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Freedom of Religious Belief and People with Disabilities: A Case Study of People with Disabilities from Religious Minorities in Chennai, India

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The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) provides research evidence and delivers practical programmes which aim to redress poverty, hardship, and exclusion resulting from discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. CREID is an international consortium led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and funded by UK aid from the UK Government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – FCDO). Key partners include Al-Khoei Foundation, Minority Rights Group (MRG) and Refcemi.

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Summary

India has a unique and complex religious history, with faith and spirituality playing an important role in everyday life. Hinduism is the majority religion, and there are many minority religions. India also has a complicated class system and entrenched gender structures. Disability is another important identity. Many of these factors determine people's experiences of social inclusion or exclusion. This paper explores how these intersecting identities influence the experience of inequality and marginalisation, with a particular focus on people with disabilities from minority religious backgrounds. A participatory qualitative methodology was employed in Chennai, to gather case studies that describe in-depth experiences of participants.

Our findings show that many factors that make up a person's identity intersect in India and impact how someone is included or excluded by society, with religious minority affiliation, caste, disability status, and gender all having the potential to add layers of marginalisation. These various identity factors, and how individuals and society react to them, impact on how people experience their social existence. Identity factors that form the basis for discrimination can be either visible or invisible, and discrimination may be explicit or implicit.

Despite various legal and human rights frameworks at the national and international level that aim to prevent marginalisation, discrimination based on these factors is still prevalent in India. While some tokenistic interventions and schemes are in place to overcome marginalisation, such initiatives often only focus on one factor of identity, rather than considering intersecting factors. People with disabilities continue to experience exclusion in all aspects of their lives. Discrimination can exist both between, as well as within, religious communities, and is particularly prevalent in formal environments. Caste-based exclusion continues to be a major problem in India. The current socioeconomic environment and political climate can be seen to perpetuate marginalisation based on these factors. However, when people are included in society, regardless of belonging to a religious minority, having a disability, or being a certain caste, the impact on their life can be very positive.

Keywords: disability; India; religious minorities; Caste; Dalit; exclusion; inclusion; intersecting inequalities; identity politics; freedom of religious belief.

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Acronyms

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILO	International Labour Organization
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NGO	non-governmental organisation
REC	Research Ethics Committee
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

Approximately 15 per cent of the world's population experience some form of disability (WHO and World Bank 2011). There is no single universally accepted definition of disability (Thompson 2017). The United Nations regards disability as an evolving concept that results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (UN 2006). The social model of disability provides a framework to understand this approach, as it regards disability as something arising from the interaction of a person's functional status or impairment with the physical, cultural, and policy environments (Mont 2007). The social model is human rights-focused and regards disability as being socially constructed. Disability can therefore vary depending on the cultural context. Impairment is defined by UN Enable (2003) as a loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function. It is important to note that people with disabilities have diverse identities and are not necessarily defined by their disability (Rohwerder 2015).

In a similar way, religion is a nebulous and complex concept. It can refer to a wide array of phenomena and it is more than just a set of religious beliefs or doctrines. Religion has various aspects and layers, including faith and spirituality, institutions, behaviour, and practice. It can represent a dynamic and complex amalgamation of beliefs (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020).

There are various human rights frameworks that enshrine certain rights relating both to freedom of religious belief and disability inclusion. Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance' (UN 1948: 5). Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, reaffirms this right, by listing the general principles which include, among others, the right for individual autonomy to be respected (including the freedom to make one's own choices), the right not to be discriminated against, the right to participate in society, and the right to equal opportunities (UN 2006). Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of freedom of religion or belief as an important human right to be protected, millions of people suffer from encroachments to this right on a regular basis (Tadros 2020). People with disabilities are amongst the most marginalised groups and are generally poorer than their non-disabled peers in terms of access to education, health care, employment, income, justice,

social support, and civic involvement, and are more likely to experience multiple deprivations (Rohwerder 2015).

Religion and religious affiliation are factors that, along with others (such as ethnicity, gender, and social class), can intersect with disability to impact on the social inclusion of people with disabilities in their communities and result in inequalities being experienced (Higashida 2019). With this framing in mind, this paper seeks to explore how religious identities of people with disabilities intersect with other identities to influence experiences of inequality and social marginalisation. To answer this question, India was selected as the country of focus due to its unique religious history and current socio-political situation. While Hinduism is the majority religion, there are many minority religions. In addition, there is a complicated class and caste system, as well as entrenched gender structures and norms.

2 Methodology

A participatory qualitative methodology was employed to gather case studies that describe in-depth experiences of participants in relation to the research question. The study was undertaken in Chennai, India. Data was collected between July and September 2020. A purposive sample of 15 Indian participants with disabilities from minority religious backgrounds were selected. Efforts were made to include diversity within the purposeful sample. In terms of religion, of the 15 participants, 11 were Christian (six Catholic, five different types of Protestant), and four were Muslim. In terms of impairment, ten had a physical impairment, four had visual impairment, and one participant was deaf-blind. In terms of caste, eight of the participants were Dalit and seven were non-Dalit. With regard to gender, three were women and 12 were men.

Participants were invited to take part in a two-stage process. The first stage was to provide an account of their life history, using a method called 'river of life'. The second was to take part in a narrative interview.

2.1 River of life

The river of life is a graphic elicitation methodology that allows participants to reflect on personal experiences. Participants are invited to reflect on key stages in their lives (including both positive experiences and difficult challenges) by using a river to symbolise and graphically depict their journey (Moussa 2009). It allows for granular experiences to be expressed at every phase in life. It uses visual narratives to help people tell their stories, representing the major events and milestones in their lives through features shown along

the river. This method is designed to elicit how the participant regards and evaluates their experience to date, as well as including people, places, and events that have played a significant part in it. Drawing their experience as a river can assist participants to express their emotional lives and allow more concise presentations of the key elements of their experiences. The process allows participants to communicate their experiences without the influence of the researcher's preconceived assumptions (Fullana, Pallisera and Vilà 2014).

Participants were asked to draw their own river and show the course that their life had taken, graphically represented by a river by adding various features, such as bends, rocks, and waterfalls, as metaphors for what had happened. Participants were then asked to comment and describe each phase of their life that they chose to focus on. The participants were asked to consider the various factors (e.g. having a disability, belonging to a religious minority, being a Dalit, etc.) that comprise their identity, for each phase.

2.2 Narrative interview

Narrative interviews – a form of unstructured, in-depth interview – were selected as the other methodology. According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000: 6),

conceptually, the idea of narrative interviewing is motivated by a critique of the question-response schema of most interviews. In the question-response mode, the interviewer is imposing structures in a threefold sense: (a) by selecting the theme and the topics, (b) by ordering the questions and (c) by wording the questions in his or her language. To elicit a less imposed and therefore more 'valid' rendering of the informant's perspective, the influence of the interviewer should be minimal, and the setting should be arranged to achieve this minimising of the interviewer's influence.

The narrative interview avoids pre-structuring the interview. It uses story-telling and listening. The narrative interviews were as open-ended and unstructured as possible to allow the participant to report what they felt was important, in a way that other more structured interviewing methods may have curtailed. This approach was selected with the goal of producing detailed and authentic accounts of people's experiences (Holt 2010). The aim was to empower the participants by ensuring their agency as the authors of their own narrative (Overcash 2003; Parker 2004).

The narrative interviews were started with the following deliberately open question:

'Could you share with me your relationship with your religious community and how it has impacted on your life?'

This was followed up, where appropriate, after the participant had responded freely with the following prompt questions:

'Can you give me any examples of when you have felt included by your religious community and what impact this had on your life? Why do you think this was the case?'

'Can you give any examples of when you have felt excluded by your religious community and what impact this had on your life? Why do you think this was the case?'

'Can you give any examples of any benefits you feel you have in your life as a person with a disability as a result of being a member of your religious community? Why do you think this was the case?'

