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Social Exclusion and Inclusive Development: The Case of Dalit Christians in Kerala

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Abstract

Kerala is known for its strong record in human development, especially in literacy, education, health care and social welfare. State-level averages, however, say little about whether every social group has shared in these gains. This paper examines the position of Dalit Christians, Christians whose families come from castes historically treated as untouchable, within Kerala's development experience. The community faces disadvantages linked to caste origin that research shows have outlasted conversion, while its religious identity places it outside Scheduled Caste (SC) status and the affirmative action attached to it.

The study is a critical narrative review of scholarly literature, official data, policy documents and published empirical studies. Evidence is classified by its relevance to the population (Dalit Christians in Kerala, Dalit Christians elsewhere in India, or Dalits and Scheduled Castes more broadly) and appraised for design, scope and currency. Social exclusion is used to identify the material, relational and institutional processes through which disadvantage may be reproduced, and inclusive development, focusing on its social and relational dimensions, is used to evaluate outcomes, opportunities, recognition and voice.

The review finds consistent but uneven descriptive evidence of disparities in landholding, education, occupation, housing and economic security, much of it drawn from a single 2014 survey and a few local studies, together with reports of caste discrimination and thin representation in institutions. The paper argues that the community's disadvantage is concealed twice, by state averages and by the relatively favourable averages of Kerala's Christians, and that the mismatch between the caste basis of disadvantage and the religion-based rules of eligibility is central to understanding it. The links between material, relational and institutional disadvantage are presented as theoretically informed interpretations, not

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demonstrated causal effects. The paper derives prioritised, evidence-linked policy measures from the synthesis and sets out an agenda for representative, disaggregated research.

Keywords: Inclusive development, social exclusion, Dalit Christians, Kerala, caste inequality, institutional recognition

Introduction

Kerala is widely studied because it achieved large gains in education and health while its per capita income remained comparatively low, an outcome Kannan (2022) attributes to favourable historical conditions and sustained public action. The state reports long life expectancy, low infant and maternal mortality and a low birth rate (Kerala State Planning Board, 2026), and it shared the top position among states in the SDG India Index 2023–24 with a composite score of 79 against a national score of 71 (NITI Aayog, 2024). Such averages, however, do not show that gains are evenly shared. Studies report continuing regional differences in social conditions and infrastructure (Jose & Kumar, 2023; Kallingal & Mohammed Firoz, 2023) and lasting shortfalls in land, housing and amenities among Scheduled Caste communities (Rajeev et al., 2025). This paper asks what Kerala's development record looks like from the position of one community whose disadvantage is particularly difficult to see in aggregate data: Dalit Christians.

Three terms need to be kept apart in this discussion. Dalit is a self-chosen political and social identity for communities historically subjected to untouchability. Scheduled Caste is a legal category, defined by presidential orders under Article 341 of the Constitution, which determines eligibility for specific constitutional protections and reservations. Dalit Christians, as the term is used in this paper and in most of the literature reviewed, are Christians whose families belong to castes that were historically treated as untouchable and that would otherwise qualify as Scheduled Castes. In Kerala, many trace their origins to communities such as the Pulaya and Paraya, and they are spread across several denominations. The population is not homogeneous; denomination, locality, gender, class and migration history may all shape individual experience, even though the available evidence rarely allows these differences to be examined.

The legal position is central to the argument, and three questions need to be kept separate: the existing legal rule, the debate about reforming it, and the availability of other forms of support. Paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, as amended in 1956 and 1990, provides that "notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste" (Government of India, 1950, para. 3). Dalit Christians are therefore not recognised as Scheduled Castes and are not eligible for the reservations and protections tied to that status. This rule is the subject of a long-standing legal and political debate. Petitions seeking its extension to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims have been pending before the Supreme Court for many years (Pratap, 2022), and the Union government appointed a commission headed by former Chief Justice K. G. Balakrishnan in October 2022 to examine the question; its report was reported to be ready for submission in June 2026 (Catholic Connect, 2026). The present paper takes the existing legal rule as its starting point and does not assume any particular outcome of that debate. Exclusion from SC status does not mean exclusion from all state support. In Kerala, Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity are classified as a backward class for purposes of state public service reservation (Government of Kerala, 1958), and a state corporation for Christian converts from Scheduled Castes provides loans and scholarships (Kerala State Development Corporation for Christian Converts from Scheduled Castes and the Recommended

Communities [KSDC], n.d.). Whether these provisions are adequate is a separate question that the available evidence does not settle.

