new juridical system of universal rights. This has not happened in India where, as noted earlier, Ambedkar pointed, with scathing irony, to the fact that while independent India was democratic in terms of legislation, it was very far from democratic in terms of actual social relations. He therefore declared, "Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic" (Ambedkar 2016).

The ubiquity of caste-based discrimination (racism/casteism) today shows that modern India in the twenty-first century has retained the hegemonic upper caste/class structures that legitimate casteism/racism, not through any accidental aberration, but through very deliberate stratagem, because the legitimation of racism/casteism enables India's neoliberal capitalist classes to continue to exploit the poor working classes to a grotesque and shocking degree³⁰. Casteist/racist social relations of production also prevent the solidarity and unionization of poor workers: the non-Dalit working classes cling deludedly to their own caste identities, while despising Dalit workers, thus allowing the corporate/capitalist classes to heap up huge wealth for a tiny rich minority, while impoverishing the majority. Under BJP rule the number of India's billionaires has steadily grown³¹, and income inequality is at its highest ever, while the hard-fought-for gains of the Congress-decades are being lost through (among other welfare schemes) the BJP's deliberate destruction of the MGNREGA³² scheme, the largest and most successful poverty-alleviation scheme that India has ever known. Every so-called 'labor reform' of the neoliberal BJP government has very deliberately weakened legislative protections for workers, 'flexibilizing' them and making it easier for employers to sack them. Things have improved to a limited degree for Dalits, but far less than they have improved for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (cf. Jaffrelot 2002) since independence in 1950. But change is painfully slow, and the political setbacks are plentiful.

Frosini continues:

In this sense, all modern politics is potentially or tendentially 'democratic', because it always has to ensure some kind of 'implication' [or participation] of the ruled into the hegemonic project of the ruler . . . Of course, democracy here means not a procedural system of government, based on the division of powers, constitutionalism, a parliamentary system, a multiparty system (opposed to dictatorship, a traditional monarchy, a totalitarian State, etc.). Instead it [democracy] has to be understood in a substantive way, as a form of access or participation whatever the concrete modalities are of the people's access to power.

That is why Gramsci says here that 'among the many meanings of democracy, the most realistic and concrete' is that which can be described in terms of hegemony, since the concept of hegemony highlights the substance or content of the 'implication' [or participation] of the people [e.g., Dalit Pentecostal women] into power. When analyzed in terms of hegemony, power systems show a whole series of distinctions, ranging from those where a merely instrumental or merely superficial form of 'implication' [participation] exists, (these are the

³⁰ Dalits who work as manual scavengers, especially Dalit men working as 'sanitation' workers, perish from the toxic fumes in sewage systems and drain holes every week all over India. They are employed as casual 'coolie' labor by corporates and even by the biggest state-owned enterprises like Chennai international airport—and Dalit men die (as at Chennai airport) because they are not provided with any safety equipment—and because their lives are considered expendable. Dalit lives are cheap, in the view of many upper-caste Indians.

³¹ Chancel and Piketty (2017).

³² The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme.

states where consent is gained through the massive use of propaganda) to states with a deep and organic form [of proletarian hegemony], where the objective of the ruling class³³ is actually the elevation of the mass of the ruled, in order to suppress the historical necessity of the difference between ruler and ruled.³⁴

Gramsci's definition of democracy as a form of access to power or participation in power highlights the illusory nature of Indian democracy where participation in power is denied to Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and the poor. It also suggests why Pentecostalism is so important to Dalits, because their Pentecostal churches have become their means of participation in a wider caste society that, until now, they had been excluded from.

4.9. *Any Practical Engagement Fueled by Ideology Is a Political Fact'*

The genuine participation of dispossessed women in any sphere of everyday politics greatly increases their ability to challenge gender/caste/class hegemonies in other spheres³⁵. Dalit women's growing confidence in the public roles they have accessed as lay-teachers, lay-preachers, and lay leaders in the liberating spaces of their Dalit Pentecostal churches have slowly enabled them to challenge male power in the arena where it is strongest—the domestic sphere. This is where Indian democracy must begin, within the four walls of the home.

The majority of Indian women are still illiterate or poorly educated, financially dependent on husbands, and severely shackled by deeply misogynist social norms. They also remain sharply divided by class, religion, and caste. Consequently, meaningful feminist alliances across caste and class have been very rare in India (Chakravarti 2017). As a result, the fight against patriarchal tyranny tends to be highly localized, and is usually restricted to same-caste women who have strong and frequent interactions with each other. It is therefore no surprise that the women-led Dalit Pentecostal churches, the so-called 'female churches', have also become natural greenhouses for nurturing female self-confidence and a feminist sensibility. Dalit women Pentecostals cannot challenge male rule explicitly as yet—prevailing misogynist/patriarchal hegemonies are too strong to allow this. But they do challenge male hegemony implicitly in a multitude of ways. The extraordinary popularity of Dalit Pentecostalism in Chennai, built largely on the continuing conversions of Dalit women, has a great deal to do with an irresistible desire for emancipation from male control among ordinary, dispossessed Dalit women. Their modest, home-grown feminism has provided the small spark that has lit the fuse of the Pentecostal revolution in the Dalit slums.