'Can you give any examples of any disadvantages you feel you have in your life as a person with a disability as a result of being a member of your religious community? Why do you think this was the case?'

'Can you give any examples of any disadvantages you feel you have in your life based on your caste? Why do you think this was the case?'

'How has being a religious minority impacted on your daily life and interaction with society beyond your immediate religious community, specifically people from other religions and especially majority Hindus?'

Where necessary, reasonable adjustments were made to the methodologies to ensure that everyone could participate. Each participant was asked if they needed any support. For example, for the 'river of life', participants who had a visual impairment were provided with assistance so they could describe what they wanted to be visually presented. The river of life data and the narrative interview data were then transcribed and thematically analysed.

2.3 Ethics

Fieldwork was undertaken in accordance with ethical protocol and guidelines as set out for the overall CREID programme and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at IDS. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on respondents' fully informed

consent, with adjustments made for accessibility, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. In light of Covid-19, the interviews were carried out in a socially distanced manner and needs established and reasonable adjustments made, where needed. All information has been kept private and confidential and names were not used in order to ensure anonymity.

2.4 Limitations

In terms of positionality, none of the researchers have a disability themselves. Two of the researchers are European and based in the UK. Neither are significantly involved in an organised religion. One of the researchers is a middle-class Dalit Catholic Christian Indian. Two researchers are male and one is female. While the researchers recognise their own positionality and the potential impact that aspects of their identity may have had on the analysis, they aimed to conduct the research in a fair and open-minded way from a neutral stance.

The majority of participants (11 out of 15) were Christian, due to existing personal relationships and networks with this community. The remaining four participants were Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, other minority religions, and people with no religion were not represented in this study. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on data collection, limiting the time available to undertake the research. In addition, many institutions were closed due to restrictions of movements. For example, the biggest Shia mosque in the central part of Chennai was contacted with regard to recruiting more participants, but they responded that due to Covid-19 advice and regulations, some of their members who had a disability were not attending. Also, a Sunni Muslim centre for people with disabilities in Chennai was approached. However, people did not want to participate due to the fear of infection. We wanted to include Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains but struggled to make contact due to the Covid-19 restrictions. In addition, ideally the gender and impairment type of the participants would have been more diverse. The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on our ability to secure a more diverse sample of participants. Also, the sample size was restricted due to time and resources available.

3 Disability experience in India

The 2011 census in India reported that the disability prevalence rate in India was 2.2 per cent (2.0 per cent for women and 2.4 per cent for men) (Leonard Cheshire 2018). This figure is much lower than the global estimated prevalence of 15 per cent (WHO and World Bank 2011). Another estimate for India based on analysis of data from the World Health

Survey suggests that the disability prevalence rate is 24.9 per cent (Mitra and Sambamoorthi 2014). India is not alone in struggling to produce a robust estimate of disability prevalence. Like many countries, disability data in India suffers from underestimation, as well as validity and reliability issues. Different measures of disability result in different figures, making comparison across regions and countries a challenge. There is momentum globally towards improving disability statistics and delivering consistent and robust estimations of prevalence. The next census in India is planned for 2021, which presents an opportunity to improve disability estimates for India (Dandona *et al.* 2019).

Data that does exist suggests that disability prevalence in India varies across geographic regions. It is found to be higher among rural dwellers, and members of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. Approximately 70 per cent of people with disabilities live in rural areas. Age-standardised disability prevalence was found to be 2.98 per cent for men and 2.44 per cent for women for Scheduled Castes, and 2.58 per cent for men and 2.27 per cent for women for Scheduled Tribes, compared to 1.92 per cent for men and 1.59 per cent for women for all other social groupings (Saikia *et al.* 2016). Compared to international data on disability prevalence, these figures are likely to be underestimates.

India was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), doing so in 2007. In response to the initial report on the CRPD by India, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2019a: 2) made a series of observations, including welcoming India's adoption of legislation recognising and enforcing the rights of persons with disabilities. However, the Committee expressed concern over the following factors in relation to the general principles and obligations relating to the CRPD:

- The medical model of disability (which considers a person's impairment first and focuses on the impairment as the cause of limited participation in society) remaining prevalent in legislation, public policies, and attitudes. This is on account of misunderstandings about disability being solely a biological condition that requires prevention and rehabilitation. To address this, it is recommended that India adopts national and state strategies to promote understanding about the human rights model of disability among policymakers and in society. Disabilities need to be regarded as part of human diversity and humanity at all levels.
- Legislation, public policies, and practices continue to discriminate against persons with disabilities in the sense that derogatory terminology exacerbates negative perceptions. Guardianship, institutionalisation, psychiatric treatment, and segregated community services based on disability are all areas where disability-

inclusive reform is needed. Derogatory terminology and concepts against persons with disabilities must be eliminated from legislation, policies, government regulations and government websites, and from public discourse.

- The coverage of disability identification cards is limited, especially in rural areas. This has implications for people with disabilities who need to access public services. These cards facilitate accessible and affordable public services for persons with disabilities, and those without cards have difficulties accessing these services. The cards also have the potential to assist with gathering much-needed statistical data on people with disabilities.

With regard to equality and non-discrimination, the Committee expressed concern about the absence of measures to combat multiple and intersecting discrimination against persons with disabilities in Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, including Dalits and Adivasi, and persons with disabilities who belong to ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, among others (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2019a: 3). A lack of effective redress in cases of discrimination on the basis of disability and multiple and intersecting discrimination, including gender-based discrimination against women with disabilities, was also noted as a concern.

With regard to respect for home and the family, the Committee is concerned about religious personal laws restricting the right to marriage of persons with disabilities, and allowing divorce on the grounds of disability and restricting parental responsibilities of persons with disabilities and their right to adopt children. Harmful practices against women with disabilities include forced marriages, dowry payments from families, and financial incentives for marriage with a woman with disabilities. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2019a: 13) recommend that India repeal from personal laws on marriage and divorce all restrictions relating to the marriage and family of persons with disabilities, including persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, and those requiring higher levels of support. In response, the Indian government has initiated the process of consultation to remove certain discriminatory provisions in various marriage/religious laws (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2019b).

The Disability Rights Law was passed in India in December 2016, which enshrined in law the right of people with disabilities in India to equality, life with dignity, and respect. However, implementation of the law is limited. Despite progress at the policy level, people with disabilities continue to face discrimination in their everyday lives. Many people with disabilities in India experience poverty due to barriers to accessing education and employment. The Indian disability rights movement continues to push for the realisation of

disability rights and positive change (although there has been some criticism that the movement is dominated by the urban middle classes) (Schedin 2017).

People with disabilities in India are marginalised in education, employment, mobility, and other significant life areas (Mehrotra 2013). Ghai (2015) describes the common cultural perception in India as being that disability is retribution for past karma from which there can be no reprieve. Karma is associated with the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and as such is the basis for the dominant cultural construction in India. In Hinduism, karma is the concept of 'action' in contradistinction to 'faith' as advocated by Christianity and Islam, which view all human predicaments as the will of God as opposed to present and past life actions. Hindus believe that humans have free will to choose their own actions, which require only the will of God to implement karma's consequences. Through karma, disability is commonly understood in India as being linked to sin.

Some international literature suggests karma can be a positive coping mechanism for people with disabilities. For example, Gupta (2011) argues that although karma may evoke feelings of guilt for people with disabilities, as impairments are viewed as being caused by past misdeeds, it generally helps in accepting impairment with equanimity, surrendering to the will of God. However, there is also concern that in India specifically, viewing disability as a result of karma can result in people with disabilities being victims of abuse and violence. Linking disability to sin can result in a society that treats people with disabilities with a range of responses from pity and charity to hostility, anger, banter, and ridicule. In the most extreme cases, people with disabilities have been killed, and embedded cultural norms may restrict the violence from even being recognised as a crime (Ghai 2015).