Several studies have documented aspects of the community's disadvantage. John (2017) and Zachariah (2016) compare Dalit Christians with other groups using the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2014. Tiji and Babu (2023) survey a single parish, and Mathew et al. (2023) study one family through relational interviews. George (2012) and Zachariah et al. (2026) review the position of Dalit Christians across India and link caste discrimination with institutional exclusion. Taken individually, these studies establish particular disparities or offer national-level conceptual accounts. What they have not done is bring the Kerala evidence together, appraise its strength, or assess it against explicit criteria of inclusive development. Social exclusion research on Dalit Christians tends to describe barriers without asking what they imply for judging Kerala's development record, while inclusive development research on Kerala works with aggregate or religion-level categories that do not separate Dalit Christians. Combining the two frameworks addresses this gap: the first identifies the processes that may reproduce disadvantage, and the second supplies criteria for judging whether the outcomes are equitable. The relationship between material deprivation, caste relations and institutional eligibility in the Kerala context has so far been treated in fragments.

The paper's contribution is to examine whether, on the available evidence, material deprivation, relational caste exclusion and institutional eligibility are better understood as interconnected dimensions of disadvantage than as separate policy problems. It does so by bringing material deprivation, relational caste exclusion and institutional eligibility together as connected dimensions of the marginalisation of Dalit Christians in Kerala. Instead of treating socio-economic disadvantage and policy recognition as separate concerns, it examines how they may reinforce one another and why aggregate development indicators, including religion-level averages, are insufficient for judging inclusion in socially differentiated populations. It also offers an appraisal of the evidence base, separating what is established from what is suggested and what remains unknown. The paper proceeds as follows. Sections 2 to 4 set out the problem, objectives and review method. Section 5 develops the conceptual framework and an analytical model. Section 6 presents and appraises the evidence. Section 7 discusses its implications for inclusive development, Section 8 sets out prioritised policy measures, and Sections 9 to 11 address limitations, future research and conclusions

Statement of the Research Problem

The development experience of Kerala is normally presented as a common development story. The state's high literacy, longevity and extensive public provision have led many observers to regard it as a model of equitable development (Kannan, 2022), and state-level indicators continue to bear this out (Kerala State Planning Board, 2026; NITI Aayog, 2024). These are average indicators. They show how far the state has come, but they don't show which communities are being left behind or why. This study begins with the gap between aggregate achievement and group-level experience.

This gap is made particularly apparent by Dalit Christians. They live in a state with a high level of human development and they belong to a religious community with a relatively good average socio-economic status. But the evidence available shows them to be far below other Christians in housing, ration card status, landholding and education (John, 2017; Zachariah, 2016). Local studies also report caste discrimination and very limited presence in community and political leadership (Mathew et al., 2023; Tiji & Babu, 2023). Their disadvantage is thus doubly concealed, first by the favourable averages of the state, and then by the favourable averages of the Christian community to which they belong.

The problem is institutional, too. SC status is a response to caste-based disadvantage, while rules determining SC status are religious in nature. Dalit Christians continue to suffer from caste-based disadvantage and they do not qualify for the measures for it and have to depend on smaller provisions under backward-class and welfare categories. At the state level, the report of the Justice J. B. Koshy Commission on the condition of Kerala's Christian communities was accepted in principle and ordered to be published in February 2026 (South First, 2026), but the extent of its measures for Dalit Christians is not yet known.

There is a further difficulty with the evidence base. There are few studies on Dalit Christians in Kerala. They are scattered in terms of themes, families and parishes and differ in method and period. The primary state-level comparisons are based on a single dataset, KMS 2014, which is now more than a decade old. Official statistics rarely record caste origin and religion together, so the community remains largely invisible in routine data. This makes it difficult to assess need, to design targeted programs or to assess whether existing support is effective.

