



RESEARCH PAPER

Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability-Lived Experiences of Dalit Christians in Pakistan

¹Nukhba Sabahat, ²Muhammad Rizwan Safdar and ³Ribka Sabahat

1. Lecturer, Department of Sociology, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, University Institute of Diet and Nutritional Sciences, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: nukhba.sabahat@soc.uol.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study delves into caste-based discrimination against Christians who converted into Dalits to escape exploitation. The study explores the socio-economic and occupational constraints alongside the role of religion in molding caste dynamics among Dalit Christians in Lahore, Pakistan. Caste-based discrimination is a significant yet under-analyzed form of racism globally. Caste is not only about color, education and economic independence but comprises of much deeper social hierarchies. In Pakistan, Dalits conversion to Protestant Christianity is inherently linked with caste, leading to the association of Christianity with untouchables. Due to these conversions, Christianity is generally associated with Dalits. The theory of intersectionality is used to highlight caste, gender bias, religion and their role in generating segregation and discrimination. Data was collected from 25 participants using thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed persistent untouchability and caste stereotyping. These lived experiences demonstrated their exclusion from mainstream society and engagement in degrading occupations. The findings highlight the marginalization of Dalits and give insights to government and NGOs to develop strategies to improve the socio economic conditions of Pakistan.

KEYWORDS Dalits, Discrimination, Untouchability, Christians, Caste

Introduction

The insufficient literature on lived experiences of the minority community and the discrimination they faced led to the present study, which aimed to address such discrimination, untouchability, and the lived experiences of minority people on a larger scale. The study called attention to the intersection of gender, caste, religion and its effects on the Christian community living in a lower position in society. It explored the lived experiences of Dalit Christians and examined the level of untouchability that still existed. It helped identify discrimination based on caste and its impact, highlighting how inequalities had formed and were reconstructed due to inferior identities associated with sanitation work and low caste status. Components like gender, caste, and religion determined an individual's social position and perpetuated inequality across generations (Kabir et al., 2018).

Caste remained a persistent contributor to socioeconomic and human capital disparities and was considered a complex institution. It impacted the social well-being of individuals (Mosse, 2018). In Pakistan, caste consciousness was rooted in norms of purity and pollution (Singha, 2015). In India, social exclusion stemmed from caste, religion, ethnicity (Pal, 2015). Caste identity was a major determinant of life opportunities in India, while in Pakistan, caste-based discrimination was less pronounced (Singha, 2015). However, caste remained largely ignored in Pakistan and was not recognized in the SDGs as a category of inequality (Mosse, 2018).

Christians in Pakistan, mostly converts from untouchable castes like Dalits, Chamris, and Chuhras (Ali, 2015; Muzaffar, et. al., 2017).), continued to face caste-based discrimination even after conversion. Scheduled caste was the term used for lower-caste Hindus and Christians. Despite preaching egalitarianism, practices such as refusing to share utensils persisted. Dalits in Sindh were silenced through civil society narratives that denied their existence, suppressing their access to opportunities (Hussain, 2020). The Chuhras began mass conversion to Protestant Christianity in 1870 to escape caste inferiority (Singha, 2015), yet continued to be treated with contempt and discrimination after partition (Streefland, 1979).

Dalit Christians faced double victimization, being both Christians and Dalits. Their identity was more associated with being Dalit than Christian (Hermit et al., 2016). In Bangladesh, Hindu sweepers were similarly marginalized, forced into caste-based jobs, and denied housing and education (Sultana and Subedi, 2016). In Indian Punjab, SCs had political representation through quotas, but in Pakistani Punjab, SCs lacked political participation or recognition. Despite the presence of caste at village levels, Pakistan officially denied caste-based identity and rights (Javid and Martin, 2020). Dalit Christians suffered disparities in socioeconomic and educational sectors. Their conversion did not guarantee rights or freedom from oppression (Hermit et al., 2016).

In Nepal, despite the legal abolishment of caste discrimination in 1963, untouchability persisted. Dalits (formerly Shudras) were restricted from education, public services, and justice. Anti-caste movements led to their legal recognition (Lamsal, 2012). Despite educational progress, equality remained elusive, and notions of purity and pollution prevailed.