The general attitude of the state towards people with disabilities has always been one of charity and welfare. This is due to the acceptance of a religio-moral-medical model of disability, where disability exists due to God's will, and is regarded as a biological condition requiring prevention and/or rehabilitation. It is regarded as the fault of the individual with the impairment and considered to be their problem to deal with. The reluctance of government to produce and implement a suitable disability policy reflects some of these sociocultural assumptions about people with disabilities in India. This has resulted in many people with disabilities in India experiencing general neglect and apathy towards their needs and concerns. When they are included in society, it is often done in a tokenistic way (Ghosh 2016). People with disabilities are often subject to negligence, segregation, and deprivation. This is in part due to social attitude and stigma, which makes people with disabilities among the most excluded in India (Pal 2010).

4 Religious minority experience in India

India is a land of many religions, where spirituality is interwoven with culture, identity, and society (Haq *et al.* 2020). According to the 2011 census, the vast majority of India's population are Hindu (80 per cent), while the largest of the minority religions is Islam (14 per cent). The remaining 6 per cent of the population is made up of Christians (2 per cent), Sikhs (2 per cent), Buddhists (1 per cent), Jains (<1 per cent), other religions (<1 per cent), and those that did not state a religion (<1 per cent) (Ministry of Home Affairs 2011). Within each of these broad religious groupings, there are different communities. The Christian community, for example, is made up of Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and indigenous sects (Robinson 2010).

The 1950 Constitution of India aimed to unite a diverse population by establishing India as a secular nation where people of all religions could live free from discrimination. Despite this, members of religious minority groups in India have experienced periods of social integration and harmony, alternated with incidents of discrimination, alienation, and even communal violence, 'depending on factors such as geographical location, local governance, socioeconomic conditions, the absence or presence of catalysing events, and so on' (Goh 2018: 25). In the current socio-political environment in India, religious minorities (particularly Muslims) are at increasing risk of marginalisation (Goh 2018).

As the boundary between religion and politics is becoming increasingly blurred under the Hindu nationalist prime minister Narendra Modi, divisions along religious lines in Indian society are once again coming to the fore (Haq *et al.* 2020). Although Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formally acknowledges the need for equality in India, its policies on religious minorities have raised concerns about intolerance and discrimination (Kim 2017). The introduction of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, which requires Muslims to prove their citizenship or face extradition, has proved highly divisive and was met with public protests and violence (Haq *et al.* 2020). Incidents of religious intolerance involving hate speech and/or communal violence against people belonging to religious minorities have been on the rise in the last decade (Kim 2017; Basu 2019). BJP's success at the ballot box may be causing an increase in the incidence of hate crimes against religious minorities (Basu 2019), while at the same time the government is remaining silent in the response to such attacks until they are faced with external pressure (Kim 2017).

Vajpeyi (2020) argues that by recasting India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (a Hindu Reich or Hindu Nation), Modi and the BJP have created the illusion of being united and being right, leaving

no space in this vision for diversity, casting minorities as 'others'. Parvez Alam (2020) argues that the BJP under Modi have achieved majoritarianism, where the majority population enjoys a degree of primacy in society and claims the right to make decisions that affect the society. For majoritarianism to function, internal criticism is needed to empower the movement, and is suppressed when it arises. Those who manage to voice their displeasure are framed as traitors to the nation. Populist ideologies require a threat and enemies to survive. Under the current regime in India, this threat comes from anyone who is not Hindu and is regarded by the majority of people as an outsider.

Modi promises to deliver order, identity, orientation, spiritual clarity, discipline, and collective strength. Hinduism provided the unity around which a seemingly stable, eternal, and God-given foundation could be built. Hindu homogenisation is presented as being needed to transform and modernise India without compromising its 'basic' values, customs, and traditions. As part of the Hindu nationalist discourse, minorities are represented as dangerous, sinister, and united with connections to India's external enemies (Wojczewski 2020).

India's political populism is trapping religious minorities in a downward spiral of exclusion, disadvantage, and socioeconomic deprivation. Certain religions have become associated with other identities, with Christianity, for example, 'closely associated with the social objects of Hindu society: the backward castes, non-Indo-Aryan tribal peoples, rural poor' (Goh 2018: 32). This position has both highlighted and magnified the outsider status of these groups. Policies designed to address material disadvantage facing members of religious minorities are yet to achieve any level of success, and can be regarded as politically expedient tokenism as opposed to genuine efforts to address socioeconomic inequalities that exist along religious lines (M.S. Alam 2020). Robinson (2010: 1) notes that 'the state is deeply implicated in defining social categories and its recognition of citizens on the basis of such categories is important for what these citizens can access from the state or what rights they can claim'. Identity politics is therefore deeply embedded in contemporary India and is a central feature determining the lived realities of its citizens.

Even though the caste system is of Hindu origins, it continues to play a role in the lives of many people from all religions. This is despite some religions (such as Christianity and Islam) preaching equality (Goh 2018; Robinson 2010). Dalit Muslims and Christians, who are not recognised as Scheduled Castes under the law, unlike Dalits from other religious backgrounds, are therefore not eligible for the benefits of positive discrimination for Scheduled Castes sanctioned by the Constitution (Arora 2020; Robinson 2010). As a result, they have been protesting against this injustice and discrimination on the basis of religious belief (Arora 2020; Robinson 2010). Originally the Constitution only allowed for Hindu

Dalits, although it was amended to include Sikh Dalits, who are called the Mazabhi Sikhs (in 1965), and Buddhist Dalits (in 1989) after political activism, and the Indian government deciding that Sikhism and Buddhism are off-shoots of Hinduism (Arora 2020; Arockiasamy 2005).

Dalits who chose to convert to Islam and Christianity continue to remain outside the purview of the Constitution (Fazal 2017). A 2007 report by the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Ministry of Minority Affairs 2007) noted that convert Christians and Muslims of Scheduled Caste origin continue to be victims of the caste system and suffer from a comparable depth of social and economic disadvantages to the already recognised Scheduled Castes. The report therefore recommended that they be given official Scheduled Caste status (Ministry of Minority Affairs 2007). However, this recommendation has not been implemented and a petition challenging the order limiting Scheduled Caste status is now pending in the Supreme Court (Arora 2020; Jebaraj 2020).

5 Dalit experience in India

Caste is an ancient, entrenched form of social stratification in India that is legitimised by religious texts and solidified through social norms. The caste system orders different groups in society into a hierarchy (Das and Mehta 2012). The Indian Constitution has Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled Castes are ranked in caste hierarchy at the lowest level. Scheduled Tribes on the other hand are defined in terms of their geographical isolation from mainstream society, distinct culture, language, and customs. Dalits in India are united in challenging the historical oppression legitimised by the dominant Brahmanical Varnasrama dharma ideology of the Hindu caste system. Dalit is a political identity which covers various social groups who are defined and identified as Scheduled Castes. In recognition of the oppression they have faced, officially recognised Dalits are entitled to positive discrimination policies of the Indian state, which does not include those who are Muslim and Christian (Mehrotra 2013).

The 2011 census indicated that Dalits made up 16.6 per cent of the total population of India (Raghavendra 2020). They face many social disadvantages due to caste-based stereotypes and discriminations, and deprivation of opportunities in different spheres of life (Pal 2010). In general, Dalits lack assets (including land-holdings) and often do poorly paid, undesirable jobs. Stigma and discrimination entrench the large-scale poverty faced by Dalits, making them unequal citizens. Dalits are twice as likely to be poor, unemployed, and illiterate compared to non-Dalits (Mehrotra 2013). Dalits are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters, due to the fact that they often live in much more vulnerable

locations such as near rivers or other high-risk areas. Dalit families may find themselves being neglected by government relief efforts (Dutt 2016).

Some efforts have been made to improve the situation of Dalits (such as constitutional amendment, legislation changes, and affirmative action in certain sectors such as education); however, there remains insufficient political will to address the deep-seated discrimination against Dalits in India and to work for the abolishment of caste itself (Dutt 2016).

