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From oppression to marginalisation: The illusion of equality in dalit conversion narratives with special reference to Imayam's Beasts of Burden and G. Kalyana Rao's Untouchable Spring

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Abstract
This paper examines the persistent gap between the promise and the reality of religious conversion for Dalit communities in India. Its central argument revolves around what the paper terms "the illusion of equality." Dalits, historically classified as untouchables and subjected to severe caste-based oppression, often leave Hinduism in search of dignity and social freedom. Yet even after conversion, they frequently encounter new and subtler forms of legal, social, and religious marginalisation.
To substantiate this argument, the paper draws on three bodies of evidence. The first is Indian constitutional law: The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, specifically Paragraph 3, strips Scheduled Caste status from Dalit Christians and Muslims, meaning that legal protections disappear at the moment of conversion while caste-based discrimination does not. The Supreme Court reaffirmed this position as recently as March 2026. The second source of evidence is Imayam's Tamil novel Beasts of Burden *(*Koveru Kazhuthaigal, 1994), which portrays Catholic Dalit washermen and women who remain economically bound to their caste occupations long after their conversion. As Imayam observes, "the worst oppression of the caste system is that people are dependent upon it for their living" (156). The third source is G. Kalyana Rao's Telugu novel Untouchable Spring *(*Antarani Vasantam, 2000), which traces seven generations of Mala and Madiga Christian families. These communities converted in the belief that Christianity was fundamentally egalitarian, only to discover, as the novel puts it, that "even within Christianity, caste hierarchy is prevalent" (272–274). The novel ultimately argues that genuine liberation can only come through a sustained, collective struggle against the entire ideology of ascriptive hierarchy.
Taken together, these three threads of evidence suggest that conversion is not a destination but a beginning—a significant but incomplete step in a far longer journey toward equality that Indian society has yet to complete.

Keywords: Dalit, marginalisation, equality, inequality, conversion, survival, cultural identity, caste oppression

Introduction

Caste remains one of the most tenacious and consequential structures shaping Indian society. Its reach extends far beyond questions of social rank, touching economic survival, cultural identity, and the most intimate dimensions of human dignity. Two major literary works engage with this reality in ways that are both historically grounded and deeply personal: Imayam's Beasts of Burden and G. Kalyana Rao's Untouchable Spring. Though they emerge from different linguistic traditions—Tamil and Telugu respectively—these novels share a critical preoccupation: the question of whether religious conversion can genuinely free Dalits from the burden of caste, or it merely relocates that burden within a different institutional framework.
Read together, the two novels construct what might be called an anatomy of caste's resilience. They show how caste sustains itself not only through overt violence and social exclusion, but also through economic dependency, inherited occupational roles, and the quiet reproduction of hierarchy within institutions that claim to stand for equality. In doing so, they expose the seductive but ultimately deceptive promise that a change of religion is the same as a change of social condition.
Beasts of Burden, translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström and published by Niyogi Books in 2019, centres on Arokkyam, a washerwoman whose identity as a vannaatti—a member of the Vannaar caste of washers—is not merely an occupation she has chosen but a condition imposed upon her by generations of social stratification. From the novel's opening pages, where she is introduced simply as "washerwoman (vannaatti) Arokkyam, who serves a Dalit community of agricultural labourers" (1), it is clear that her existence is structured by a framework in which personal choice counts for very little and survival depends on perpetuating the same inherited labour. As the narrative progresses, the depth of this dependency becomes increasingly visible and increasingly tragic, culminating in the observation that "the worst oppression of the caste system is that people are dependent upon it for their living" (330). Caste oppression, Imayam suggests, is not only a matter of humiliation and social exclusion; it is, at its most fundamental, an economic entrapment. People are compelled to sustain the very system that degrades them because to resist it is to risk starvation.
Crucially, the novel also examines the failure of Christianity to dismantle these hierarchies. Though the community has converted and looks to the priest at the Church of Saint Anthony for spiritual guidance— "deferring to the authority of the priest… and seeking his blessing on family and community occasions" (210)—this religious allegiance does not translate into social transformation. The Church reproduces power and hierarchy as effectively as the caste system it was supposed to supplant. Conversion, the novel implies, has changed the idiom of authority but not its substance.

