



Metamorphosis of identities through migration

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Abstract

This research paper endeavours to establish that the answer to the question 'who am I?' is inextricably embedded in the exploration of another question 'where am I?' This 'whereness' enables or constrains socio-economic relations, and thereby socio-economic spaces of a community. In India this 'whereness' becomes much more important because space is occupied on the caste lines. Place or space is a signifier of one's identity. So, if one has to witness a metamorphosis in one's identity, one has to transform one's space. Through a case study of 160 Christian Dalits, 180 Non-Dalit Christians and 160 Hindu Dalits households in Kottayam and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala, one of the southern states of India, this paper tries to encapsulate the unparalleled metamorphosis of identities and thereby of socio-economic spaces of Christian Dalits through international migration. Thus, it deciphers the contours of socio-economic transformation ingrained in spatiality.

Keywords: space, identity, Christian Dalits, slavery, caste

1. Introduction

Identity is a profoundly geographical concept. Identities are generated and shaped in spatial contexts which might take various forms such as territorial, social, economic and corporeal (Keith and Pile 1993) ^[1]. This is the reason why the question 'who am I?' is being resurfaced as 'where am I?' This 'whereness' enables or constrains socio-economic relations (Brown, 2000: 3) ^[2]. Because space does not just represent power; it materialises it (Brown, 2000: 3) ^[3]. It is a template which unfolds the secrets of reality (Jameson, 1991: 364-5) ^[4]. Contours of social reality are ingrained in spatiality.

In India spatial element becomes much more important because space is occupied on the caste lines. For dalits there is always a segregated 'colony', 'cheri', 'vada' etc. so identity is tied to a place. Place or space is a signifier of one's identity. If you hail from a certain village, people can predict with a fair degree of certainty whether you are a Dalit or Brahmin, a Baniya or a Muslim!

Hallmark of concocted superlative identities are shared by the majority of the Indian society built on social asymmetries. Identities, in Indian society, are taken to be primordial, based on birth-ascriptions which are maintained by enforced differential associations. Accident of birth and skin pigment (taken into consideration wherever it can be) are taken to be the building blocks of one's identity. In a way, biological traits and social categories become coterminous with personal identity. This, an essentialist understanding of one's identity, tend to rely on the

assumption that each person has got some core characteristics or the essential essence that they are born with, and which remains unchanged throughout their lives (Horton and Craftl, 2014: 160-61) ^[5]. Thus, as per this view, identities are considered a stable thing internal to each of us, rather than a process (Horton and Craftl, 2014: 162) ^[6]. Horton and Craftl (2014: 164) ^[7] unapologetically denounce this point:

"Underpinning any suggestion that identities are somehow 'natural', there are always sets of social, cultural, political or economic considerations. Identities are rarely neutral, objective 'things' that people have. Instead, they are socially constructed and then revised. They are created and re-created."

As identities are socially constructed, it implies that identities are relational, which means, individuals gain their identities in comparison to others. During the process of comparison it becomes obvious that everyone is different in some respects. Now the challenge is whether to celebrate and cherish these differences or to look down and stigmatize these differences. Unfortunately, majority of the Indian society already infected with the essentialist understanding of identity invoking biological superiority or inferiority, opt for the latter one. Hence, *one encounters an eerie Indian invention of an incongruous identity known as 'caste' (better usage would be its plural form i.e. 'castes') which as its grand characteristic, endorses inflated and extremely erroneous view of oneself not only over others but at the cost of others and that too, just on the basis of the accident*

¹ Keith, M. and Pile, S. (eds.) 1993. *Place and the Politics of Identity*. London, Routledge.

² Brown, M. P. 2000. *Closet space: Geographies of metaphor from the body to the globe*. London: Routledge.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.

⁵ Horton, J. and Kraftl, P. 2014. *Cultural Geographies: an introduction*. New York: Routledge.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

of one's birth! Interestingly, this whole caste system has been given a religious sanction and holy garb by 'Hinduism', a nebulous category of 'religion' which the majority of the Indian society pledges an allegiance to (Kusuman, 1973: 15; Omvedt, 2003) ^[8].