Dalits as a group are more likely to be disabled due to poor living conditions, increased risks of illness, and poor nutrition. Dalits who have disabilities experience multiple disadvantages resulting in discrimination, deprivation, human rights violations, and increased risk of harm. They experience multiple barriers to accessing public resources due to both their disability and social status. These intersecting identities entrench disadvantages, resulting in significant negative consequences. Social safeguards focusing on improving health, nutrition, and education that aim to address the double disadvantage faced by Dalits with disabilities have failed (Pal 2010). Commonly held negative stereotypes stigmatise Dalits with disabilities as being unproductive and dependent. The low educational and employment status of Dalits with disabilities increases the likelihood that their families will continue to face poverty in the future, and results in sustained poorer living conditions. Due to the lack of political will to address discrimination based on caste, Dalit people with disabilities continue to be not only segregated but effectively socially excluded from all mainstream social activity (Dutt 2016).

Dalit women suffer multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously and throughout their lives due to the caste system, which reduces them to an intrinsically impure and 'untouchable' people. This system is used to legitimise their exclusion and exploitation. They face stigma, discrimination, and deprivation. Sexual violence is used as a social mechanism to enforce and precipitate the Dalit woman's subordinate position in society (Dutt 2016).

The intersection between caste, gender, and disability is an under-researched topic. While it is recognised that social contexts are diverse and the situations of persons within different groups varies, women with disabilities from the Dalit communities are most disadvantaged as they suffer multiple marginalities (Mehrotra 2013). A Dalit woman who has a disability is particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation due to her lower economic standing and compromised social status. They may also be the victims of abuse based on superstitious beliefs. Dalit women with disabilities who are victims of abuse may

struggle to access justice due to marginalisation and lack of recognition of their equal rights to protection under the law (Dutt 2016).

6 Case study findings

6.1 Exclusion/inclusion as a result of people's religious identity

Our findings show that there are several different ways in which people with disabilities from minority religious backgrounds have experienced exclusion and discrimination due to their faith. Much of this exclusion or discrimination is on the basis of their minority religious identity related to the benefits that Hindu Dalits have in comparison to Christian Dalits with regard to access to jobs, promotions, and services. Most of those interviewed from a Dalit background felt that they had missed out on opportunities offered to Hindu Dalits as a result of being Christian.

There are government schemes in place which support people with disabilities into jobs, yet participant 11, a trained teacher who is registered with the government to get employment in a government institution, has thus far been unsuccessful, which they attribute to being a Dalit Christian, noting that

my being a Christian Dalit puts me in the Backward Class list and that delays the process of my getting a government job. That is a clear disadvantage to be a Dalit and a Christian. Had I been a Hindu [who is] disabled, then by this time I would have got a job.¹

This experience is similar to that of participant 2 who has not been able to find a permanent position but notes that some of their 'Hindu Dalit and visually challenged friends have got into government teaching professions'. While participant 6 considers themselves to be a Christian, on paper they are officially a Dalit Hindu, which has entitled them to a government job, but they note that 'if the government comes to know about my being a member of a Christian church, I may be taken out of the state benefits that I enjoy now as a Dalit Hindu' (i.e. may lose their job and financial stability). Some of those who have been able to get work have also noted that being Christian or 'suspected' of being Christian (and being disabled) has affected their promotion opportunities, with participant 12 mentioning that 'I always had a suspicion that my double identity as a Christian and someone who is disabled played negative roles in delaying my due promotions'.

¹ All quotes were from individual interviews conducted between July and September 2020.

Access to services such as cooking gas connections meant for Hindu Dalits have been slower for participant 2, a Christian Dalit, who mentions that, while they were told they were initially denied a cooking gas connection because it was too dangerous as they were blind, 'I felt the undercurrent that I was denied because of being a member of a Christian community'. Participant 1 mentions that 'Dalit Christians are not treated on a par with the Hindu counterparts. Had I been a Hindu Dalit, I would have received a lot of government loans and advances, I would have put my children in better schools'.

As well as the social welfare benefits it provides to officially recognised Dalits, the government also provides some people with disabilities with some benefits, including a small stipend. People's religious identity does not seem to affect receipt of this benefit, although participant 11 feels that the benefits they get from the government as a disabled person in the form of this small monthly stipend is provided 'in spite of being a Christian' as the stipend is provided to all disabled persons irrespective of all religious/communal/income barriers.

People with disabilities have also experienced discrimination as a result of their minority religious identities elsewhere in their lives, although this has mainly been in professional environments or environments outside of their own neighbourhood (participants 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 14). This included verbal abuse and denial of opportunities, with participant 11 noting that when they went to interview at a college run by Hindu missionaries, the professor verbally abused them in relation to their disability, and refused them entry to the subject, which they felt was also related to their religion. They noted that 'this hurtful experience would not have happened to a "normal" student who aspired to study Chemistry and also to a disabled Hindu student who applied there'.

Participant 5 mentions their experience of subtle discrimination from their Hindu colleagues at work, who continue to perform *Poojas* (Hindu religious prayer ceremony) inside the government offices in spite of a government order banning them. Participant 12 faces 'stiff pressure from my Hindu colleagues and higher officials as they always tend to discriminate against my being a Christian'. Participant 7 experienced discrimination in their professional life as a musician, when Hindu musicians objected to their playing for famous composers (who held firm against these objections and continued to employ them).

Participant 10 notes that increasingly over recent years, since there was a BJP government, Hindu competitors of theirs have organised a syndicate against Muslim traders like them and tried to usurp business opportunities from them, including through hooliganism perpetrated through *goondas* or hired thugs. Participant 10 claims that the

goondas are often paid by local police to destabilise small businesses owned by Muslims, and reflects that 'they go uncontrolled by the local police as they are bribed by them. We the Muslim persons are hugely affected by the majority Hindu hooligans'. This situation has got worse under the current Hindu nationalist government.

Participant 14 also mentioned that 'we have been denied rented houses when we revealed that we are Christians', although they feel this is also tied into the association of Christians with Dalits and their disability and 'in the belief that we will not be able to pay rents in time'. Participant 8 notes that 'I face the hostile Hindus every day and night. My attire of a Muslim with a cap on my head, a beard on my face usually will irk the majority Hindus' and they have had their beard grabbed and their cap snatched off a number of times in the street.

Concerns about conversion to other religions from some Hindus seems to be related to the particularly negative treatment experienced by people from minority religions, especially those in official religious positions. Participant 3, who is visually impaired, was assaulted on the street when they asked for help to find their way back to the road. They believe they were targeted because they were carrying a Bible, displaying their religious identity. Participant 3 recalls that

before I realised what was happening, he suddenly removed the belt from my hip and started to assault me using that belt. I was shocked. During the assault he asked me if I am converting Hindus to Christianity. He started to beat me faster as I remained silent this incident began to settle a sense of insecurity in me it took very long to come out of this shock. I believe I was attacked by that young man just because I was a preacher. I guess I was manhandled by [a] Hindutva [person] who were trained to resist the evangelisation in Tamil Nadu.

The assault was stopped when they were rescued by others passing by. Participant 3 was also involved in efforts to build a small church and noted that initially local Hindus verbally abused them, stole their construction materials, and 'even excreted inside our building and we have found human excreta many times'. However, since the church was established, such instances have decreased. Participant 2 notes that as a preacher they face a lot more resistance from the majority Hindus, and that some 'local Hindu right wing members used to threaten our church members against attending to our worship programmes', while some other Hindu neighbours conflate nationalism with Hinduism, describing them as 'anti-nationals just because we run a Church'. Participant 5 mentions that while their relationship with their Hindu neighbours is not negative, they sometimes 'would prevent their children to visit my home just because of the fear that we will convert them'.