Untouchable Spring, translated by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar and published by Orient BlackSwan in 2010, approaches the same set of questions from a broader historical perspective. Through the interwoven stories of several generations of Dalit families, Rao traces the arc of a community's aspiration for equality and its gradual disillusionment. The hope that drove many Dalits to convert is captured succinctly in the novel's observation that "the only solution was to leave Hinduism behind, which was founded on caste hierarchy, and to convert to Christianity, which they felt was egalitarian in nature" (145). It is a hope grounded in reason: if caste is a feature of Hinduism, then leaving Hinduism ought to mean leaving caste behind. But the novel quickly dismantles this logic, noting that "very soon they realized that even within Christianity, caste hierarchy is prevalent" (148). Caste, it turns out, is not a religious category but a social one, and it travels with the people who carry it.

The novel's response to this discovery is not passive acceptance but a call to action. Anything short of a direct challenge to the ideology of hierarchical ascription, it argues, will prove insufficient: "an all-out fight against the ideology of ascriptive hierarchy is the only way to do away with the problems of Dalits" (300). This is a political rather than a spiritual solution, and it marks the limit of what conversion, understood purely as a change of religious affiliation, can accomplish.

When read in dialogue, the two novels offer a remarkably comprehensive account of caste's mechanisms. Imayam works from the inside out, using Arokkyam's daily life to illuminate the intimate textures of oppression—its weight in the body, its presence in family relationships, its persistence in the face of quiet endurance. Rao works from the outside in, tracing the broad historical currents that have shaped Dalit experience across generations and connecting individual suffering to collective social forces. Together, they challenge any narrative that would reduce caste to a problem already on its way to being solved. They insist, instead, on its adaptability and its continuing grip on Indian social life.

In doing so, Beasts of Burden and Untouchable Spring function not only as works of literature but as acts of social witness. They demand that readers reckon honestly with the distance between constitutional ideals and lived realities, and they make that demand with a specificity and emotional power that no abstract argument can match.

Literature Review

Research on Dalit conversion narratives draws from at least three distinct disciplines—law, sociology, and literary studies—and while each approaches the subject differently, they converge on a common conclusion: religious conversion does not automatically dissolve caste. What it does is reveal, with unusual clarity, the gap between what equality means in principle and what it means in practice. This review situates both Beasts of Burden and Untouchable Spring within that interdisciplinary conversation and identifies the space this paper seeks to fill.

Legal scholarship provides the most structurally precise account of the paradox at the heart of Dalit conversion. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability in unambiguous terms, yet the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 restricts Scheduled Caste status to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists—effectively excluding Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from the reservation and protective legal framework that the Constitution otherwise guarantees. Scholars have described this as a "legal illusion of equality," a situation in which the state formally declares the end of caste-based discrimination while simultaneously enacting legislation that makes caste identity a prerequisite for legal protection. The Supreme Court's recent decision in Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh (2026), which held that a person cannot claim Scheduled Caste status after adopting another religion, only deepened this contradiction. For legal scholars, this ruling is less a resolution of ambiguity than a structural disincentive: it punishes conversion by stripping converts of the very protections designed to compensate for their historically disadvantaged position.

Sociological scholarship complicates the legal picture by showing that the persistence of caste after conversion is not primarily a matter of state policy but of social reality. Gail Omvedt, among others, has argued that caste is best understood not as a religious institution but as an economic and social system that organises land ownership, labour markets, and marriage practices. This means that the act of changing religion, while symbolically significant, leaves the underlying social structure largely intact. G. Aloysius extends this argument by showing how modern institutions—including churches—often replicate caste divisions rather than eroding them. Field studies of Dalit Christian communities in South India have documented a range of practices that attest to this replication: segregated seating in churches, the exclusion of Dalits from positions of religious leadership, and, most strikingly, caste-segregated burial grounds. These examples make viscerally clear that caste can survive, and even flourish, within institutions committed in principle to universal brotherhood.