Literature Review

This study explained different socio-economic and political outlook on Christian's community in Pakistan, further highlighting their lived experiences and multiple dimensions of discrimination. Despite different studies, in-depth analysis of Dalit Christian's realities and experiences was scant and limited. Literature identified various issues like hereditary janitorial occupations and socio-economic challenges of Dalit Christians and highlighted by qualitative studies to verify discrimination. Christians having Dalit background faced social exclusion due to their caste associations in Pakistan. They were still linked with sanitary work and untouchability issues, despite conversion, because of the existence of stigma (Patras & Usman, 2019). Untouchability remained a stigma as per Ambedkar as well (Zelliot, 2013). Casteism fostered prejudice and hindered mobility of Dalit Christians because it was deeply rooted in Pakistani society (Safdar et al, 2022). At global level, Dalits continued to face social, educational and occupational discrimination in South Asia (Sultana & Subedi, 2016; Nepali, 2018). The issue of untouchability persisted due to cultural, historical and religious beliefs despite presence of constitutional protections and modern reforms (Alam, 2023). Despite continuous resistance through social activism and conversions, caste based inequality remained a persistent issue that needed structural change and deeper recognition (Thorat & Joshi, 2020).

In Pakistan, the term "Chuhra" denoted caste were denied of the involvement in national policies and legal recognition (Mahmood, 2022) because of Pak-ness being indicator for purity based discrimination (Bilal, 2022). In contrast to India, the term "Dalit" was not used; instead "Chuhra" was considered as a derogatory identifier for Dalit background of Christians. In fact, India acknowledged caste through legal recognition, reforms and activism (Javid & Martin, 2020). Poorer Christians faced discrimination while wealthy ones escaped it and experienced social exclusion as street vendors reserved stale and quite a few days old food for them and given to them in separate dishes (Singha, 2022). Historically Dalits were denied rights including right to education, land, etc (Thorat & Joshi, 2020). Double discrimination was faced Dalit Christians in both religion and caste (Gregory,

2012; Christopher, 2012). Caste discrimination was overlooked among different leaders claiming that caste did not exist despite existence of Article 25 and 36 of Constitution of Pakistan (Shah, 2007). Having low income and literacy (Patras & Usman, 2019), most Christians remained in slums and sanitation jobs (Beall, 2006). Stigma persisted, despite making progress in education and healthcare (Amjad-Ali, 2015). Dalits were not treated well after conversion to Christianity, they were still linked with their caste and were unequally treated among Christians (Louis, 2007). Caste status persisted even after conversion too (Kamran & Purewal, 2015). Activists pushed for inclusion and dignity (Patras & Usman, 2019) but due to inadequate addressing of caste by international legal discourse, Dalits continued to face double marginalization (Christopher, 2018). Dalit women also faced double marginalization based on gender and caste and were restricted to menial labor (Jose & Sultana, 2013). Structured poverty and gendered caste violence hindered their empowerment (Pratto et al, 2006). Women belonging to lower caste were subjected to notions of impurity and discriminations based on class (Zulfiqar, 2019; Karamat, et. al., 2019). Even the utensils they touched were considered as impure and cleaned properly (Borooah, 2017). Promises of equal citizenship were unfulfilled among Dalit Christians (Raina, 2014). Identity of Dalit Christians remained questionable and controversial (Hussain, 2020). While progress had been made through NGOs and international advocacy, systematic caste oppression persisted (Dobe, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The study used the theory of intersectionality to analyze how multiple inequalities shaped discrimination against Dalit Christians. It highlighted how caste, gender, and poverty intersected within minority identity. Coined by Kimberley Crenshaw, intersectionality showed how social categories were interdependent and created unequal outcomes (Bowleg, 2012). Kumar (2010) argued it was a sociological approach examining how systems of power interacted through social categories, resulting in discrimination. The study addressed the challenges faced by Dalit Christians and gave voice to their vulnerabilities through their lived narratives.

Material and Methods

Study design and setting

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Dalit Christians in Pakistan using an interpretive approach grounded in constructivist epistemology. This framework helped uncover subjective meanings tied to caste, gender, religion and context. As phenomenology was a research design that deals with lived experiences of people in their social setting so it was chosen as the research design to examine Dalit Christian's lived experiences and social interactions.

