

Caste and Gender in India: The Bakht Singh Assemblies and Egalitarianism

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The position of women in India is marked by contradictions. Drawing on Hindu mythology, the mother goddess is a recurrent archetype called up in veneration of Indian women.¹ This, however, is in stark contrast with the lived female experience in the country, where gender discrimination and targeted violence are widespread in both private and public spaces.

Appeals to tradition are often instrumentalized to undermine mutuality in man-woman relationships, and the Indian church is no different. Efforts to empower women, both within the church and in Indian society at large, do not always achieve their desired effect. To some extent, this is a consequence of the larger failure of empowerment campaigns, well-intentioned as they are, to account for the complex web of factors that undergird and amplify gender discrimination. Most prominent among these is the caste system, which has a critical influence on determining the social location of women in the country.

Through a study of the intersectionality between caste and gender, this article examines the work of the Bakht Singh Assemblies, an Indian indigenous denomination established in the mid-twentieth century. As we shall see, this movement's push toward gender egalitarianism came about somewhat inadvertently, almost as a byproduct of its engagement with the caste question.

Caste and Gender: The Need for an Intersectional Lens

Sanctioned in the ancient Vedic scriptures, Hinduism's caste system has formed the bedrock of social stratification in South Asia for millennia. It remains a crucial identity marker, even to this day, thriving on socio-religious hierarchies of power. Broadly speaking, it mandates that society be divided into four "varnas" or categories: the Brahmins (priestly class), Kshatriyas (warrior class), Vaishyas (merchant class), and the Shudras (labor class). This classification is intrinsically tied to one's profession. Each varna category is further divided into thousands of "jatis," sub-units that reinforce the fatalistic notion that an individual is born into their caste group.²

The caste system has perpetuated centuries of exploitation and social exclusion. Among the most severely affected by these forms of marginalization are communities that do not belong to any of the varna groups. Referred to as the "avarna," or "outcaste," they have typically been denied equal status and opportunity, as they are seen as belonging to the lowest strata of society. Some of these groups are also referred to as the Dalits (meaning "broken into pieces" or "crushed" in Sanskrit), a term introduced by social reformers to highlight the plight of these historically persecuted communities.³

With the present-day caste system, there are three key points to note. First, while caste-based discrimination has been outlawed constitutionally in India, it continues to inform social interaction.

This is especially so in communal dining and in marriage, drawing on the belief that eating with or marrying into "lower" caste groups can pollute an "upper-caste" community.⁴ The second point, much less discussed, is the undesirable existence of caste consciousness within non-Hindu groups. Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, for instance, have also, unfortunately, appropriated versions of these hierarchies into their community interactions.⁵

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Thirdly, and most importantly, discussions on caste would be remiss if they did not include the ways this system is closely tied to gender. Supurna Banerjee and Nandini Ghosh hold that it is through "patriarchal practices within the larger framework of sexuality, labor, and access to material resources" that caste-based hierarchies are sustained.⁶ Notable twentieth-century Dalit social reformers such as Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) were among the first to point out the aggravating effect that caste has on gender-based exclusion.⁷ In this regard, endogamous marriage—restricting marriage to within a community—is one of the most visible consequences. Casteist (meaning, caste-discriminatory) traditions are often invoked to ensure that a community's women are limited in their marriage options. In some cases, coercion is used to prevent women from marrying outside their caste.⁸ Even matrimonial advertisements and services continue to specify caste preferences when seeking potential spouses.⁹

Key to this intersection of casteist and gender-based violence is the shame-honor culture pervasive in community life. Men are seen as the defenders of their women's honor, which is perceived as being violated through inter-caste marriage. It is not uncommon in India today to read of instances where young inter-caste couples are brutally murdered by their families in "honor killings" that supposedly preserve the community's reputation.¹⁰ The most vulnerable are Dalit women, who are doubly discriminated against on the basis of their caste and gender. Thus, as many scholars have put forth, it is impossible to ensure gender equality without addressing the casteist oppression that so uniquely characterizes and reinforces patriarchal structures in India.

The Christian community in India, comprised predominantly of converts from Hinduism, has surprisingly maintained caste structures over the centuries. Perhaps this was undesirable fallout from the indigenization of the Christian faith.¹¹ As in Hinduism, caste consciousness is especially visible in endogamy: it is not uncommon for upper-caste Indian Christians to be encouraged to marry within their caste groups.¹² The persistence of endogamy in present-day Indian Christianity is a testament to the essential nature

of caste in South Asian society. Missionaries and Indian Christian leaders across denominations have attempted to dismantle these structures, but with varied success.