Finally, the literature tends to describe disadvantage one dimension at a time, whether it be land, education, employment or discrimination, without asking how the dimensions are related, or judging them against a clear standard of inclusive development. It is unclear, therefore, whether the community's situation is a result of independent shortcomings or an interrelated process of exclusion.

The research problem can thus be framed as: despite Kerala's celebrated human development progress, Dalit Christians continue to experience material, relational and institutional disadvantages that are hidden by aggregate and religion-level data and only partially addressed by public policy, while evidence on these disadvantages remains fragmented and unevenly assessed. The study is guided by one overarching question: How does the existing literature explain the relationship between caste-based disadvantage, religious identity and institutional recognition in shaping the inclusion of Dalit Christians in Kerala's development experience? Two supporting questions follow:

1. What socio-economic and institutional disparities have been documented and what are the limitations of the evidence available?

2. What do these findings imply for measuring inclusive development and designing accountable policy responses?

Since the study is a review, these questions relate to what the literature tells and how it should be interpreted. The study does not estimate prevalence of disadvantage nor test causal effects.3.

Objectives of the Study

The study has three analytical objectives, each corresponding to a distinct task:

To critically synthesise and appraise the available evidence on the socio-economic and institutional position of Dalit Christians in Kerala, distinguishing community-specific findings from contextual evidence (descriptive task; Sections 4 and 6).

To interpret how caste relations, religious identity and institutional eligibility are represented in that evidence as potential processes of social exclusion, and how these processes may be connected (interpretive task; Sections 5, 6 and 7.2).

To evaluate what the documented disparities imply for the social and relational dimensions of inclusive development, and what the evidence cannot establish (evaluative task; Sections 7.1–7.3).

The policy priorities in Section 8 and the research agenda in Section 10 are outcomes of this synthesis rather than separate analytical objectives.

4. Methodology

4.1 Review Design

The study is designed as a critical narrative review. This design was chosen over a systematic or scoping review because the aim is interpretive: to bring a small and heterogeneous body of evidence into dialogue with two conceptual frameworks and to assess what it implies for inclusive development. A narrative review allows conceptual, policy and empirical sources to be read together, but it must be transparent about how sources were found, selected and weighed. The procedures followed are set out below.

4.2 Search Strategy

Literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE Journals and Shodhganga, together with the official websites of the Government of India, the Government of Kerala, the Kerala State Planning Board and the Centre for Development Studies. Searches used combinations of population terms, including “Dalit Christians”, “Christian converts from Scheduled Castes”, “Pulaya Christians” and “Scheduled Caste converts”, with “Kerala” and thematic terms such as “social exclusion”, “caste”, “discrimination”, “land”, “education”, “employment”, “reservation” and “inclusive development”. Searches were conducted between August and October 2026 and covered publications from 1998 to 2026, including both foundational conceptual works and recent empirical and policy literature. Earlier foundational works cited in the included sources, and legal documents governing eligibility for Scheduled Caste status and related affirmative-action provisions, were also reviewed. Reference lists of key studies were checked to identify further sources (backward citation searching).

4.3 Eligibility Criteria

Sources were included if they (a) reported empirical findings on Dalit Christians in Kerala; (b) reported empirical findings on Dalit Christians elsewhere in India or on Dalits and Scheduled Castes in Kerala that provided relevant context; (c) set out foundational or recent conceptual work on social exclusion or inclusive development; or (d) were official legal or policy documents bearing on the eligibility of Dalit Christians for state support. Sources were excluded if they were opinion pieces without data, duplicated findings already reported elsewhere, or did not allow Dalit Christians to be distinguished where that distinction was needed for the claim being made. Four news reports were used to contextualise recent legal and policy developments not yet covered by academic or official sources. One public commentary reporting institutional staffing figures (Paul, 2024) was included as indicative evidence, with its methodological limitations acknowledged.

4.4 Evidence Classification and Appraisal

Each empirical source was assigned to one of four evidence categories: (A) direct evidence on Dalit Christians in Kerala; (B) evidence on Dalit Christians elsewhere in India; (C) evidence on Dalits or Scheduled Castes more broadly; and (D) conceptual or policy literature used to interpret findings. Only category A sources are used to make claims about the condition of Dalit Christians in Kerala; categories B and C provide context and possible explanations. Empirical sources were further appraised for design, sample and coverage, year of data collection, and transparency of methods. Where two sources draw on the same dataset, as John (2017) and Zachariah (2016) both do with KMS 2014, they

are treated as one body of evidence rather than as independent confirmation. Table 1 summarises the empirical sources, their coverage and their limitations.