Because of the divisive and centrifugal tendencies of the caste system it has been catastrophic to community formation. It is anti-society and completely incompatible with the concept of fraternity and equality. That is why a significant section of the Indian society called 'Dalits' ^[9] fails to appropriate even the bottom space. They have been reduced to lesser human beings by this very caste system. Though in possession of the same soul and the body as others have, they are considered outcastes and expendables of the society.

The most horrendous aftermath of the juggernaut of the caste system has been another diabolic and dehumanizing system called 'slavery' ^[10] in India.

Kusuman (1973: 15) ^[11], in her rigorous historical research on South India establishes that:

"In India the origin of the slavery is closely associated with the inception of the caste system which in turn was based on our hierarchical social order."

This line of argument is further picked up by Saradmoni (1980:48-50) ^[12] with similar conclusions. Mohan (2015:39) ^[13] also substantiates that system of slavery (agrestic slavery) in Travancore emerged from the caste system. The oddity of the caste system and the odious form of the agrestic slavery robbed untouchable castes such as *Pulayas*, *Parayyas*, *Kuravas* etc. of their identity as human beings and imposed an identity of 'cattle' and 'commodities' on them. Mateer (1883: 302) ^[14] found the condition of these slave castes unparalleled in the history. He quotes from the *Church Mission Record*, 1850:

"The condition of these unhappy beings is, I think, without a parallel in the whole range of history. They are so wretchedly provided with the necessaries of life that the most loathsome things are a treat to them. They are bought and sold like cattle, and are often worse treated. The owners had formerly power to flog them and enchain them, and in some cases to maim them, and

even to deprive them of their lives. They are everywhere paid for labour at the lowest possible rate consistent with keeping life."

Inhuman treatment meted out to the slaves marred their identity beyond recognition and reduced them to nonentities. Christian missionaries, staunch believer of the Gospel of Christ which promotes the sacrificial love for all human beings, could not bear this ugly sight of suppression, oppression, alienation and obliteration of slave castes. In fact, "it was the missionaries who first raised their voice against slavery; it was they who drew the attention of the public as well as the authorities to this evil", records Kusuman (1973: 44) ^[15].

When untouchable castes such as *Pulayas*, *Parayyas*, *Kuravas* etc. known as Dalits embraced christianity, they got a new identity of being known as 'Christian Dalits'. Though this identity is widely used in common parlance, it is not a constitutional identity.

There is no dearth of socio-anthropological literature dealing with one or the other dimension of Christian Dalits' lives in Kerala. As far as their identity is concerned, "It is not easy to say to what extent these [once] untouchables belonged to the Hindu religious community" (Kooiman, 1991: 59) ^[16]. Mateer (1883: 33) ^[17], while attempting to trace the origin of the *Pulayars* or *Pulayyas* (slave caste with the highest numerical strength) quotes Bishop Caldwell who considered the people of this slave caste as the best representatives of the earliest race of inhabitants and called them aborigines of Travancore. Hunt (1918: 192) ^[18] also calls them the "...relics of the original inhabitants of India..." They had their peculiar religious practices. Animistic practices were also prevalent amongst them (Krishna Iyer as quoted in Kooiman, 1991:59) ^[19]. But during their slavery they practiced 'Hinduism'. So, it is most probable, as opines Gladstone (1984: 47) ^[20], that with the Aryan invasion (around 3rd century AD or perhaps 3rd century B.C., though no unanimity among historians about the date of the arrival of the first wave of Aryans in Kerala), they were drawn into 'Hinduism' while 'Hinduism' itself absorbed many of the pre-Aryan religious elements and practices.

As the caste system within 'Hinduism' became rigid around 10th century A. D. (Pillai, 1970:309) ^[21], *Pulayas* who believed in the glorious past of having a king of their own residing not far off from Trivandrum; *Parayyas* who claimed themselves to be the rulers of the land in ancient times; and *Kuravers* or *Kuravas* who also claimed to have their own kings and kingdoms, were very gradually subjugated by the so-called Brahmins, by hook and the crook (Gladstone,

⁸ Kusuman, K.K. 1973. *Slavery in Kerala*. Trivendram: Kerala historical society.

Omvedt, G. 2003. 'Caste and Hinduism', *Economic and political weekly*, Vol.38. No. 47, pp. 5003-04.