In the following sections, we shall look at one such effort which took shape through a grassroots revivalist movement in India in the mid-twentieth century. The Bakht Singh Assemblies, as we shall see, were not founded with the modern agenda of gender egalitarianism. However, through challenging casteist practices within the church, its founder, Bakht Singh (1903–2000), laid the groundwork for a culture of empowerment for women within their local “assemblies.”

The Birth and Development of the Bakht Singh Tradition

Born in 1903 in the village of Joiya in Punjab, Bakht Singh came from a family with caste privilege, generational wealth, and high social status. At the turn of the century, Punjab was of great strategic and economic interest to the colonial administration in British India, especially in light of its agricultural output. It is against this backdrop that Bakht Singh’s father, Jawahar Mall, made his fortune as a contractor, building canals for irrigation in the region. His family were Sikhs, the dominant religious faith in the Punjab region.¹³

From an early age, Bakht Singh was drawn to spirituality and religion, preferring to spend his time in a Sikh temple rather than on the playground. This led many to believe that he would eventually take up the life of a religious ascetic. His first brush with Christianity came as a boy at a missionary school, where he was largely hostile to the faith and its teachings. It is possible that this antagonism was learned from the prevalent notion that converts to Christianity were “lower” in status.¹⁴ A majority of converts in the Punjab region at the time were products of mass movements initiated by the Dalit Chuhra community. Socially excluded by upper-caste Hindus and Sikhs, many of these Dalit groups saw in Christianity a possible escape from their caste.¹⁵

Bakht Singh accepted the gospel later, in 1929, as a student in Canada. He had increasingly found his religious practice unfulfilling. Plagued by questions, he began reading the Bible. It was on reading Jesus’s words in John 3:3 about new birth that he experienced a profound and inexplicable change of heart and committed his life to Christ in December of that year.¹⁶ In 1933, filled with passion for Christian ministry, Bakht Singh set sail for India, landing in Bombay. His parents, who visited the city on his arrival, were shocked to hear of his conversion and pleaded with him to return to Sikhism.¹⁷

From these early years of his faith and ministry, the caste question was a recurring one. Thottukadavil Eapen Koshy, Bakht Singh’s confidant and biographer, points to the social implications of his conversion. “[Bakht Singh’s parents] did not share this with anyone,” he writes, “because conversion to Christianity was considered to be against family prestige of the well-to-do high-caste Hindus, Sikhs, and other non-Christians in India.”¹⁸ During this time, Bakht Singh visited his sister in Karachi; she was equally appalled by the news of his conversion.

Much of Bakht Singh’s initial ministry was among street sweepers and other municipal workers, occupations typically taken on by Dalit and lower-caste communities. Bakht Singh himself recounts

his sister’s initial reaction—she called him an “outcaste.” His early collaborators were from the sweeper community, including an individual named Iman Din.¹⁹ They would distribute gospel tracts in Karachi’s streets and organize small-scale preaching drives. His charismatic presence and life story gradually drew in greater numbers. Between 1938 and 1940, he took his ministry across the length of the country, traveling south to the Madras Presidency.

At the outset, his profile—that of an upper-caste north Indian—sat at odds with the socio-cultural makeup of south Indian Christianity. The church in the south was an established one, with several denominations competing for congregations. The Anglican missionaries commanded larger congregations, especially in the Madras Presidency, and Bakht Singh’s arrival is believed to have caused tensions. Accusations of “sheep-stealing” and allegations of jealousy ensued. Bakht Singh found himself increasingly marginalized by the entrenched “Greater Tradition” churches. After an all-night prayer with his colleagues and friends in Pallavaram Hill, Madras (now called Chennai), in 1941, Bakht Singh was convinced that he needed to rent a house to establish a church for the local community. With a few friends, that year he set up the Jehovah Shammah Assembly in Madras.²⁰ Over the next decade, his assemblies would spread across the south, notably in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In 1959, Bakht Singh set up Hebron, an assembly in Hyderabad that would soon become his home base and the parent church of the denomination until his death in 2000.

From the outset, Bakht Singh’s mission was largely to the working classes, especially those from marginalized and impoverished backgrounds. It is likely that his formative years working with sweeper communities and other socially ostracized groups informed his conception of caste equality within the church.

Having set out a brief biography of this Christian leader, we now look at how his policies subverted the existing social order on matters of both caste and gender.