In addition, a number of different interviewees mentioned their families worrying or reacting negatively when they converted, or suggested they wanted to convert from Hinduism to another religion (participants 2, 3, 5, and 6). Participant 2's Hindu biological father tied them up when he left the house due to the interest a pastor was taking in them and his fear that the pastor would convert them to Christianity. Participant 3 converted to Christianity in secret and 'years later when [their Hindu family] came to know about this, they were much upset. I felt I became a stranger inside home.' However, later on, their parents 'accepted me back as their son and as a Christian and that too as a pastor' and found a wife for them. The leaders of the church that participant 6, a Hindu by birth, attended 'hesitated to provide me with a baptism. Initially I could not comprehend their attitude. But later I understood that they hesitated because my mother would not give her consent to my baptism.' While their mother accepted their conversion, it led to a rift with their Hindu friends and extended family and 'they stopped inviting us for occasions like weddings or funerals and severed all domestic relationship with our family'. However, they 'have not faced any negative reaction from the larger society as I remain a Hindu on paper'.

Exclusion has not necessarily only come from other religions but also from different branches of the same religion. Participant 2, a Protestant Christian, spoke about being bullied in their Catholic secondary school for belonging to a different denomination. 'I was discriminated [against] by the Catholic students for I was not a Catholic. I did not have any problems from the non-Christians [smiles]. I was told by the Catholic teachers that I am unfit to touch the Bible'. This experience was very tough and had a negative impact on them, as they recall 'I did not know why they said like that. That really hurt me. It was very tough time for me'.

However, the interviewees also shared examples of when they have been included because of or in spite of their minority religious identity. Such inclusion has made a positive impact on their lives, materially, socially, and spiritually. Several different interviewees (participants 13, 14, and 15) felt very accepted and included by schools run by religious bodies from a different religion to their own. These schools were generally schools for people who are disabled, and the staff there did not discriminate against those coming from a different religious background. For example, participant 13, a practising Muslim person with disabilities who attended a Bible College notes that 'the college was very inclusive that they provided me with special facilities to keep up the pace with other students and also facilities to practise my religion without any hindrance; for example, they bought me a Quran with much bigger printed letters'. As a result of this inclusion and the positive experience they had, they feel that 'the impact of the Bible College will be with me all my life. I became a worthy man only because of that Bible College.' They felt that

reasonable accommodation had been provided by the workers at the Bible College, which allowed them to freely practise their religion. This made them feel included in college life, despite their differing religious beliefs.

Participant 14, a Catholic with negative experiences of disability exclusion within their Catholic religious community, attended a Protestant school for persons with disabilities, which 'did an excellent job of inclusion by providing me the basic schooling and a life-long support in being a spiritual partner of ours'. Participant 4, who works at a school run by the Methodist church found that 'the Catholic Church that I belong to has not been very accommodative considering my disability but the Methodist church to which I have no religious attachment but only a professional relationship has given me a lot of freedom to exhibit my talents as an artist', as well as providing them with their livelihood. Participant 7, a musician, has a positive relationship with their Hindu neighbours, many of whom are fans of their playing and who have requested performances at special occasions for their family. The fact that participant 7 is a Catholic does not impact on the relationship with their neighbours, who appreciate them and their musical talents. Participant 15 notes that 'all my negative treatments were based on my disability and I don't remember any kind that was related to my being a Christian'. They are currently in a school environment, where the majority of the school, including the Head, are Hindu, and where they are 'very happy and treated with dignity as a human person'.

Others have been accepted and included as people with disabilities by different religious communities to those they had been born into (participants 2, 3, 6, and 13), which in some cases led to their conversion to the religion of the communities they were accepted into as people with disabilities. For example, participant 3, who comes from a Hindu background, mentions that 'I encountered a pastor who was very kind and always talked about overcoming the disability and instilled a confidence in me to achieve in life. Just before the school final exams, I was converted to Christianity by him without the knowledge of my family.' Participant 6, also from a Hindu background, received a lot of support and encouragement from a Christian family friend, who later introduced them to their church, where they were 'amazed by the love and affection showered by the other members of the Church on me as a disabled person and I started frequenting to that church and was soon formally included as a member'. Participants 2, 8, and 9 also mention receiving some financial and food support from their religious community because they belong to that religion. For example, participant 8 receives some money before Ramadan each year but 'these financial helps are for all poor Muslims and not specific to disabled Muslims'.

Other participants also mention that their minority religious identity has not made much of a difference to their relationship with their majority religious neighbours (participants 4, 9,

11, 12, 13, and 14). Participant 4 suggests that this may be because they are Catholic and 'the image for the Catholics that they adapt to local culture could be one of the reasons' for the lack of negative impact from their Hindu neighbours. In addition, they live in a slum where there are no negative interactions based on religion as 'we feel that we are all the same when it comes to being Dalits and the marginalised'. Participant 9, a Muslim, also notes that they have no problems with their Hindu neighbours as at 'our social level we all feel we are all in the same (social strata) – irrespective of our religious differences', although this does not extend to things such as marriage, with the Hindu neighbours not accepting marriage of Hindus to non-Hindus.

Prior to, and since, participant 11's negative experience when applying for college, they have not had any negative interactions with the Hindu community in their neighbourhood. Participant 12 has a good relationship with the majority Hindus in their immediate society and there are equal numbers of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in the block of flats they live in. Participant 13, a Muslim, did 'not have much interaction with the majority Hindus from my childhood – either good or bad', except some teasing from their peers when they were a child, and has felt very accepted by the Christian college they are in. Participant 14 is 'not affected any way in negative by the Hindus living in my area. I have a lot of Hindu and Muslim friends. I do not remember any such ill treatment by them as a disabled person or as a Christian.'

However, most of the focus of the discussion around the religious identities of people with disabilities from minority religious backgrounds focused on their experiences of inclusion or exclusion within their own religious community, rather than the impact of attitudes to their religious identity from society at large. This is perhaps because their own religious community played a greater part in their lives than the attitudes of society in general. It suggests a complex picture of intersecting identities and the multifarious factors that influence social inclusion/exclusion in India.

6.2 Exclusion/inclusion as a result of people's disability

With regard to the participants with disabilities from minority religious backgrounds, the main aspect of their experiences of inequality and social marginalisation they talked about was the barriers they faced from family, society in general, and religious communities, which made up an important part of their lives.

Some people with disabilities have had traumatic experiences of abuse and abandonment from some of their family members, including extended family (participants 2, 9, and 14). When participant 2 (who is blind) was a child, they were left tied up to a tree by their father

to restrict their movements and control who they interacted with. Participant 9 has a physical disability and was placed in an exploitative child labour situation by their parents. They were forced to work as a child servant in a relative's home, where abuse and overwork was a regular occurrence. This treatment was directly due to their impairment, with participant 9 reflecting that 'this kind of tough phase in life would not have happened to a "normal" girl or a "normal" boy or even a disabled boy'. The forced labour lasted seven years and restricted their education.

Participant 14, who has a physical disability, was regularly confined to the house. Participant 14 felt that this treatment was due to their disability, reflecting that 'this confinement would not have happened to a "normal" child'. They were abandoned by their mother in an orphanage, despite both parents still being alive. Participant 14 recalls that the experience was 'so frightening and nightmarish that I kept on weeping the whole of first night. This would not have happened to a "normal boy" of my age'. The next day when their father learned what had happened, they were taken back to the family home. Later in life, they were exploited by their uncle, who tried to take land they had been given by their father, and then verbally abused them about their disability when they refused to sign it over to them. Others have had their lives restricted as a result of their family's overprotectiveness, with participant 14, who has a physical disability, noting that 'I was denied access to the outer world by my father, mostly in the fear that I would be lost or would suffer'.