To describe the position of Dalit converts caught between two social orders, scholars have drawn on the concept of liminality: the state of being in transition, belonging fully to neither the old world nor the new. Dalit converts leave Hinduism in search of equality, but they are not received as full equals in their new religious community. The result is a form of double marginalisation—rejected by the caste system they fled, yet not fully absorbed by the egalitarian community they sought. This liminal condition generates what the literature describes as an identity crisis, a state of uncertainty that is both psychologically destabilising and socially disempowering.

Dalit literary criticism adds the dimension of lived experience to this structural analysis. Scholars such as Arjun Dangle and K. Satyanarayana have argued that Dalit literature functions simultaneously as creative expression and historical documentation, preserving accounts of marginalisation that are systematically absent from official records. Literary analyses of conversion narratives frequently identify a three-stage pattern: an initial period of hope, in which conversion represents the possibility of liberation; a period of disillusionment, in which the persistence of caste becomes undeniable; and a turn toward cultural or political assertion, in which communities begin to articulate the need for resistance on their own terms. Both Untouchable Spring and Beasts of Burden can be read within this framework, though they occupy different positions within it. Rao's novel is explicitly concerned with all three stages, tracing the arc from aspiration to disillusionment to a call for collective struggle. Imayam's

novel focuses more narrowly on the middle stage—the texture and weight of marginalisation as it is lived by one woman and her family.

Despite the richness of these individual disciplinary perspectives, a significant gap remains in the existing scholarship: very little work has attempted to integrate the legal, sociological, and literary dimensions of Dalit conversion into a single analytical framework. Most studies confine themselves to one mode of inquiry, examining legal exclusion, social persistence, or literary representation in relative isolation from one another. This paper takes the integration of those perspectives as its central methodological commitment, bringing them to bear simultaneously on two major novels from different regional and linguistic contexts. In doing so, it argues that the illusion of equality after conversion is not a regional phenomenon, specific to Tamil Nadu or Andhra Pradesh, but a structural feature of Indian society that reproduces itself across contexts and across generations.

Research Objectives

- To examine the socio-economic, cultural, and psychological pressures that lead Dalits to convert to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Sikhism, with particular attention to the role played by the promise of dignity and social equality.
- To analyse the legal status and lived conditions of Dalits following conversion, and to assess whether conversion produces measurable improvements in their rights, opportunities, and social acceptance.
- To explore how Dalit communities, understand and articulate the concepts of equality and marginalisation from within their own experience, as those experiences are rendered in the selected literary texts.
- To investigate whether religious conversion leads to the genuine elimination of caste-based discrimination, or whether caste reconstitutes itself in altered or concealed forms within new religious and social environments.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how caste-based marginalisation persists in Dalit conversion narratives, with particular focus on Beasts of Burden and Untouchable Spring. It draws entirely on secondary sources, allowing for sustained critical engagement with existing literary, legal, and socio-cultural materials.

The primary textual corpus includes the two novels under study alongside relevant Supreme Court and High Court judgments from 2025 to 2026, selected for their bearing on questions of caste, conversion, and reservation. These legal documents are supplemented by peer-reviewed journal articles, establishing the theoretical foundation of the inquiry. Autobiographical texts—most notably Bama's *Karukku*—along with NGO reports and credible journalism, are incorporated to capture the contemporary realities that the literary texts refract.

The analysis proceeds through three complementary methods. Thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns across the primary texts, focusing on the quest for dignity, the experience of continued exclusion, and the negotiation of identity across religious and social boundaries. Critical discourse analysis is applied to legal judgments to illuminate how institutional and juridical frameworks interpret caste in the aftermath of conversion. A comparative approach then juxtaposes literary representation with legal and sociological evidence, foregrounding the gap between the constitutional ideal of equality and the actual conditions under which Dalit communities live. Throughout, the analysis is informed by perspectives drawn from Dalit studies and subaltern theory, which provide the conceptual tools necessary to read the exercise of power and the assertion of marginalised voices.