⁹ In this study the term *Dalit* is utilized to allude to those communities who were and still are cursed, crushed and oppressed and still considered untouchables under the evil caste system in ways so subtle and surreptitious very difficult to get a hold on. In recent decades, it has been used to express self-representation, resistive-surge, collective identity and politics of 'untouchables' 'outcastes' and ex-slave castes. The term 'Dalit' flows out from the concept of caste not class.

¹⁰ In this study the term 'slavery' should be taken as 'Agrestic Slavery' – organically linked to the caste social order-and is different from the slavery in the Atlantic world linked to European colonialism. This distinction is borrowed from Sanal Mohan (2015: 40).

¹¹ Kusuman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

¹² Sardamoni K. 1980. *Emergence of a slave Caste: Pulayyas of Kerala*. Delhi: Peoples publishing house.

¹³ Mohan, P. S. 2015. *Modernity of slavery: struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: OUP.

¹⁴ Mateer, S. 1883. *Native life in Travancore*. London: W.H. Allen & Co.

¹⁵ Kusuman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Kooiman, D. 1991. 'Conversion from Slavery to Plantation Labour: Christian Mission in South India (19th century)'. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 8/9, pp. 57-71.

¹⁷ Mateer, S. *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Hunt, W. S. 1918. *The Anglican Church in Travancore & Cochin, 1816-1916*. Kottayam: CMS Press.

¹⁹ Kooiman, D. *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

²⁰ Gladstone, J.W. 1984. *Protestant Christianity and people's movement in Kerala, 1850-1936*. Trivandrum: Seminary publications.

²¹ Pillai, E. J. 1970. *Studies in Kerala History*. Kottayam: NBS.

1984: 33-47) [22]. Notion of purity and pollution and imposition of hierarchical stratification social system engendered the diabolical system of slavery, victimizing Pulayas, Parayas, Kuruvas and other autochthones (Kusuman, 1973: 15; Mohan, 2015: 39-40) [23].

In Kerala, the origin of slavery cannot be attributed to historical antiquity (Kusuman, 1973: 25) [24]. Nair (1986: 7) [25] maintains that disruption of primitive communist social set up in Kerala occurred between 500 B.C. and 200 A.D. Lower castes such as *Pulayas*, *Parayas*, *Kuravas* and other autochthones were reduced to Slave castes. System of slavery dehumanized them. As Christian missionaries were the ones who dwelt amongst them and walked amongst them, they have documented exhaustive details concerning the lives of slave castes people. Commenting on the condition of slave castes, Hunt (1918: 192) [26] quotes a joint letter by three Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries, Bailey, Baker and Fenn in 1818 A.D., which reads "They (the slaves) are...regarded rather as brute beasts than as human beings". The reason behind this diabolic identity was: physical space or land. Dalits who are now known as Christian dalits had no physical space of their own. And, that is why they did not have a robust socio-economic space.

Scholars like Gupta (2000, as quoted in Raju, 2011) [27] argues, "geographical space is not the origin of cultural space [and therefore] geographical rootedness is neither necessary nor sufficient [also that]... the mute fact of geography is of little relevance". Raju (2011) [28], finds these assertions open to be contested in the wake of contrary evidences which are found in Butalia (2000), and Massey & Allen (1984). She further shifts the focus to a very important point and contends with greater emphasis than Soja (1985, 1989) [29] did that though absolute causative/generative or determining role cannot be assigned to physically conceptualized space, social relations, their evolution and articulation cannot be completely independent of it either. She also proposes that rather than seeing these physical spaces as a mere stage against which human lives unfold, they be given the credit they deserve. This study also seconds her stand to not to push back the physical space into oblivion but to extend a due recognition wherever it is needed. This study, of course, is an effort to decipher the socio-economic spaces of Christian dalits through international migration; but at the same time it recognizes the need of the inclusion of physical space in order to analyse the evolution and articulation of contemporary socio-economic spaces of Christian Dalits in particular and Syrian Christians and Hindu Dalits in general as it considers that there exist an extricable linkage between various spaces. Figure 1.1 presents this linkage:

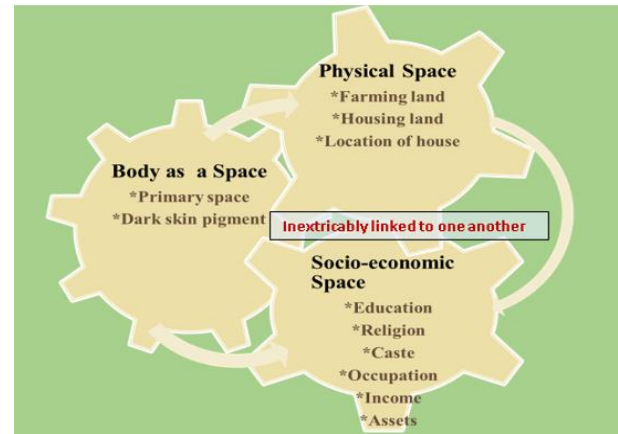


Fig 1.1: Constituents and the linkages between physical space, body as a space and socio-economic space

Present cannot be divorced of its past. Past will have its own bearing on the present, might be in varying proportions. Similarly, present socio-economic spaces instinctively invoke traditional socio-economic spaces. At least from the first century onward, agriculture was the mainstay of Kerala's economy. And for agriculture, land is inevitable necessity or speaking differently, without physical space, there is no agriculture. This farming land as physical space, was not only inevitable for agriculture but it determined the power and the status of its possessor. Saradamoni (1980: 32) [30] documents that "Land was the most cherished and precious form of wealth. It was also the symbol of power and status". Singh (1986) [31] puts this point across very succinctly:

"Directly or indirectly, power was associated with land-ownership. It conferred prestige and status on the owner. Land ownership facilitates dominance of various sorts. There has been a close link between the caste, land and power. Those who controlled land also monopolized power".

If corollary of this is observed, it can safely be deduced that dispossession of land was a major setback to status and power and it denoted inferior socio-economic status in the society.

This problem gets compounded with the caste system. Power and privilege are the two main aspects of social stratification (Lenski, 1966) [32] and caste being a system of social stratification exhibits it exactly. Braham may have a very small plot of farming land or housing land, but his power and privilege being reflected in his socio-economic spaces would always have a sharp difference in comparison to a Christian Dalit who may happen to manage to get more land than that of the Brahman. Does that mean physical space is subservient to caste system? In a sense, answer is in the affirmative; more so when the comparison involves an upper caste person and a slave caste person or a Syrian Christian and a Christian Dalit (this is the inflection point where social meaning are ascribed on the physical space and it gets transposed into a socio-economic space). Though it is difficult to assign a causative role to physical space yet in agrarian society, physical space seems to a determining or generative space. Once a person gets hold of this physical

²² Gladstone, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

²³ Kusuman, K. K. *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Nair, Adoor. K. K. R. 1986. *Slavery in Kerala*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.

²⁶ Hunt, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

²⁷ Gupta, D. 2000. *Culture, space and the nation-state*. New Delhi: Sage.

²⁸ Raju, S. 2011. *Gendered Geographies: Space and Place in South Asia*. New Delhi: OUP.

²⁹ Soja, E. W. 1989. *Postmodern Geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London: Verso.

³⁰ Saradamoni, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

³¹ Singh, H.N. 1986. 'Caste, land and power', in *social stratification in India* (ed.) by K.L. Sharma. New Delhi: Manohar.

³² Lenski, Gerhard. 1966. *Power and privilege*. New York: Mc-Graw Hill.

space, especially in an agrarian society, it provides him an upper hand in other spaces such as social and economic spaces. The reason is that this physical space in itself is a precious form of wealth and whatever is produced using this physical space, adds to the already existing stock of wealth. This wealth can be used to get a quality education, good health, highly rewarding job, financially stress free life, access to commonly inaccessible quarters, such as politics etc. And then in turn, all of these things will further strengthen socio-economic spaces of a person and his future generation too. Thus, physical space and then in turn socio-economic spaces pave the way to not only the intra-generational mobility to upper echelons but also to the inter-generational leap to the higher quarters of all forms of spaces including physical space itself. Thus, a virtuous cycle of healthy socio-economic spaces is set in motion and unfortunately, attains permanence, prominence and dominance under the patrondom of the hideous caste system. If the above-mentioned virtuous cycle of healthy socio-economic spaces is the result of the possession of the physical space, there can be (or must be) a vicious cycle of stifled socio-economic spaces as a result of the dispossession of the physical space.