However, other participants noted that some of their family members played a role in ensuring their inclusion in wider society, for example by fighting to get them into school, taking them to religious services, helping them set up a business, or helping find them a partner (participants 2, 3, 6, 10, 11, 14, and 15). For example, participant 15 talks about how 'my father used to carry me to the church on Sunday mornings and I remember my whole family took lot of efforts in taking me to the church whenever possible'. Friends have also played a role for some people, with participant 14 mentioning that 'one of my friends designed a manual three-wheel cycle for me, taking into consideration of my inability to use my hands. The cycle proved to be a successful model as far as I am concerned. My life looked very easy after acquiring that cycle, as for the first time in life I felt I can move a little faster than I used. I instantly felt I was independent.'

Almost all of those interviewed mentioned a variety of different challenges in relation to access to education (participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15). Such challenges included being denied access to education, with participant 1, who has a physical disability, describing how 'my parents told me that when I attained the right age for primary schooling, I was denied an admission into a local Christian school that I was

entitled to just because of the reason that I am disabled', while participant 14, who also has a physical disability, reflects that 'my parents never gave me a thought of sending me to a school and getting educated'. Participant 10 went blind as a child and as a result 'I was taken away from my school by my parents for probably in the fear that I will suffer in the school'.

The schools were often not accessible which made it harder for people with disabilities to study and progress. Accessibility was particularly challenging for the participants with physical impairments, with participant 7 mentioning that 'it became a little later than expected to complete my school finals because of my poor access to school in the big city of Chennai and general difficulty in learning process' and participant 12 reflecting that they 'underwent a lot difficulties in getting easy access to the school'. Participant 2, who has a visual impairment, also notes that 'during my college days I was never assigned a volunteer or a guide to physically guide me to specific geographical areas of the college, say like the college chapel or so. I had to do on my own. That was very difficult. I felt excluded when I was left alone by others against my reaching vital places of the college, including the chapel. I was very rudely informed by students that my presence was not liked by many students and that my presence disturbed the whole scenario.'

Bullying by other students was brought up as an issue by participants 2, 8, 10, 11, and 15. Participant 15, for example, mentioned how 'the fellow students looked at me like an extra-terrestrial and bullied and teased me very badly', while participant 2 'was heavily bullied by classmates for bumping into things or for small errors'. Participant 11 had a positive experience of inclusion in primary school but 'when I had to go to a government-run high school, I was hugely shocked to find the fellow students very abusive and bullying. It was very disappointing that when I resorted to the teachers, they were very indifferent towards this attitude of the fellow students.' The low expectations of others about what they could achieve was also mentioned as an issue by participants 1, 11, and 15, with participant 15 mentioning that 'some of the teachers discouraged me by saying I cannot achieve anything by coming to school with great difficulty'.

However, people with disabilities' experience of education is not uniformly negative, and some people who have had negative experiences in one school, have had positive experiences of disability inclusion in another school, which has made a positive difference to their lives (participants 4, 7, 11, 13, 14, and 15). Participant 4 'was happy inside the school thanks to the teachers' care', while participant 15's experience of inclusion in a different school to the one where they were bullied 'has given me a great moral strength and brought out my talents as an achiever'.

The government has made efforts to include people with disabilities through the provision of jobs for people with disabilities. The 'Persons with Disability' Act 1995 reserves 3 per cent of all public jobs for people with disabilities, as well as providing incentives for public and private sector companies, that have at least 5 per cent of their workforce comprising people with disabilities (Shenoy 2011). Participants 1, 5, 7, 10, 12, and 14 have benefited from these incentives, and from the provision of skills training. For example, participant 5 states that 'as a disabled person, I was given a permanent job by the government' and participant 1 'got this job because of the fact that I was a disabled person in the eyes of the government, to be helped'. Participant 14 attended a government-run technical training institute for people with physical disabilities where they were 'given a certificate in electronics and for the first time in life I felt I had some kind of worthiness as a human person'.

However, the inaccessibility of public transport and workspaces, as well as lack of support or even hostility from the public, has also made it more difficult for people with disabilities to find and keep work and livelihoods, as well as get around for other activities (participants 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 12). For example, participant 10, who has a visual impairment, mentions that 'many times, I have fallen down from a moving bus or have been pushed down by the crowd in the city', while participant 12 who has a physical impairment mentions that 'I was shocked when my physical disability was totally ignored by the general public when I commuted to the office every day. They used to push me out of the train that often arrived late to the office'. Participant 9 used to be self-employed and owned a telephone booth but 'could not sustain that self-employment because of my poor accessibility to reach the place in time without the support of the others'. In some cases, their difficulties at work are due to disability discrimination, with participant 6 stating that 'I have been denied due promotions based on my seniority, citing my physical disability'. For participant 12 and participant 14, having access to assistive devices has made a big difference to their independence and inclusion in society. For example, participant 12's acquisition of an adapted motorcycle meant that their 'life saw a dramatic change with regard to my mobility'.

Many of the participants also noted instances of exclusion by religious authorities from their religious community, including lack of reasonable accommodation which made it harder for them to participate in religious activities, as well as negative attitudes, and even abuse, towards disability (participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 14, and 15). For example, participant 2 mentions that 'I was very badly discriminated against in the Church by the pastors and the fellow church members' and was 'not allowed to be a part of Sunday Bible classes that will be organised after the main service, just because I was blind'. Participant 10 (who is also visually impaired) notes that the Imams at their mosque did nothing to help them

participate in daily prayers or weekly worships, which left 'a bitter feeling not only against the structure but against myself as well'. Participant 6, who has a physical disability, provides some examples where reasonable accommodation was not provided: 'During Christmas carols, although everyone wanted to include me in the local visits to the families, they had to count me out because of the logistics issues', while prayer meetings were often held in inaccessible places such as beaches, hillocks around Chennai City, and in high-rise buildings with no lifts. As a result, 'although I know I have been always included morally or spiritually, whenever I could not have had physical access to church activities, I felt I had been let down'.

Participants 4, 14, and 15 all have different types of physical impairments and have similar experiences. Participant 4 has 'always felt that the church buildings and vicinity had never been disabled friendly. I had great difficulties in getting access to places in time'. Participant 14 notes that 'I have always felt that the priests or religious sisters and the other parish members never chose to talk to me or strike a conversation with me whenever I had gone to the church.' Even though people talk to participant 15, 'when many members of the church come and talk to me, they would always talk about my physical disability. They would not [talk] about what I study or what are my ambitions or things of general interest like the politics or sports or cinema or any other interesting issues.'

Participant 3, a pastor with a visual impairment, notes that 'In every church, the fellow priests started discriminating against me based on my disability and they did not allow me to act as a pastor. They were not very happy when I took the pulpit to preach. They all felt that a blind person is unfit to preach.' Their fellow priests also excluded them from the collection of the offertory due to their disability and used foul language against them. In addition, they were driven out of a church they set up by a 'few members citing the reason that I was blind and cannot run the church as it was growing. Nobody supported me and everyone was of the same opinion that a blind person cannot run a church independently.'

Previously inclusive situations can change with new leadership, with a new parish priest trying to remove participant 1's reserved parking space, for example, although their fellow parishioners protested, and they were able to keep it. They still do not know why the priest did this, but it made them feel excluded and they feel 'that the priest in question could have been a little more sensitive towards my disability'. The support provided by religious communities to their members may not take into consideration their disabilities, as has occurred in the cases of participants 8, 10, and 14. For example, during the floods in Chennai, participant 14's parish council distributed a small amount of money and other food items to all the poor members of the parish, but you had to go to the church in person to receive it. Despite explaining that both the participant and his wife were disabled, they

were still expected to come, which was impossible for them due to accessibility issues. In the case of participant 14, the negative attitudes towards disability by a religious authority figure also occurred outside of their participation in religious life and happened when they wanted to enrol their daughter in a religious pre-school, where 'the principal, a nun, refused to meet us after coming to know that we both parents are disabled...she said we are unfit as parents to help a child to become a good student'. This suggests that the nun believed that being a responsible parent and having a disability were mutually exclusive. She did not believe someone could hold both identities, which is denying this participant's personhood. In addition, when selling his wife's candles to the various Catholic churches in the surrounding area, participant 14 has experienced that the priests 'many times refused to meet me; if at all they meet me, they always show the body language of contempt or rejection', and even sometimes 'used abusive and insulting language at me' when they tried to collect late payments from them.