Study Participants

A purposive sampling was chosen as a technique because Dalit Christians were at intersection of caste, religion and gender-based marginalization. Purposive sampling was used to select Dalit Christians residing in Lahore, regardless of gender (See the table 1). Members of the sweeper's community were interviewed at University of the Punjab, Lahore and other neighboring Dalit Christians. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached. Non-Dalit Christians and other minority groups were excluded.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were used in a semi-structured interview guide informed by literature. The guide evolved during fieldwork as questions were added based on responses. Preliminary interviews helped refine the guide. Some interviews were audio-recorded with

consent, while others were manually noted due to sensitivity. Data collected during pilot-testing was not included in the study.

Prior to fieldwork, a plan was devised which included learning Punjabi for smoother communication. Rapport was built through gatekeepers to gain trust and access. Ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality, and a safe environment were strictly followed. Participants were informed about the tentative time, date and duration of the interview. A digital recorder was used to record the interviews. The time of interview varied from 60 to 90 minutes.

Field challenges included access restrictions, permissions from authorities and difficulty in securing uninterrupted interview times. Disengagement from the field was gradual and included follow-ups, with gratitude expressed to participants.

Data analysis included transcription, translation (Urdu and Punjabi to English), and thematic coding. Reflexivity was maintained to ensure accurate interpretation, capturing pauses and conversational flow. All data was kept confidential and interpreted through identified themes and sub-themes.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics (values, percent)

Sex	
Male	17 (68%)
Female	8 (32%)
Age	
16–25 years	3 (12%)
26–35 years	6 (24%)
36–45 years	10 (40%)
46–55 years	4 (16%)
56–65 years	2 (8%)
Monthly Income	
PKR 15,000 to 20,000	7 (28%)
PKR 20,000 to 25,000	7 (28%)
PKR 25,000 to 30,000	9 (36%)
PKR 30,000 to 35000	2 (8%)
Marital Status	
Unmarried	17 (68%)
Un-Married	6 (24%)
Widow	2 (8%)
No. of Children	
No Child	5 (20%)
1-2 Children	5 (20%)
3-4 Children	12 (48%)
5-6 Children	3 (12%)
Partner's Profession	
Working	4 (16%)
Not Working	21 (84%)
Years of working in this Profession	
1 to 10 years	10 (40%)
10 to 20 years	6 (24%)
20 to 30 years	7 (28%)
30 to 40 years	2 (8%)

Data Analysis

This study employed an inductive coding method to analyze interview transcripts and utilized thematic coding to identify significant themes and categories (Nowell et al, 2017). Content analysis was conducted by thoroughly reviewing written notes and transcripts, a well-established method in qualitative research (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Textual analysis was also used to interpret not only text but also relevant non-verbal cues

(Zikmund et al, 2013). The analysis followed systematic steps: familiarization with data, coding, identifying themes, building explanation and theorizing the reasons behind caste-based discrimination and untouchability among Dalit Christians. Key phrases and recurring patterns were extracted to generate themes and sub-themes, further clarified through participant quotes labelled as DC1, DC2, etc. (Nasar et al, 2022).

Results and Discussion

The findings highlight the pressing need for institutional and governmental intervention to combat discrimination and untouchability faced by Dalit Christians. The study also stressed the importance of support from the local Muslim majority in enabling upward mobility. Thematic analysis revealed a deep desire among Dalit Christians for equal treatment, access to opportunities, and societal inclusion. Despite hard work, they face exclusion due to their minority identity and caste stigma (Safdar et al, 2022).

Participants reported avoiding sharing utensils with Muslims to prevent humiliation. Table 1 and table 2 detail participant demographics and themes reflecting their lived experiences. Efforts were made to protect participant confidentiality, and researcher actively engaged with respondents to ensure empathetic, accurate data collection (Safdar et al, 2023).

Inadequate work opportunities

Dalits were historically viewed as inferior and faced caste oppression, leading many to convert to Christianity in hopes of escaping this legacy. In Punjab, a mass conversion movement occurred in 1870 among Chuhra, who were primarily employed in sanitation and sweeping work (Singha, 2015). Despite converting, they continued to be marginalized and offered little opportunity for professional advancement.