Table 1. Summary and appraisal of the evidence reviewed

Author and year	Location and population	Design and sample	Main finding relevant to the review	Relevance to Dalit Christians in Kerala	Limitations
John (2017)	Kerala; households by community	Secondary analysis of KMS 2014	Lower landholding, degree attainment and migration, greater reliance on wage labour among Dalit Christians than Syrian Christians	Direct (A)	2014 data; shares dataset with Zachariah (2016); indicators reported in summary form
Zachariah (2016)	Kerala; households by religious denomination	Secondary analysis of KMS 2014	45.9% of Dalit Christian households in poor-quality housing (23.6% of all Christians); 54.1% with red ration cards (23.9%)	Direct (A)	2014 data; same dataset as John (2017); ration cards are a proxy
Tiji and Babu (2023)	Mannanam parish, Kottayam; Dalit Catholic families	Household survey; 100 families	87% without agricultural land; 72% dependent on agriculture; 84% indebted; 51% reported caste discrimination; few leadership roles	Direct (A)	Single parish; not representative; debt amounts not reported
Mathew et al. (2023)	Kerala; one Christian family of Pulaya origin	Relational interviews	Caste-linked disadvantage and barriers to inclusion persisting after conversion	Direct (A), qualitative	One family; cannot indicate prevalence
Meethale Purayil et al. (2023)	Kerala; Dalit Christians	Conceptual and historical analysis	Conversion did not dismantle structures of caste domination	Direct (A), interpretive	No new empirical data
Paul (2024)	Kerala; 40 aided colleges under Christian management	Compilation of staffing data	5 of 1,467 teaching and 13 of 649 non-teaching staff were Dalit Christians	Direct (A), indicative	Not peer-reviewed; identification method not reported
Mannathukkaren (2023)	Kerala; selected households	Ethnography of consumption	Case of a Dalit Christian woman unable to finance a modest house	Direct (A), illustrative	Single case

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Author and year	Location and population	Design and sample	Main finding relevant to the review	Relevance to Dalit Christians in Kerala	Limitations
Mohan (2015, as cited in Thomas, 2024)	Colonial Kerala	Historical study	Opposition from Syrian Christians to Dalit Christian land acquisition	Direct (A), historical	Secondary citation; historical period
George (2012)	India; Dalit Christians	Review of official data and studies	Links low education to agricultural and casual labour, informal work and poverty	Contextual (B)	National scope; not Kerala-specific
Zachariah et al. (2026)	India; Dalit Christians	Conceptual review	Links caste discrimination and institutional exclusion to disadvantage in education, mobility and assets	Contextual (B)	Proposed relationships, not tested
Yadu and Vijayasuryan (2016)	Kerala; Dalits	Analysis of land data and policy	Historical restrictions and limited gains from land reform explain low Dalit landownership	Contextual (C)	Does not separate Dalit Christians
Sreekumar (2023)	Kerala; health policy	Critical discourse analysis	Primary health care policy under-recognises caste-based inequity	Contextual (C)	Policy texts only; no Dalit Christian data

Note. KMS = Kerala Migration Survey. A = Dalit Christians in Kerala; B = Dalit Christians elsewhere in India; C = Dalits or Scheduled Castes more broadly. Details are as reported in the original sources.

4.5 Levels of Claim and Synthesis

The evidence was thematically structured around conversion and caste, land, education, employment, housing, economic security, health policy and participation. Social exclusion guided identification of possible processes, and inclusive development guided evaluation of outcomes and participation. Distinctions are made at three levels to keep the interpretation proportionate to the evidence. Descriptive claims describe what a study found ("the study reported"). Interpretive claims state that a pattern is consistent with a proposed process ("this may indicate". Causal claims, i.e., claims that a process leads to a particular outcome, require designs that can support causal inference. None of the reviewed studies had such a design, therefore the paper does not make causal claims. Where sources differed, for example in period, population or measure used, findings were reported alongside each other with their scope rather than combined into a single estimate and more weight was given to sources with clearer methods and wider coverage. There were no directly contradictory findings reported by category A sources in the reviewed material; the main differences were in coverage and date rather than in the direction of the results. No primary data were gathered.