Most of the participants also mentioned their exclusion from social or cultural events, including the social life of their religious community, as a result of their disability and issues with accessibility and people's attitudes towards them (participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 15). For example, participant 14, who caught polio while young, notes that 'for very long after my becoming a disabled [person], I remember to have remained confined to my home except my weekly visits to the Church', when their father carried them to Church for a while before stopping, while participant 2 mentions that 'I was never allowed to participate in the college choir in spite of the fact that I was musically talented'. Participant 9 notes that 'there were a lot of ladies involved with the Mosque administration, in working for the Muslim ladies of the community. I do not remember any of them having ever tried to establish a spiritual or societal relationship with me as a person with disabilities'.

Even when attitudes towards disability are generally positive, people with disabilities may still be excluded, with participant 15 noting that 'although all the parishioners loved me, they never included me for the parish pilgrimages to the nearby pilgrim centres' and while participant 12 was taken on their parish's pilgrimage to Goa, 'I felt very excluded when I was left behind in the church in custody of people's belongings, when everybody else went out for sight-seeing'.

In some cases, previous exclusion and difficulties have resulted in self-exclusion and internalised oppression, with participant 12 mentioning that 'I have excluded myself from the regular picnics and outdoor activities of our parish for the fear that I would become a burden to others' and participant 1 mentioning that 'I wanted to involve myself in many voluntary activities done by other youth, but I could not do so by the same fear that I may become a burden to the fellow youth club members'. Participant 5 also avoids

participating in social events, say for instance at the homes of the members of the church just for the fear of being a burden to them and so on. If I, in particular go to any such events with my wife, the embarrassment is more pronounced that everyone will look at my wife with sympathy that she has to suffer because of her marrying a disabled person.

In addition,

sometimes I have had to overhear the heartless comments of some of the church members that my orthopaedic disability is the cause of our childlessness and my wife is a victim of being married to a disabled person. Those comments were unwarranted and painful.

This lack of inclusion has made it harder for people with disabilities to socialise and make friends and connections in their community, and to feel fully involved and that they can make a positive contribution.

While a number of those interviewed are married, participant 11 also notes that 'nobody is willing to marry me as I am a disabled person', and participant 4 mentions that 'after my marriage, I have experienced unwanted sympathy from my new in-laws shown towards my wife that she had to marry a disabled person'.

However, despite all the barriers and exclusions people with disabilities from minority religious groups face, the participants describe examples of efforts to include them. Individual religious authority figures have made big differences in the lives of participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 14, and 15, as a result of providing moral and practical support, such as advocating for them in educational situations. For example, participant 1 was finally admitted to school when one nun assured the other staff that she would take care of them. This suggests they were admitted due to individually-led special treatment rather than systematic inclusion.

Religious authorities more widely have also included people with disabilities by providing them with reasonable accommodation and opportunities for involvement in religious life, as mentioned by participants 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 15. For example, participant 1 notes that 'I was provided with an exclusive place to sit inside the Church during worships and when I got a motorcycle, a reserved space for parking'.

Participant 6 notes that

one or other members of the church were very particular that they would come and pick me up in their vehicles to reach me to places of worships or venues of personal events of the church members or so. They never failed to come and pick me up. Whenever the church planned for a festival or celebration, the pastor would send one of the members who owned a vehicle to my home to give me a comfort of reaching the church in time.

Participant 8 notes that

the Jama-at [Islamic social assembly or congregation] has organised outstation prayer-related travels and have always taken me along with a big group of members throughout the state. I have to say that they have been very inclusive in this aspect that they provided all comforts during such extensive travels, having been sensitive to my blindness.

The kindness, acceptance, and inclusion of some religious authorities has contributed to people with disabilities' feelings of worth and ability to deal with what life throws at them. For example, participant 11 mentions that

I have been given that worthy feeling that I am too a worthy creature of God and I deserve all the dignity to live as a 'normal' human person. This did not happen overnight. All the worship methods, providing me with leadership opportunities and a place in the choir and even small positive gestures over a period of time gave me such a hope.

During a difficult time, when their family was struggling with poverty, as noted above, participant 3 had a positive experience with a pastor who had a positive attitude towards overcoming disability, and filled them with confidence about what they could achieve in life. Participant 12

was given responsibility to be member of the prayer group called the 'Legion of Mary' in association of which I had to visit many members of the parish and that required quick physical movements. The fact that I was given the opportunity was in fact an act of inclusion. Moreover, I was very delighted for the fact that my disability was overlooked and I was made to feel that I was a 'normal' person.

Participant 15's 'parish priests were very kind to me and whenever I had a chance to meet them, they tried to instil courage in me to face the life with disability'. Their words 'have

sown a sense of self-confidence in me'. Participant 5 mentions their gratitude for 'the overall love and care that is shown by my religious community because of their sensitivity towards my disability. The church leadership had never discriminated against me based on my disability.'

Most of the participants note that the general religious community has also been inclusive of people with disabilities at certain stages, for example by supporting their participation in religious life by ensuring they get to events safely or providing them with moral support (participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13). Participant 7, for example, notes that 'the difficulties in accessibility in general associated with my disability have been compensated by the inclusive attitude of the church and I have felt as equal as a "normal" person – thanks to all the members' support and attitude', while participant 8 mentions that 'the Muslim religious community gives me moral and spiritual security as a blind person'.

Participant 13, who is deaf-blind, remembers that 'the people in our mosque were very sensitive towards my disability. When I lost my hearing they even resorted to reading prayers for me, keeping the Quran in my lap'. They still receive assistance when they attend prayers and the regular Friday Namaz.² Participant 1 remembers how they 'felt I was always included by the religious community – in particular by the youth of my parish. I was made a member of the youth club. I have been included in picnics where I specifically recall incidents when the members carried me on their shoulders to help me get across a tough path.' Participant 12 has been given opportunities to get involved with lay ministry activities and feels that 'the religious community of the local parish unleashed my potential and that had a very positive impact in my life as a disabled person'.

6.3 Exclusion/inclusion as a result of caste

Exclusion in life in general due to their Dalit identity was mentioned by most of the Dalit participants (participants 1, 2, 3, 6, 11, and 12), with participant 4 mentioning that 'caste-based discrimination is everywhere'; participant 6 noting that 'I am heavily discriminated in the office for being a Dalit. My official file connected with my promotion is being delayed purposefully for a reason that I am a Dalit'; and participant 12 hiding their Dalit identity in their parish for fear that they would miss out on the opportunities they've had if others knew they were Dalit. There have also been occasions when participant 2 has been 'denied entry to certain localities inhabited by the so-called upper castes'.

² Ritual prayer session prescribed by Islam for the followers to be performed five times a day.

Some participants suggested that caste-based exclusion had not been a key feature of their experiences in their religious community, even if it may have an impact in their everyday life (participants 1, 5, 6, 11, and 15). For example, participant 5 mentions that 'I don't remember from my childhood or during my school days or during my active membership of the church that I have been discriminated against based on my caste as a Dalit', perhaps because 'an overwhelming majority of my Church members were the Dalits'. Participant 6 also has 'had no issues of Dalit discrimination in my church'. Participant 8 comes from a so-called backward caste but notes that 'I have never faced any discrimination in the mosque environment as a backward caste person. Unlike my father's days, the Urdu speaking members (who consider themselves a higher caste than Tamil speakers) speak to me in Tamil.' Participant 11 mentions that

In the present church, I have never heard of the caste-based discriminations. However, one of the families had asked about my caste background and I said I do not believe in castes as I am a Christian. They were visibly taken aback and embarrassed.