Their Dalit identity remained a stigma even within the Christian community, reinforcing exclusion and limiting employment prospects (Singha, 2022). Many Dalit Christians were compelled to continue ancestral professions under societal pressure, believing they had no chance elsewhere. Dalit Christian (DC1) said:

"It is a demerit of circumstances or if there is no work opportunity for us than ultimately we can move to this work as it is our eventual job"

Others tried to resist this pattern but found themselves returning to sanitation due to limited options:

"I lived in the village and worked as a laborer there but I did not like to do that so I simply rebelled against it and came here in the city. I started this job of sweeping as we do not get jobs easily"

Table 2
Thematic categories and sub-categories based on qualitative analysis

Theme	Categories	Sub-categories
Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability: The Lived Experiences of Dalit Christians in Pakistan	1. Inadequate Work Opportunities	1.1. Lack of access to better job 1.2. Ancestral pressure of continuing same occupation 1.3. Association with Chuhra caste as a barrier for better opportunities 1.4. Lack of proper education
	2. Hereditary Occupation as a Barrier	2.1. Consideration of inheritance is significant 2.2. Continuous exploitation a key factor for pursuing hereditary occupation 2.3. Deprivation of basic necessities lead to ancestral occupation

3. Lack of Education as a Roadblock for Development	3.1 Education is a key to development 3.2 Lack of resources cause unemployment 3.3 Exploitation due to lack of education 3.4 More work is taken due to lower caste
4. Untouchability- A Major Concern	4.1 Significance of the concept 'Purity' 4.2 Discrimination and oppression due to caste 4.3 Untouchability as a common phenomenon in society 4.4 Acceptance of discrimination 4.5 Bad thinking leads to destruction 4.6 Acceptance of Dalits for a peaceful society 4.7 Equal citizenship is crucial for eradication of untouchability
5. Inadequate Work of Government for the Betterment of Dalit Christians	5.1. Lack of access to private accommodations 5.2. Separate allocations to reside differently from the wider society 5.3. No hope for betterment due to political instability 5.4. Lack of government focus and more into their own benefits 5.5. No sufficient work done by government 5.6. Power dynamics is a hindrance for development 5.7. Role of every citizen to ensure safe place for Dalit Christians
6. Religious Discrimination	6.1. Use of religion to cause problems for Dalits 6.2. Double discrimination faced by Dalit Christians 6.3. Strong religious belief 6.4. Tolerance of hardships 6.5. Denial of religious identifications 6.6. Resistance towards acceptability of Dalits
7. Caste-Stereotyping Based on Janitorial Work	7.1. Economic factors as determinants of social relations 7.2. Hindrance to upward mobility of Dalit Christians 7.3. Use of derogatory terms 7.4. Stigma attached to the term 'Caste'

Participants revealed the generational impact of these barriers. DC3 said

"I started my job as welding then later got a job cleaning washrooms. I thought of selling bulbs for a better future for my family".

Dalit Christians feel locked into these roles due to lack of education and low self-confidence. Discrimination against them continues through derogatory references to their caste. One DC4 participant shared a traumatic experience:

"A teacher told my daughter Christians are Jahil (Illiterate), foolish, stupid, Kafir (disbeliever) and they have no manner and should be killed. It left her disturbed and she decided to quit and ultimately quit the school".

Hereditary occupation as a barrier

Dalit Christians experience caste discrimination at multiple levels, including education, employment and social acceptance. Despite religious conversion, the caste tag persists, and lack of access to dignified jobs pushes them into hereditary occupations. A participant (DC2) said:

"I started sanitation work because it was given in inheritance but later I started repairing bulbs for my children's future."

Due to social exclusion and low income, they often continue their ancestral jobs. De Haan (2000) and Silver (1994) discusses multidimensional social exclusion- including lack of citizenship, education, housing, and dignified livelihoods- which accurately reflects Dalit Christian experiences.

It was emphasized how upper castes exploits lower castes, even post-conversion. Participants expressed feelings of being trapped: lacking the confidence or opportunities to break free from sanitation and pursue better livelihoods for their families.

Lack of education as a roadblock for development

Education remains the primary pathway out of hereditary occupation. However, due to poverty and social exclusion, Dalit Christians are often deprived of access. One participant (DC10) stated:

"There are many opportunities with education. But circumstances are like that which do not allow us to get an education."