5. Conceptual Framework: Social Exclusion and Inclusive Development

5.1 Social Exclusion

The term social exclusion was brought into the modern policy debate mainly by René Lenoir, who wrote of groups in France who were beyond the reach of social protection, proving that marginalisation could exist even in a wealthy society (Lenoir, 1974, cited in Sen, 2000). Later writers have taken the idea much further than welfare coverage. Buvinić (2004) stresses material hardship, social deprivation and lack of voice and power .De Haan (1998) discusses the multiple, cumulative deprivations and the institutions and actors that generate them and Kabeer (2000) demonstrates how institutional rules, along with poverty and discrimination, regulate access to resources and opportunities.

Sen (2000) embeds exclusion in his notion of capability deprivation. Exclusion can harm well-being directly by cutting people off from social life, and indirectly by blocking routes to education, work and other opportunities. He makes a distinction between active exclusion (where it is a consequence of deliberate policy or practice) and passive exclusion (where it is not intended), and describes unfavourable inclusion (where people are included, but on unequal terms). Exclusion is dynamic and relational, disadvantages accumulate and a group is included in one sphere but excluded in another (Silver, 2007). Cuesta et al. (2024) differentiate between risk of exclusion, which is based on identity and circumstance, and exclusion as it is seen. Ben Brik and Brown (2025) argue that inclusion and exclusion happen at several levels simultaneously and must be defined in context. This paper thus conceptualises social exclusion as a multi-dimensional process that involves material deprivation, unequal social relations, institutional barriers and limited participation.

5.2 Development of inclusiveness

Inclusive development is about whose well-being improves, who is involved in development and the distribution of benefits. Gupta et al. (2015) put the participation, empowerment and well-being of marginalised people at the heart of development. Gupta and Vegelin (2016) differentiate between social inclusion (fair access to resources and opportunities), ecological inclusion (environmental sustainability), and relational inclusion (power relations and institutional arrangements that create inequality). As Johnstone (2022) argues, universal rights and plural needs are not mutually exclusive, and equal rights may require differential responses that are sensitive to the barriers faced by particular social groups.

Two more ideas are important here. Dörffel and Schuhmann (2022) disentangle development achievement from development equity, acknowledging that better average outcomes do not equate to equitable progress. Dekker and Pouw (2022) and Borda-Rodriguez and Johnson (2020) are concerned with the process: participation, representation, voice and control, assessed in terms of quality and terms rather than mere presence. Thus inclusive development requires attention to outcomes, distribution, recognition and influence on decisions.

5.3 Framework of Analysis

The two frameworks serve different purposes in the analysis. Social exclusion is used to identify mechanisms, the processes through which caste origin, religious identity and institutional rules may restrict access. Inclusive development serves as a benchmark: it sets the standards against which outcomes and modes of participation are assessed. But when combined they reveal something that is not available from either alone. Social exclusion by itself can articulate the barriers faced by Dalit

Christians without questioning if the development model of Kerala is equitable. Inclusive development by itself can reveal that averages hide inequality without explaining why a particular group is disadvantaged. Together, they illustrate how a record of development that is deemed successful at the aggregate level can coexist with, and partially obscure, a related set of exclusions based on caste and institutional eligibility.

The framework is structured as a pathway with four stages: (i) the structural and institutional context, including caste hierarchy, religious identity, historical asset inequalities and eligibility rules; (ii) potential exclusionary processes, including unequal access to land, education, employment, housing, institutional resources and representation; (iii) observed or reported disadvantages, such as lower asset ownership, insecure livelihoods, educational gaps and limited participation; and (iv) an inclusive-development assessment of equity of outcomes, access to opportunity, institutional recognition, and voice and accountability. The relations between stages are relations to be examined, rather than causal effects established by the evidence. The framework is heuristic and does not assume that each disadvantage is the outcome of a single mechanism or that the relationships operate in the same way across all Dalit Christian communities. Table 2 connects each dimension to the evidence reviewed and to the corresponding criterion of inclusive development. It also indicates whether the proposed mechanism is directly supported by evidence or is a theoretically informed interpretation. The analysis is of the social and relational dimensions of inclusive development. Gupta and Vegelin (2016) identify an ecological dimension, but it is not assessed separately as none of the reviewed studies report environmental exposure, environmental resources or climate risk for Dalit Christians; the paper therefore does not claim to offer a comprehensive assessment of each dimension of inclusive development.