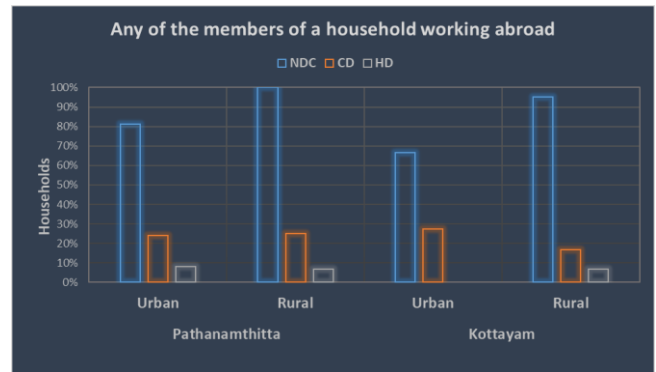
Secondly, not only possession of the physical space matters, its location in regard to its neighbourhood also plays a decisive role in the genesis of stifled socio-economic spaces. Whether these locations are segregated or inclusive, has a significant bearing on the social space. So, location of physical space has to be simultaneously studied with the possession of the physical space. One question regarding the applicability of this spatial framework may still crop up. Some minds may struggle with the fact that the area under this study is no more predominantly an agricultural society; so this framework is redundant. But to those minds, I would pose a question: can you divorce present from the past, and that too in a casteist society like Kerala?

In order to bring the idea of metamorphosis of identities through migration home, this paper incorporates quantitative as well as qualitative data from 160 Christian Dalits (CDs), 180 Non-Dalit Christians (NDCs) and 160 Hindu Dalits (HDs) households in Kottayam and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala, one of the southern states of India. This data was collected in 2014—15 through a primary survey. This data pertains to various socio-economic indicators which would be discussed further.

This paper makes a comparison of the transformation of socio-economic spaces of Christian Dalits (CDs) between two points in time i.e. when they were slaves and now when they have embraced Christianity. It compares transformation of their identities and thereby their socio-economic spaces with their counterparts in Hinduism i.e. HDs, a community where CDs started from and to which belongs their many relatives and even their own family members. This will serve as a benchmark of the beginning of the status of CDs' identity and their status of socio-economic spaces. This paper also compares their identities and thereby their socio-economic spaces with NDCs too as they presents a benchmark of the desired level of socio-economic transformation. As required data of their past status is not available, one is left to explain the past on the basis of the present data.

First of all this paper presents the magnitude of international migration in all the three communities i.e. Christian Dalits (CDs), Non-Dalit Christians (NDCs) and Hindu Dalits

(HDs). Figure 1.2 exhibits this magnitude:



Source: Field survey data

Fig 1.2: Magnitude of international migration amongst CDs, NDCs and HDs

It was found during field survey that if we analyse the direction of the migration, the highest concentration of NDCs is found in the Middle-east (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain etc.). But they are also present in other countries too. But in case of CDs and HDs, they are concentrated in the Middle-east only. NDCs are absorbed in highly skilled and skilled sector of the economy while CDs and HDs are engaged in semi-skilled and unskilled sector of economy. But at least they are getting higher monthly income in comparison to Indian labour market where they do not even get opportunities to work. Thus, they are also contributing immensely to the poor economy of their households.

It is true that only one-fourth of the Christian Dalits households have any of their members working abroad which is very small proportion yet encouraging given the fact that they have set the process of socio-economic transformation in motion. This has certainly influenced positively many arenas of their lives. It has boosted up the respect of the family in the society and it has fetched economic returns which facilitate the right momentum for the quality of life. Households have got enough remittances to build new houses or renovate the old ones. They have bought agricultural land. They have started sending their children to reputed schools. They are able to buy new clothes and flaunt them before everyone which has added to their confidence. Their dietary menu has got new items added to it. Overall, they feel much more confident now than ever.

Secondly, they have been able to rope in their relatives and friends and that is how every next year will have some other member from a new family joining the earlier ones to work abroad and fulfill personal and household aspirations. Their economic status has gone up by many notches. This has unleashed a snowball process having positive impact in social standing and paving a platform to jump higher for the younger generation.