Families struggle between sending children to school and losing an income source. Sultana & Subedi (2015) noted that for sweeper communities, education expenses equate to economic loss. Thus, dropout rates remain high.

Noble et al. (2006) defined deprivation as lack of access to resources, which is evident among Dalit Christians.

A participant (DC5) expressed:

"More work is taken from us, which is a problem and difficulty."

Despite many improvements, many still feel constrained. One interviewee (DC11) noted:

"It does not matter if you are Christian or not- our owner says do work in a certain way so we have to."

Untouchability- A major concern

In the Hindu caste order, Dalits (Shudras) are deemed untouchable and impure (Singha, 2015). Despite converting to Christianity, many Dalit Christians internalize untouchability norms. A participant said:

"I do not eat with them and have separate utensils as they have dirt in their minds."

They also maintain separate utensils at work or in mixed communities to avoid conflict. Another participant (DC8) said:

"We eat separately and in our own utensils to avoid trouble."

Yet Dalit Christians promote positive values and kindness. During interviews, they avoided humility and hate speech. As one participant (DC4) said:

"If a person is himself good, everyone feels good- but nobody considers it and the environment gets affected."

They believed real changes require transformation of society's mindset. Interviewees consistently expressed that respect and equality were key to ending discrimination. One (DC20) noted:

"Those with education who use it for good will not discriminate."

Being treated as equal remained a dream. Dalit Christians wished for complete eradication of untouchability through shared responsibility and better education.

Inadequate work of government for the betterment of Dalit Christians

In Pakistan, Dalit Christians are facing significant barriers in housing and employment.

One interviewee (DC15) expressed disillusionment:

"What will the government do for us? Their fights for power never ends."

They believed that government quotas (currently 5%) should be increased to at least 10% to offer meaningful change.

"If the government can't increase our quota, then there is no purpose."

Government apathy and political instability worsened the lives of Dalit Christians. A participant (DC25) shared:

"Pakistan's circumstances are worse now. Poor is poorer and rich is richer- we are crushed between politicians."

They emphasized the role of individuals in society to uplift and protect minorities. A collective effort is needed to create inclusive, safe spaces for Dalit Christians in Pakistan.

Religious discrimination

Dalit Christians conversions, intended to escape oppression, resulted in double discrimination: both caste and faith-based.

A participant (DC4) said:

"We are born as Christians and die as one... there should be humanity. Love everyone, eat and stay together."

Despite strong religious faith and tolerance, they face denial of their identity. Their desire for acceptance is evident:

"Religion is sacred but people use it for personal benefit."

Caste stereotyping based on janitorial work

One Dalit said:

"In a university department, you won't see Dalit Christians as teachers- only as sweepers."

They are systematically excluded from white-collar jobs, reinforcing the stereotype that they belong to janitorial roles. Their skills and ambitions are ignored, keeping them in subordinate positions.

Access to education was minimal, which limited social mobility. They continued to be called derogatory terms such as Chuhra and Chamaar, which dehumanize them and keep them in a cycle of inferiority. A participant (DC20) observed:

"In office work, they don't discriminate openly but they make you feel it."

Dalit Christians have lived marginalized lives since partition in 1947. Discrimination has slightly lessened, but work has still remained to offer equitable opportunities and societal acceptance to them.

Discussion

The study is significant as it addressed the research questions it was based on. A major theme was the lack of within the Dalit Christians community, which hinders their upward mobility. Due to limited educational opportunities, they are excluded from well-paid and respectable jobs. Discrimination based on their janitorial work pushes them into hereditary occupations, passed down across generations. The findings captured the lived experiences of Dalit Christians and highlighted core issues such as untouchability, caste-based discrimination, and the absence of governmental efforts to mitigate these inequalities.

The data revealed a strong link between lack of work and limited work opportunities. Education is essential for social mobility. While some educated Dalit Christians still face job discrimination, the majority lack access to quality education. The lack of education prevented Dalit Christians from securing a respectable employment. A barrier to education identified in the study is the societal unacceptance that lowers Dalit's confidence, discouraging them from pursuing learning. Inclusion and acceptance could motivate Dalits to seek education and improve their lives (Singha, 2022).