Table 2. Analytical framework linking dimensions of exclusion, evidence and inclusive-development criteria

Dimension of exclusion	Possible exclusionary process	Evidence reviewed (category)	Status of the mechanism	Inclusive-development criterion
Material: land and assets	Historical restrictions on land acquisition; limited gains from land reform	John (2017) (A); Tiji and Babu (2023) (A); Mohan (2015, as cited in Thomas, 2024) (A); Yadu and Vijayasuryan (2016) (C)	Disparity documented; historical opposition documented; link to present disparity interpretive	Equity of outcomes; access to productive resources
Material: education	Unequal progression to higher education	John (2017) (A); George (2012) (B)	Disparity documented; mechanism interpretive	Access to opportunity; progression, not only enrolment
Material: employment and livelihood	Concentration in wage labour; limited migration and institutional employment	John (2017) (A); Tiji and Babu (2023) (A); Paul (2024) (A)	Disparity documented (Paul indicative); discriminatory recruitment not established	Quality of opportunity; secure livelihoods

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Dimension of exclusion	Possible exclusionary process	Evidence reviewed (category)	Status of the mechanism	Inclusive-development criterion
Material: housing and economic security	Poor housing; reliance on priority ration cards; household debt	Zachariah (2016) (A); Tiji and Babu (2023) (A); Mannathukkaren (2023) (A)	Disparity documented (proxy measures)	Equity of outcomes; well-being
Relational	Caste distinctions persisting after conversion; discrimination in religious and social settings	Mathew et al. (2023) (A); Meethale Purayil et al. (2023) (A); Tiji and Babu (2023) (A)	Reported experience documented locally; extent unknown	Relational inclusion; recognition and acceptance
Institutional	Religion-based SC eligibility; reliance on backward-class and welfare provisions; weak recognition of caste in universal policy	Government of India (1950) (D); Sreekumar (2023) (C); Zachariah et al. (2026) (B)	Eligibility rule documented; effect on outcomes interpretive	Institutional recognition; distribution of public support
Participation and voice	Limited leadership and representation in church, political and institutional bodies	Tiji and Babu (2023) (A); Paul (2024) (A)	Low representation documented locally; influence not measured	Voice, representation and accountability

Note. Letters refer to the evidence categories defined in Section 4.4. "Documented" = reported directly in at least one source; "interpretive" = consistent with the evidence but not tested.

6. Evidence on Social Exclusion of Dalit Christians in Kerala

The evidence is presented here by theme, with each source categorised and its limitations noted. Material hardship by itself is not a proof of social exclusion. The analysis therefore also concerns the social relations and institutional rules through which hardship may be produced or sustained.

6.1 Conversion, Caste and Continued Exclusion

For communities once branded as untouchable, conversion to Christianity meant the promise of dignity, education and escape from untouchability. In relational interviews with a single Christian family of Pulaya origin, Mathew et al. (2023) describe how caste-linked disadvantages persisted post-conversion and how differences in welfare and reservation provisions influenced the family's opportunities for mobility. Based on a conceptual and historical reading, Meethale Purayil et al. (2023) argue that the educational and cultural transformations that came with conversion did not break down the structures of domination that Dalit Christians faced. These sources are informative about experience and meaning, but none can demonstrate how common such experiences are. Taken together, they suggest that belonging to a religious community does not necessarily entail equal social recognition.