Thus, CDs mobility beyond domestic borders have wider implications for their socio-economic spaces. As mentioned earlier, their global mobility for employment has enhanced their economic space. Now with the help of increased purchasing power they can negotiate with newer physical space. Buying apartments in skyscrapers with other so-called upper caste Hindus and NDCs is a firm sign of impact of economic space on occupancy of physical space and both the spaces in turn boost up their social space. In fact, global

mobility of CDs edifies their social networks and thus, paves a way for healthy social space. Keeping in view the temporal dimension of this mobility, it is noteworthy that is a very recent phenomenon as around 50 percent of the CDs went abroad to work just five years ago and the rest of the 50 percent has spent less than that working abroad. So, if a household has got even a single member outside India, it has got better chances to go up in socio-economic ladder and break the vicious cycle of underdevelopment. Now, the metamorphosis of identities and thereby of socio-economic spaces can be discussed in regard to some of the important aspects of their identity in the light of the impact

of international migration. As physical space has played a central role in the past, it is discussed first. Table 1.1 exhibits the possession of agricultural land amongst CDs as well as NDCs.

Table 1.1 reveals that there are wide gaps in agricultural land possession between CDs and NDCs yet CDs have been able to show encouraging figures in Kottayam. It is noteworthy that around 15 percent of the CDs households possess agricultural land ranging in size between 1 Acre and 5 Acre. When we compare CDs' possession of agricultural land with their Hindu counterparts, we find that HDs are still lagging behind (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.1: Possession of agricultural landholdings with CDs and NDCs

Agricultural Landholding Size	Christian Dalits (Percent household)				Non-Dalit Christians (Percent household)			
	Pathanamthitta		Kottayam		Pathanamthitta		Kottayam	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
less than 50 cents	3	12.5	36.4	16.7	6.3	23.1	12.5	14.3
1 acre or more than 1 but less than 5 acre	6.1	6.3	18.2	16.7	50	53.9	50	57.1
No farming land	90.9	81.3	45.5	66.7	31.3	15.4	25	19
5 or more than 5 but less than 20 acre	0	0	0	0	0	7.7	12.5	9.5

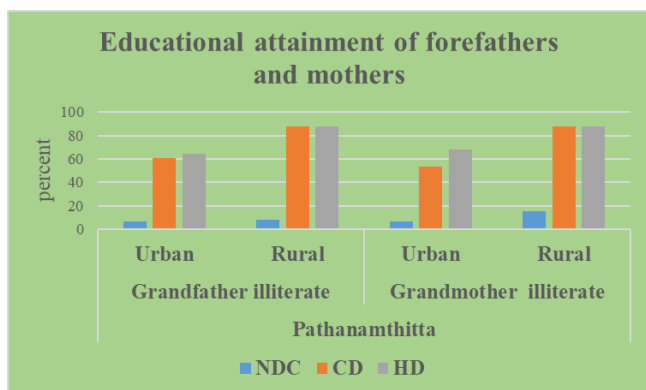
Source: Field survey data

Table 1.2: Agricultural land possession by CDs and HDs

Agricultural Landholding Size	Christian Dalits				Hindu Dalits			
	Pathanamthitta		Kottayam		Pathanamthitta		Kottayam	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Less than 50 cents	3	12.5	36.4	16.7	12	6.7	21.4	6.9
1 acre or more than 1 but less than 5 acre	6.1	6.3	18.2	16.7	0	3.3	0	6.8
No farming land	90.9	81.3	45.5	66.7	88	90	78.6	86.2