Research Discussion: Conversion, Continuity and the Subtle Machinery of Marginalisation

Religious conversion, for Dalit communities, has long been understood as something far more than a change of faith. It is an act of social and political defiance, an attempt to sever the connection between birth and destiny, to step outside the caste system by stepping outside the religious framework that is supposed to sustain it. The expectation embedded in this act is one of rupture: a decisive break from stigma and subjugation into a space where dignity and equality are not merely promised but genuinely available.

Yet when one reads Beasts of Burden alongside Untouchable Spring with this expectation in mind, the rupture proves far less decisive than it first appears. What the novels reveal, with considerable force and subtlety, is not transformation but continuity—the same hierarchies, the same dependencies, the same forms of exclusion, relocated into new settings and dressed in new idioms. In place of liberation, these texts offer a more unsettling account: conversion changes the external markers of identity far more readily than it changes the internal logic of the society in which that identity is embedded.

Untouchable Spring: Story, Community and the Dream of Escape

G. Kalyana Rao's Untouchable Spring—originally published in Telugu as *Antarani Vasantam* in 2000—is a novel of unusual scope and ambition. It does not restrict itself to a single protagonist or storyline but unfolds as a collective memory narrative, tracing the lives of several generations of Dalit families, particularly from the Mala and Madiga communities, across the colonial and postcolonial periods. Its narrative technique is deliberately layered, blending past and present, personal experience and communal history, individual memory and political consciousness. The effect is something closer to an epic than to a conventional novel, and this formal choice is itself an argument: Dalit history is too deep and too complex to be contained within a single life.

The novel's engagement with conversion is equally complex. Sivaiah, the son of Yellana, is the first character to convert from the Mala community to Christianity. His conversion is encouraged by Martin, a Christian missionary who is himself of untouchable origin, and it is framed from the beginning in terms of spiritual solidarity rather than mere social calculation. Martin draws a parallel between Sivaiah and Simon of Cyrene—the man compelled to carry Christ's cross—telling him: "It was then that Simon was seen. A villager from Cyrene. They forced Simon to carry the Cross along with Christ. He would carry the Cross. You too have that Simon's name. Sivaiah, your name too is the name of that Simon who carries the Cross" (165). This comparison does real work in the novel: it frames Dalit suffering within a universal Christian narrative of

redemptive pain, and it invites Sivaiah to understand his own oppression as something more than local or contingent.

Sivaiah's conversion is part of a wider social movement. Brahmins and upper-caste members of his village also convert, becoming John Paul Reddys and Immanuel Sastrys and Joshua Choudharys, and large numbers of Malas and Madigas follow, drawn by the promise of social upliftment and the dignity they had been systematically denied. But the promise is not fulfilled, at least not immediately, and the consequences are violent. The early Dalit converts face beatings, imprisonment, and public humiliation. They are pressured to renounce their faith and compelled to worship Krishna. Martin, who openly challenges these atrocities, pays for his resistance with his life: he is beaten to death by upper-caste men, and when Simon carries his blood-stained body back to Valasapadu, he finds a massacre underway, the thatched huts of the community in flames, people being hunted down with spears and crowbars. The scene is described with a rawness that conveys both the scale of the horror and the absolute vulnerability of the converts: "Did not know how many they killed. Did not know how many fled and in what direction. The thatched huts burning. The smoke from flames that touched the sky…" (176).

Gail Omvedt, in Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond, described converted Dalits as "doubly marginalised"—excluded both on grounds of caste and on grounds of their new religion. The violence depicted in Untouchable Spring gives this theoretical formulation a terrible concreteness. Simon, the sole survivor from his immediate family, is forced to abandon his infant son, Reuben, at an orphanage in order to conceal the child's identity and save his life. Even the act of giving a child a name becomes a survival strategy rather than a celebration.