However, some participants mention that caste-based exclusion still exists in their religious community, with participant 4 noting that the arrival of a caste-orientated priest coincided with them being asked to leave the church choir, while their previous music playing had gone unacknowledged during public events. They note that 'the Catholic Church is heavily caste-ridden. Everywhere I had gone I had to carry the burden of being a Dalit Christian. People will quite diplomatically probe my caste background.'

6.4 Intersectional inequalities

Several of the participants identify how different aspects of their identity intersect to increase their exclusion, or in a few cases provide an advantage. While being a Dalit results in discrimination, being a Christian Dalit makes life even more difficult, with several participants noting that they are competing with Hindu Dalits for jobs and services (participants 2, 5, and 6). For example, participant 6, a practising Christian Dalit who is officially a Hindu, notes that 'if the government comes to know about my being a member of a Christian church, I may be taken out of the state benefits that I enjoy now as a Dalit Hindu'. Participant 6's disability identity has also contributed to the discrimination they experience at work. Participant 5 also faces triple discrimination, and notes that 'in my office I have been discriminated against basically based on my disability, then on my being a Christian, and then for being a Dalit'. Participant 1 also notes that they experience 'continuing multiple discrimination with my disability and my being a Dalit, in the Church, society, and in the office'.

Some aspects of identity may be easier to hide, preventing exclusion based on that identity, such as certain impairments, or people's religious identity. As well as participant 6, a Christian Dalit officially recorded as a Hindu, participant 2 notes that

although I am a practising Christian, this fact was not always visible to my immediate society. What was visible to them was the fact that I was a Dalit. So when I used to go into the larger society, there have been instances that I was denied entry to certain localities inhabited by the so-called upper castes on that basis.

However, religious identities cannot always be hidden this way and participant 8, a visually impaired person whose visible identifier as a Muslim, in the form of their cap, which has repeatedly been snatched off them and thrown outside their reach, and their beard, which has been harshly touched, feels 'let down, not only as a blind person but more as a Muslim'.

Discrimination based on certain aspects of a person's identity may be used to hide the true basis for discrimination based on another aspect of a person's identity. For example, participant 4 notes that while they were asked to leave the choir officially as a result of a concern over their wellbeing as a disabled person, this had never been an issue until a caste-orientated priest had taken over as parish priest: 'I was heart-broken as I knew my disability was not the sole reason but it was my being a Dalit that resulted in my being expelled from the choir'. Participant 6's physical disability was also cited as the reason for denying their promotion. However, they feel their Dalit identity has also played a role in the discrimination they experience at work.

Participant 2 feels that their disability was used as an excuse to initially deny them a cooking gas connection, when the underlying reason for the denial was that they were Christian. Participant 11, a Christian, was abused by a professor for being disabled when they applied to study at a Hindu college, but they felt that this abuse would not have happened to 'a disabled Hindu student who applied there'. Sometimes, one aspect of identity also makes people feel it is easier for them to discriminate against someone for another aspect of their identity. For example, participant 3, who was assaulted by someone for being Christian, feels that his visual impairment contributed to the assault, as 'but for my disability he would not have had the courage to assault me'. This suggests they experienced cumulative discrimination and disadvantage due to their intersecting identities.

Gender is another factor which comes into play. For example, participant 9, who was removed from school at an early age, notes that

In our Muslim community, the way girl children are brought up is far different from the way boys are brought up. My parents would have given up the school education not only because of the accessibility but for the gender issues as well. They would have thought that it is enough for a girl child with disabilities.

Participant 2 was discriminated against as a woman and as a person with disabilities and stopped from saying the concluding prayer at Sunday fellowship as 'the pastors and the other members were very particular that the concluding prayer was said by a male priest and a "normal" person. They could not tolerate a blind person and a woman to perform this.'

Another interesting thing to note is that, despite all the exclusion people experience as a result of their disability identity, in several cases, it can be an advantage compared to what life would have been like if they hadn't had a disability. For example, even though their disability contributed to participant 9 not attending school, it meant that they got married much later than other Muslim girls, something they appreciated, mentioning that

in general, the Muslim girls are put into married life as soon as they become a woman and I have seen many bad marriages of my friends and relatives suffering from a very early marriage at the ages of 13 or 14 or 15 when they are not actually physically or mentally ready. In my case my disability made it a normal delay as the prospective grooms were not willing to marry me [Laughs]. When my parents were very unhappy about this, I felt very happy to remain unmarried for a long time. [Laughs].

Participant 8, who acquired a disability in their twenties, also notes that the skills training they were able to access as a person with disabilities in an association for the blind was more of an opportunity than they had before they acquired their impairment. This was because they had had to stop their education due to family poverty, and were only able to work in unskilled jobs before they acquired their disability, and so 'the irony is that when I was a "normal" person, I was unskilled and when I became a blind person, I became skilled'.

7 Conclusion

Despite various legal and human rights frameworks at the national and international level that aim to prevent marginalisation, discrimination based on factors including faith, disability, caste, and gender is still prevalent in India. Some people feel it is necessary to

disguise factors of their identity to avoid discrimination. They may face repercussions if their true identity is exposed.

While some interventions and schemes are in place to overcome marginalisation, such initiatives often only focus on one aspect of identity, rather than considering intersecting factors. Also, the initiatives are seen as tokenistic, lacking the political will to make them work effectively.

Identity characteristics that form the basis for discrimination may be visible or invisible. Discrimination may be explicit or implicit. In some circumstances, certain identity aspects are used as an excuse to discriminate against people on the basis of other parts of their identity. For example, people may be told they are being excluded due to one factor, but in reality, it is due to another factor (or a combination of factors).

Many aspects that make up a person's identity intersect and in the Indian context impact on how someone is included or excluded by society, with religious minority affiliation, caste, disability, status, and gender all having the potential to add layers of discrimination and marginalisation. These various identity aspects, and how individuals and society react to them, impact on how people experience their social existence. For example, opportunities for marriage may be impacted due to disability, caste, religion, gender, and combinations of these.

Discrimination exists both between, as well as within, religious communities, and those belonging to minority religions appear the most disadvantaged. This is particularly the case with regard to employment opportunities, access to services, and in broader contexts, rather than in people's relations with their immediate neighbours.

People with disabilities experience discrimination and exclusion in their schooling, work, and social life, as a result of attitudinal and physical barriers. In addition, some people with disabilities were excluded from practising their religion due to inaccessible facilities and negative attitudes towards them. In some cases, the negative attitudes were the primary reason why the facilities remained inaccessible, while the inaction of certain individuals sustained the marginalisation. Some people with disabilities have become so used to being marginalised that they come to expect it. This in turn can result in self-exclusion, where the person with disabilities exclude themselves from full participation in society due to the prejudices they have experienced and expect to experience again. In some situations, even when there was no overt discrimination due to disability, people who were disabled were still separated and segregated due to the lack of positive action to include them.

Caste-based exclusion also continues to be a major problem in India, impacting on how people experience their lives. People who are born into Dalit families experience particular marginalisation, especially if they are not Hindu.

When people are included in society, regardless of belonging to a religious minority, having a disability, or being a certain caste, the impact on their life can be very positive. Several examples were provided by the case studies of inclusive practice, regardless of religion, disability, or any other factor. This can result in a feeling of acceptance, strengthening community ties. When people are included, their lives become more secure, they make positive social connections, they feel better about themselves, and can contribute in a meaningful way to society.

Such inclusion can be challenging in socioeconomic environments such as in India at the present time, where there is not a strong commitment to protecting religious pluralism, and diversity and difference do not appear to be valued. However, despite the contextual challenges of life under a Hindu nationalist government, religious authorities and others can still provide moral and practical support for minorities, as well as advocating for improved access to services for those who are marginalised. Reasonable accommodation can facilitate the involvement of people with disabilities in religious and social life. This can improve their feelings of worth, as well as allowing them to realise their potential and contribute to society. Inclusive religious communities can result in society in general becoming more inclusive.

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