Against the Grain: Subversion of the Normative Social Order in the Church

The caste egalitarianism of the Bakht Singh Assemblies is especially visible in the structure of their weekly services and programs. Social status does not define seating arrangements in the assemblies; all congregants sit on mats on the floor. After a time of communal singing, individuals are free to lead the congregation in spontaneous worship. This may include singing, Bible readings, and prayers. It appears that, in including this spontaneity, Bakht Singh was influenced by the Brethren denomination of churches. However, while Brethren churches in India do not allow women to participate in spontaneous public worship, they are especially encouraged in the Bakht Singh tradition. The origins of this policy remain unclear. However, it is said that during the early years of the church, a group of women approached Bakht Singh, asking for equal opportunity in communal worship sessions.²¹ Breaking from the prevalent conservative traditions, Bakht Singh modified his order of service to set up a gender-inclusive time of praise and worship.

Furthermore, one of the distinctive features of the Bakht Singh Assemblies is a post-service lunch called the “love feast,” hosted

on the church premises. The meal in itself subverts caste since it dismantles the purity barriers of communal dining. In the broader Indian culture, those of a higher caste, especially from the priestly classes, were forbidden to eat with those of the lower castes for fear of defilement. This notion was also rooted in food preference, given that Brahminical dietary regulations prohibit the consumption of meat. It appears that Bakht Singh introduced the love feast in the initial years in order to sensitize new converts from Hinduism to the casteless ethos of his churches. There was a concern that new converts were bringing their caste-based prejudices into the church. Daniel Smith, a visiting missionary in the early years of Bakht Singh's ministry, writes about the impact the love feast had in breaking caste barriers. "It is thrilling to see them sit in long rows at meal-times eating curry and rice together," he notes, "thus showing forth the fact that there has been an entire elimination of caste and also that a new life and love has united them."²²

In the early years, the love feast primarily operated as a potluck of sorts. Members would bring home-cooked dishes and everyone shared the food. As the Bakht Singh churches grew, many assemblies begin to set up makeshift kitchens on the church premises, where a meal would be prepared during the service. A story is told of how Bakht Singh, observing caste-related conflicts within his assembly, had the entire congregation sit down for a love feast that included pork, which is traditionally forbidden among upper-caste groups.²³ Thus, common dining became a space in which discriminatory casteist practices were discouraged, thus promoting caste egalitarianism within the church. An additional measure here was that holy communion was served in a common cup. While this may be common practice in other cultures, here it was radical because of Brahminical notions of pollution from vessels shared with lower caste groups.

But apart from its anti-caste agenda, the love feast of the Bakht Singh Assemblies also promotes gender mutuality. This is seen in the upending of traditional domestic roles, which have long been gendered. A local leader at a Bakht Singh Assembly mentioned how he took on tasks typically relegated to "women's work"—cooking, sweeping, and grocery shopping, for instance. For the love feasts, meals are prepared by both men and women.²⁴ Bakht Singh's only insistence was that those who take on responsibilities in the church should be believers in Christ. Gender did not matter.

At the same time, Bakht Singh was especially invested in training women to serve in ministry. The parent churches in Hyderabad and Chennai have specially dedicated women's centers. Within a year of setting up the Hebron church in Hyderabad in 1959, the women's quarters were constructed; this points to the importance that Bakht Singh placed on providing women congregants with the same standard of facilities as the men.²⁵ There is a longstanding tradition of unmarried women who live at the church and dedicate their lives to service, much like the religious orders of nuns. Santha Kumari notes that gender equality was certainly a key aspect of how Bakht Singh Assemblies operated. Bakht Singh, she notes, pushed for "the active participation of women in the various ministries of the assemblies like Christian witness processions, distribution of the gospels and tracts, intercessory prayers at the churches, full-time Christian ministry, Sunday school ministry and personal witness for Christ."²⁶

Another notable feature of the Bakht Singh tradition is strict adherence to spatial segregation based on gender. In all assemblies, the women and men sit separately; this is irrespective of age and marital status and also includes children. At the outset, it appears that this policy was guided by Bakht Singh's social conservatism, as well as being influenced by traditions such as the Brethren movement in India. However, one finds that over the decades this policy has promoted a greater sense of sisterhood within the assemblies. There is also an element of safety that women congregants feel because of this spatial segregation. This is especially so during programs such as the Holy Convocations, which are week-long Christian events introduced by Bakht Singh to bring believers of all backgrounds together. Tents are set up as makeshift campsites for attendees. One interviewee mentioned that Bakht Singh would personally patrol these accommodations to ensure that men were not seeking to take advantage of, or intrude on, women's spaces. Thus, instead of being restrictive, this gender-based segregation is viewed as liberatory. In a traditional Indian church setting, a woman sitting with her husband or father runs the risk of having her identity defined by the male. Segregation allows them freedom from being hemmed in by patriarchal strictures.²⁷