The stigma tied to sanitation jobs continues to marginalize Dalit Christians. Though overt discrimination has declined, indirect exclusion persists making Dalits feel unwanted and isolated. This aligns with Singha (2022), who also associated discrimination with Dalit ancestry and occupational stigma. Hussain (2022) echoed similar findings, noting that Dalits' jobs are socially viewed as impure, causing isolation and derogatory labeling like "Chuhra" and "Chamaar." These jobs, passed down as hereditary roles, perpetuate poverty and educational deprivation, creating a cycle of systematic oppression.

Susairaj (2022) highlighted how caste in India defines one's profession and social worth, legitimizing hierarchical discrimination. Similarly, the present study found that Dalit Christians, deemed untouchable due to their occupation, suffer social exclusion. The inter-generational transmission of menial work reinforces this exclusion and limits social progress.

Dalit Christians face labor market restrictions across South Asia, including Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. As noted by Thorat & Attewell (2007), limited social networks and caste-based discrimination restrict employment options for Dalits. However, the present study also noted positive changes: some Dalits are now seeking alternative occupations, aiming to provide a better life for their children. Social acceptance is slowly increasing, though not widespread.

Educational barriers are rooted in systematic discrimination. Discrimination lowers Dalits' self-esteem, discouraging them from continuing education. This finding aligns with studies in Nepal (Khanal, 2015), which also reported bias and mistreatment in educational institutions against Dalit students.

Caste-based hereditary occupations have evolved through social, economic and religious structures. The interpretation of religion historically legitimized caste divisions, ranking priestly castes, as pure and others as impure. This system, deeply ingrained in South Asian societies, confines Dalits to degrading jobs and denies them dignity or mobility. The present study reaffirms that hereditary occupation remains a key driver of discrimination and marginalization of Dalit Christians.

The study also emphasized the government's role or lack thereof in protecting the rights of Dalit Christians. According to the participants, the government remains indifferent focusing on political power rather than minority welfare. This negligence contributes to their continued exclusion. Singha (2022) similarly argued for stronger state efforts to reduce caste discrimination and religious conflict.

Sadiq (2020) highlighted poor access to clean drinking water and other essential services for Dalits, reinforcing their social exclusion. While untouchability persists, some improvement in interfaith relationships, particularly with Muslims, was noted in this study. Many Dalits reported supportive workplace relationships and mutual respect with Muslim colleagues. Although society has a long way to go, small shifts in attitude offer hope for a more inclusive future.

Conclusion

The present highlights the lived experiences of Dalit Christians and how they were treated in Lahore, Pakistan, in close association with caste and untouchability. Due to their occupations, Dalit Christians faced caste persecution. They were involved in menial jobs like sanitation and sweeping, which led to caste-based discrimination. Occupation selection stemmed from their lack of education due to economic instability. Being economically weak, Dalits lacked access to educational institutions. Furthermore, sanitation and sweeping as hereditary occupations significantly impacted their job choices. Many Dalit Christians chose these professions as they were inherited, showing how hereditary occupations played a vital role in caste persecution and restricted social mobility.

The study found untouchability still existed in Pakistan. Though reduced compared to the past, it remained pertinent. Dalit Christians had accepted and downplayed it as a usual social phenomenon. In interviews, they acknowledged its existence but viewed it as a never-ending issue they had to live with.

Religion was also used to discriminate against Dalit Christians. Previously, the sweeper community faced discrimination for their religion; later, their children faced similar issues simply for being Christians. This discouraged them mentally, causing them to back out from education. The ideology of purity and impurity led Muslims to avoid such jobs, pushing Christians into these roles and subjecting them to derogatory terms like Chuhra, Chamar and Bhangi (Patras, 2019).

Education is key to progress. Unfortunately, due to financial hardships, Dalit Christians often forgone education and adopted ancestral jobs. Though discrimination persisted, it had somewhat lessened. Interviewees shared they worked multiple jobs to provide a better future and escape menial labor.

The government plays a crucial role in tackling discrimination but failed in this regard. Focused on power struggles, it ignored the plights of minorities. Political instability further affected Dalit Christians. Government and citizens alike needs to act to minimize and ultimately eradicate this issue.

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