And yet the novel does not conclude in despair. Reuben, raised in the orphanage and eventually appointed as a pastor, becomes a figure of quiet moral authority—gentle, compassionate, and steadfast in his faith despite having witnessed tremendous suffering. In this sense, the novel suggests that the values of Christianity—compassion, solidarity, the dignity of the person—remain meaningful even when the institution of the Church fails to live up to them. Reuben holds those values intact and embodies them, much as Christ is said to have done.

The novel's second-generation convert, Ruth, represents a different kind of possibility. As a nurse, a writer, and a keeper of communal memory, she embodies the gradual, hard-won access to education and social mobility that conversion eventually made available to some Dalit communities. She chronicles Reuben's stories precisely because he, as a first-generation convert, had no access to literacy, and because she understands that a community without a written record of its experience is a community that can be silenced and ignored. In writing, she claims a form of power that her predecessors were denied.

Ambedkar's own conversion to Buddhism in 1956, accompanied by large numbers of Dalits, casts a long shadow over the novel's analysis. Ambedkar argued that "as long as we remain in a religion which teaches man to treat man as a leper, the sense of discrimination on account of caste, which is deeply rooted in our mind, cannot go. For annihilating castes and untouchability from among the untouchables, change of religion is the only antidote" (Ambedkar). He chose Buddhism specifically because, unlike Christianity and Hinduism, it lacked an internal caste structure. Untouchable Spring implicitly endorses a version of this position while complicating it: conversion can open doors and create new possibilities, but it is not, by itself, a sufficient response to a system of oppression that is social and economic before it is religious. The novel's final argument is that conversion is a tool for resistance, not a substitute for it.

Conversion and Continuity: Rethinking the Illusion of Equality in Beasts of Burden

If Untouchable Spring examines the long arc of Dalit conversion across generations, Beasts of Burden works at a much more intimate scale—a single life, a single community, a single generation's experience of quiet, grinding marginalisation. The novel's title is deliberately and carefully chosen. Mules carry burdens without rest, without recognition, without the expectation of relief. This is how Imayam depicts the Vannaar community: not as people who have been oppressed in dramatic or visible ways, but as people whose entire existence has been shaped by the expectation that they will serve, that they will endure, and that they will not complain.

Arokkyam, the novel's emotional centre, is a figure of formidable resilience. She is hardworking, deeply attached to her family, and possessed of a quiet strength that the novel consistently respects. But her strength does not protect her from loss. When her son, Josep, leaves after his marriage, the separation is more than personal: it signals the erosion of the traditional family structures that have sustained the community, and it leaves individuals like Arokkyam increasingly isolated and without the support networks that have historically been their only source of security.

Her daughter Mary's experience intensifies this sense of vulnerability. Mary's seduction by Chadayan, an upper-caste man, places the novel within a well-established pattern in Dalit literature: the sexual exploitation of Dalit women by upper-caste men is not incidental but structural, rooted in the power imbalance that caste creates and enforces. Dalit women bear a double burden, marginalised both by caste and by gender, and the novel registers this compound vulnerability without melodrama or sentimentality.

Arokkyam's efforts to exercise some control over her family's future—most notably her attempt to prevent her son Peter from becoming a priest—reveal the limits of individual agency in the face of structural constraint. She fails, as she fails in her other attempts to hold the family together. These repeated losses are not presented as personal failures but as evidence of how thoroughly external pressures destabilise Dalit families even when those families are not subjected to overt violence.

The novel's treatment of conversion is understated but pointed. The Vannaar community is Catholic, which means conversion has already occurred. It is part of the characters' background, assumed rather than debated. And yet it has changed nothing fundamental about their social position. They still perform the same labour, still occupy the same place in the local hierarchy, still experience the same economic dependency and social exclusion that defined their lives before conversion. They defer to the priest's authority at the Church of Saint Anthony in much the same way that they once deferred to upper-caste Hindu authority—because deference is what their position demands.