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Finally, one of the most important areas in which Bakht Singh promoted caste and gender egalitarianism was in marriage. He was firmly against discrimination in marriage and encouraged congregants to seek partners without any preference for caste or linguistic group. One interviewee mentioned that her parents were initially concerned about marrying each other because of such community differences. Bakht Singh intervened and counseled them, eventually solemnizing their wedding. From his sermons, Koshy notes that believers were taught to "marry according to the perfect will of God . . . rather than according to their caste or class background."²⁸ Inter-caste marriage, a bold and rather counter-cultural idea in Indian society in the mid-twentieth century, was a norm in the Bakht Singh Assemblies.

Here, we see a parallel between the caste and gender egalitarian theology of Bakht Singh and the social ideology of B R Ambedkar, who is considered the father of the anti-caste movement in modern India. Ambedkar believed that the only way to conclusively upend such exploitative hierarchies in Indian society was to promote inter-community marriage, calling it the "real remedy" for the caste system.²⁹ Parallels can also be drawn with the Self-Respect Movement, led by social reformer Periyar in twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. This movement also promoted and solemnized mixed marriages as a means to undermine casteist hegemonies.³⁰

Bakht Singh's Egalitarianism: Lessons for the Indian Church

To understand the inclusive theology that guided Bakht Singh's movement, it helps to examine the spiritual leader's personal

views on issues such as ritual purity. Caste hierarchies are largely guided by the oppositional binaries of purity and pollution. If the Brahmin priesthood is required to remain pure for the worship of God, unclean or polluting work such as removing animal carcasses or cleaning toilets are to be handled by Dalits. On this basis, power relations are structured between these two groups in the caste system.³¹ Bakht Singh, on the other hand, was more concerned with inward purity. There is a recorded instance of the leader refusing to eat in a fellow believer's house, not for reasons of caste, but because the host had "suggestive pictures" of "partially-clad women" on the walls of a room.³²

His egalitarian approach, we find, was rooted in the message of Gal 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV). This verse is foregrounded in sections of Bakht Singh's biography that discuss the Christian leader's push for greater social equality in the church.³³ This message appears to have percolated down to the local leaders of the assemblies, who also referenced this verse when asked about caste and gender egalitarianism in the Bakht Singh tradition. Similarly, the communitarian ethos of the Bakht Singh assemblies evokes parallels with the NT church, as prescribed by Paul. Despite its diverse ethnic and cultural demographics, the writer of the epistle encourages believers to unite as one, as Christ's death serves to demolish barriers between Jew and Gentile.³⁴

This is not to say there had not been previous attempts to promote anti-caste values in the Indian church. Individuals such as the first indigenous Anglican bishop, Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (1874–1945) pioneered such efforts in the early twentieth century.³⁵ What sets Bakht Singh apart is the way in which his denomination enacted sweeping changes to its policies and programs in order to ensure the sustainability of its anti-caste agenda. In doing so, Bakht Singh was better positioned, in some ways, to promote gender egalitarianism at the grassroots in the Indian church. Admittedly, he did not explicitly set out to establish full mutuality—certainly not in any manner that would satisfy some within the church today. However, in taking on caste and seeking to dismantle its exploitative and discriminatory hierarchies, the movement generated an environment that allowed women in this denomination feel a greater sense of empowerment.

Conclusion

This case study on the Bakht Singh Assemblies holds an important lesson for contemporary movements within the Indian church that seek to ensure greater gender equality and opportunity. Such campaigns must first understand the socio-economic structures of oppression that undergird gender discrimination. Failure to do so may render such efforts ham-fisted, as they do not address the problem at its roots. There are, of course, shortcomings within the Bakht Singh tradition on the question of gender egalitarianism. For instance, women cannot be elevated to the office of "God's servant," a role that is the denominational equivalent of a pastor. However, one finds that this is not a concern exclusive to the Bakht Singh churches.

Caste and gender are inseparable issues within the Indian church. I submit that to address the latter, one must first engage with the question of casteism. Through the example of Bakht Singh and his

assemblies, we see a potential blueprint for an intersectional praxis that can ensure greater egalitarianism in Indian Christianity. The journey ahead will certainly throw up its fair share of challenges, given the entrenched nature of casteist and patriarchal hierarchies in Indian society. However, with Gal 3:28 as a guiding light, we must engage critically with the multi-dimensional nature of discrimination in the country if we are to build a more just and equitable church for all.

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