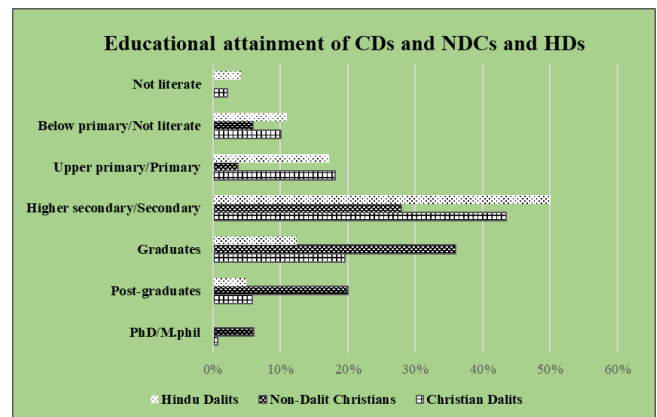
Source: Field survey data

CDs present and past educational attainment would provide us the picture of their socio-economic spaces before and after migration. Figure 1.3 shows the educational attainment of the forefathers and mothers of CDs, NDCs and HDs in the past. It is clear from the Figure 1.3 that around 85 percent of all the forefathers and mothers of CDs were illiterate. But after migration to middle-east countries, CDs educational scenario has drastically changed which is presented in Figure 1.4.



Source: Field survey data

Fig 1.3: Educational attainment of forefathers and mothers of CDs, NDCs and HDs

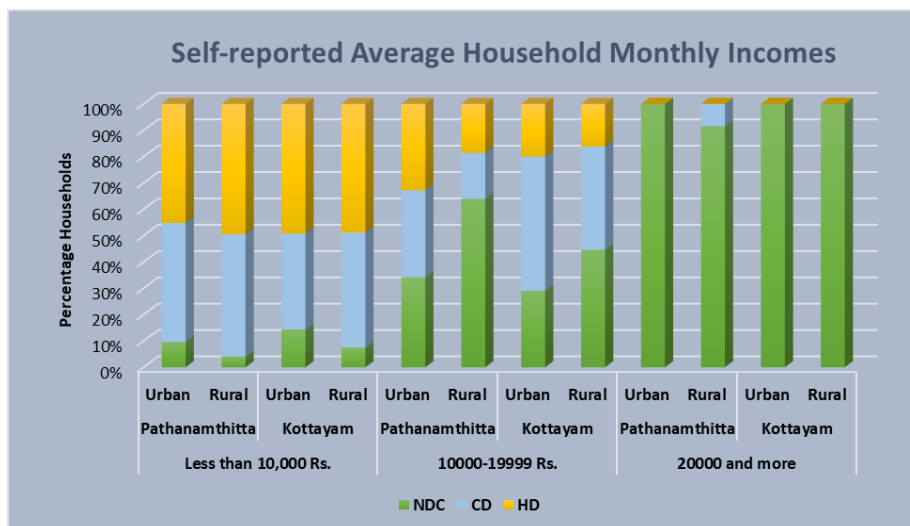


Source: Field survey data

Fig 1.4: Educational attainment of CDs and NDCs and HDs

It is evident from Figure 1.4 that CDs have traversed a long way in educational attainment and now they are competing with NDCs. HDs are still lagging behind the CDs. One of the contributing as well as explaining factor of migration is education provided to CDs by Christian missionaries and now by Christian schools.

Impact of international migration also gets reflected in household monthly income levels. Figure 1.5 captures this impact:



Source: Field survey data

Fig 1.5: Average household monthly incomes of CDs, NDCs and HDs

Thus, we can conclude that Christian Dalits' mobility beyond domestic borders have pronounced implications on their identity and thereby on their socio-economic spaces. As mentioned earlier, their global mobility for employment has enhanced their economic space. Households have got enough remittances to build new houses or renovate the old ones. They have bought agricultural land. They have started sending their children to reputed schools. Their children also pursuing higher education in professional, technical and artistic courses. Now they have money to support their preparation for various competitive examinations. All this is adding to their social capital. They are able to buy new clothes and flaunt them before everyone which has added to their confidence. Their dietary menu has got new items added to it. Due to a drastic personal transformation, they feel much more confident now than ever.

Now with the help of increased purchasing power they can negotiate with newer physical space. International migration has facilitated their migration from segregated colonies and social exorcism. Buying apartments in skyscrapers with other so-called upper caste Hindus and Non-Dalit Christians is a firm sign of impact of economic space on occupancy of physical space and both the spaces in turn boost up their social space. As argued by Sriskandarajah (2005)^[33], Castles (2010)^[34] and Narum (2008)^[35], in fact, global mobility of CDs edifies their social networks and thus, paves a way for radical transformation of their identity and socio-economic spaces.

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