This is the illusion of equality in its most insidious form. Christianity promises that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God, and the community has accepted this promise. But the social reality they inhabit is indifferent to theological claims. Their identity as Vannaars—as washers, as Dalits, as members of a community defined by its service to others—remains the operative fact of their existence. The promise of equality hovers above their lives without descending into them.

The "burden" of the title operates simultaneously on several levels. There is the physical burden of labour, relentless and unacknowledged. There is the emotional burden of grief and loneliness that accumulates through loss. There is the social burden of a caste identity that defines and constrains. And there is the historical burden of inherited oppression, carried across generations without relief. These burdens are not separable; they reinforce one another, and together they constitute what Imayam presents as the lived reality of caste—not as an abstraction or a policy problem, but as something felt in the body, in the household, in the rhythms of daily life.

Imayam's prose is essential to this effect. His use of colloquial language and conversational tone keeps the novel close to the ground, resistant to abstraction and to the comforting distance that abstraction allows. Reading Beasts of Burden, one is not permitted to engage with caste as an idea at the expense of engaging with it as an experience. This is perhaps the novel's most important achievement, and the one that most clearly marks it as a work of Dalit literature in the tradition that scholars like Arjun Dangle and K. Satyanarayana have described it; not merely a work about suffering, but a work that insists on the moral significance of the suffering it depicts.

Placed alongside Untouchable Spring, Beasts of Burden reveals how consistently caste reproduces itself across very different social and historical contexts. Where Rao traces the broad structural forces that shape generations of Dalit experience, Imayam shows what those forces feel like from inside a single life. Together, they make a case that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally irrefutable: that the journey from oppression to marginalisation is not progress in any meaningful sense, and that the illusion of equality—the belief that things have already fundamentally changed—is itself a mechanism by which the burden of caste is perpetuated.

Conclusion

A sustained reading of Untouchable Spring and Beasts of Burden points toward a conclusion that is difficult but important: caste does not dissolve under the pressure of time, religious reform, or constitutional declaration. It adapts. It finds new institutions to inhabit, new idioms in which to express itself, new ways of making itself indispensable. The movement from visible oppression to persistent marginalisation that both novels trace is not a story of social progress; it is a story of how a system of inequality reconstitutes itself after each apparent challenge.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from reading these texts together is that caste is sustained above all through economic dependency and cultural conditioning, rather than through religion alone. Conversion alters the symbolic register of identity—it gives people new names, new rituals, new frameworks for understanding their place in the world—but it does not alter the material conditions that make them vulnerable. Dalits who convert carry their caste identities with them into their new religious communities, and those communities, despite their professed commitment to equality, frequently treat converts according to those inherited identities rather than according to their theological principles.

Both novels are also careful to insist that marginalisation is not a fixed state but an evolving one. Earlier forms of caste oppression were direct and legible: violence, forced labour, social exclusion enforced through custom and law. Contemporary marginalisation operates more subtly, through invisibility, through the quiet foreclosure of opportunity, through the normalisation of conditions that ought to provoke outrage. This shift should not be mistaken for improvement. It is, rather, evidence of the system's capacity to make itself harder to challenge—to become, as it were, more efficient in its operation.

At the same time, neither novel lapses into despair or passivity. The cultural memory preserved in Untouchable Spring and the quiet resilience of Arokkyam in Beasts of Burden both testify to the endurance of Dalit humanity and dignity in the face of conditions designed to deny them. These acts of resistance are constrained and incomplete; they do not overturn the system. But they refuse to accept the terms the system imposes, and in that refusal, however limited, lies the seed of something more transformative.

What both novels ultimately argue—and what this paper has sought to demonstrate through the integration of legal, sociological, and literary perspectives—is that the promise of equality through conversion is not false, exactly, but insufficient. It is a promise that requires structural fulfilment: a transformation of social relations, of economic arrangements, of the ideological frameworks through which caste continues to organise Indian society. Until that transformation occurs, the illusion of equality will persist, and the burden that gives Imayam's novel its title will continue to be carried.

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