Thus, in Chennai, Dalit women's mass religious conversions are as much about challenging gender hierarchies as they are about rejecting caste/class hierarchies. Gillian Hart has convincingly argued that we must 'go beyond' Gramsci (Kipfer and Hart 2012) and extend his insights to subjects he did not consider. Taking my cue from Hart, I argue that Gramsci's astonishingly expansive understanding of the political implicitly supports a Gramscian analysis of Dalit women's gendered religious politics. Summing up Gramsci's view of 'the political', Frosini reiterates the all-embracing nature of political action and highlights its powerful results:

"Any practical engagement, fueled by and regulated by ideological representations, is a political fact, because it changes the relations of power and, in the course of these transformations, inevitably also changes the subjective representations [of the actors involved] that were the point of departure of the action."³⁶

³³ Frosini notes that here Gramsci was thinking of the USSR, in his hope that it would prove to be the ideal state where "the difference between ruler and ruled" would end. Frosini continues, "... in the very last instance Gramsci cannot be separated from the Third International and the Communist tradition, although the *Prison Notebooks* contain a lot of ideas that cannot be reduced to that world" (Frosini pers. comm., 22 April 2017).

³⁴ Frosini, pers. comm., 22 April 2017.

³⁵ Kapadia (2017a, 2017b).

³⁶ Frosini, pers. comm., 13 April 2017.

Frosini's admirably succinct definition serves us well: it is through their practical engagement in creating new Christian communities for themselves and their families, that Dalit women, whose point of departure was their despised identities as Hindu 'untouchables', through their oppositional struggles and self-transformation into the valorized new identities of 'lay leaders', 'Christians', and 'Pentecostals' have changed how they see themselves. Instead of despair at being born subservient 'untouchable' women, they take pride in their Pentecostal identity to such a degree that these women, through their evangelical activities, invite others, including non-Dalits, to join them in their new Pentecostal identity. This is a radical transformation in 'subjective representation' indeed, from an abhorred and reviled identity to one that is seen as utterly admirable and attractive. The very fact that Dalit Pentecostal evangelists happily and proudly invite non-Dalit 'caste-Hindus' to join them in their new identity suggests how radically the relations of power have changed.

Of course, a crucial question here is how do non-Dalit Hindus view these Dalit converts? Christianity enjoys high esteem in Chennai—it is historically associated with Chennai's best educational institutions. Even today, the elite colleges and autonomous universities in the city are run by Christian institutions: the children of the Hindu upper-castes/upper-classes compete to gain entry into them. In Chennai, therefore, conversion to Christianity confers status, because Dalit Christian converts gain easier access to better education. This makes it easier for them to compete with non-Dalits for increasingly scarce jobs. Extensive global research, as noted earlier, confirms that conversion to Pentecostalism aids the upward economic mobility of poor communities worldwide³⁷. But the greatest miracle is the change in Dalit women's 'subjective representations'. This is the huge achievement of Dalit Pentecostalism and it is rooted in the self-transformation of these women, wrought through the 'female' churches they have created.

This research also highlights a major lacuna in research on Pentecostalism in India so far—with the honorable exception of Roberts (2016) who pays very careful attention to Dalit women converts. But the recent work of Bauman (2015) and Sahoo (2017) reveals a surprising absence of gendered analysis (though Sahoo makes a very limited attempt at this). Bauman's central thesis is that it is aggressive proselytizing by Pentecostal pastors that is the reason for the violence meted out to Pentecostal converts across India. But there is virtually no violence shown to Dalit Pentecostal evangelists on Chennai's streets—on the contrary the vast majority of homes that they are invited to enter and pray in are Hindu homes, often non-Dalit Hindu homes. The huge presence of Dalit women among the Pentecostal street evangelists is a further indicator of how peaceful such evangelization usually is. Dalit women evangelists would simply not participate if violence was expected. Even so accomplished a researcher as Bergunder (2008), possibly due to his pastor-centric approach, seems to have not noted the overwhelming presence of women in the Pentecostal Dalit churches—which, after all, constitute the majority of the Pentecostal churches in Chennai. Such gender blindness leads to mistaken conclusions about Pentecostalism, given that the great majority of Pentecostal churches in Chennai are Dalit churches, which, by definition, are female-majority churches.

The extraordinary innovativeness of Pentecostalism in the Tamil context has consisted in its focus on empowering dispossessed women. Women are discounted by conservative Tamil culture³⁸ and Dalit women are discounted even more, being viewed as women of no importance. Dalit Pentecostalism has enabled poor women to access a new mobility, both physical and intellectual, across the new public spaces and public roles created by the Pentecostal churches. This has given Dalit Pentecostal women greater physical freedom, a powerful sense of agency and, above all, an astonishing and radically new *moral* authority, allowing women to significantly change Dalit gender dynamics. The fundamental political struggle of poor Dalit women has been to challenge their subalternity in relation to Dalit men. But Dalit women have also been acutely aware of the casteism of non-Dalits. Today they are resisting

³⁷ See Robbins (2009).

³⁸ See Kapadia (1995) for evidence that this was not the case historically, when matrilineal marriage (marriage with the mother's brother) was extremely important in Tamil kinship and Tamil women's status was higher than it is today.

casteist/classist oppression simultaneously with challenging Dalit patriarchy. Though fighting political battles on many fronts at once, the crucial political struggle has been the one engaged with in their own homes: the personal is always the political. Dalit Pentecostal women have come to recognize the truth of this feminist axiom in their very bones.

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