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6.2 Land Ownership and Access to Productive Assets

John (2017) using KMS 2014 data reports average landholding of Syrian Christian households was about four times that of Dalit Christian households. In a survey of 100 Dalit Catholic families in Mannanam parish, Tiji and Babu (2023) found that 87 per cent of them owned no agricultural land. The figure refers to agricultural land only and does not mean that households lacked house plots or all property (Tiji and Babu 2023). Historical research points to barriers to land acquisition: Dalit Christians who sought to buy or possess land faced fierce opposition from dominant-caste Syrian Christians (Mohan, 2015, as cited in Thomas, 2024).

At the level of Dalits in Kerala generally (category C), Yadu and Vijayasuryan (2016) cite historical caste restrictions, limited gains from land reform and barriers in the present land market . Their study does not separately identify Dalit Christians. The evidence combined shows a significant disparity in landholding in 2014 and in one parish in 2023. Based on historical and contextual sources, this disparity is likely due to caste-based restrictions. However, the reviewed studies do not directly test this explanation.

6.3 Inequalities in Education

According to KMS 2014 data, the degree attainment among Dalit Christians is 1.35 per cent and Syrian Christians is 6.36 per cent (John 2017, p. 14, Table 1). The difference is almost five times. The article does not specify the base of these percentages as a population. Thus Kerala's high overall educational standing was accompanied by unequal attainment within its Christian population. More generally, evidence from India (category B) points to the same conclusion. George (2012) links low educational attainment among Dalit Christians with dependence on agricultural and casual labour, informal work and poverty. These findings show gaps in attainment They do not demonstrate that admission practices are discriminatory, nor that the gap was caused by exclusion from SC status. Other historical, economic and geographical factors may also play a part and the existing studies cannot disentangle them.

6.4 Employment and Job Mobility

Dalit Christians are more dependent on agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour than Syrian Christians and have less participation in migration which is one of the main routes to economic advancement in Kerala (John 2017). In the Mannanam survey, 72% of families depended on agriculture and allied activities (Tiji & Babu, 2023).

Paul (2024) reported that Dalit Christians held five out of 1,467 teaching positions in 40 aided colleges under Christian management, and 13 out of 649 non-teaching positions, for which details were available (652 in all). The figures are suggestive and relate only to the colleges included in the study. The article is not peer-reviewed and does not fully explain how community identity was constructed. The low representation is evidence of inequality. Proof of discriminatory recruitment would require evidence on applicant pools, eligibility, selection procedures or experiences of discrimination, none of which is available.

6.5 Housing and Living Conditions

Zachariah (2016) using KMS 2014, points out that 45.9 per cent of Dalit Christian households lived in houses classified as poor (with mud walls, mud floors or thatched roofs) in comparison to 23.6 per cent of all Christian households. For example, Mannathukkaren (2023) describes a Dalit Christian woman who lived in a small, dilapidated rented house and had difficulty raising money to build a

modest home. This is not a community estimate, but an example of how housing and work insecurity can be experienced simultaneously.

6.6 Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Zachariah (2016) finds that in 2014, 54.1 per cent of Dalit Christian households had red (priority) ration cards against 23.9 per cent of all Christian households. Dalit Christians were second lowest among the communities compared on his poverty measure, household durables and housing quality . Ration-card status is a proxy for economic disadvantage, not a direct measure of income or consumption. In Mannanam, 84% of the families surveyed were in debt (Tiji & Babu, 2023). The mere incidence of debt does not show the intensity of hardship and neither debt nor ration-card status is a direct measure of income poverty; amounts, purposes and repayment burdens are not reported. The figures from KMS 2014 and from Mannanam are from different populations at different times and are not comparable as estimates.

6.7 Caste and Health Policy Recognition

Sreekumar (2023) in a critical discourse analysis of the Aardram Mission's primary health care policy in Kerala (category C) found that the broad categories of vulnerability tended to obscure the specific disadvantages of Dalits, despite an explicit commitment to equity. The study does not look at Dalit Christians, and therefore cannot comment on their health outcomes. This is important because it demonstrates the coexistence of universal policy commitments and weak recognition of caste-based disadvantage, a pattern that might also be relevant for communities that are marginalised on the basis of both caste origin and religious identity.

6.8 Institutions' Social Participation and Eligibility

Fifty-one per cent of families surveyed reported experiencing caste-based discrimination from the Syrian Christian community and the government, with smaller proportions reporting it from clergy and others (Tiji and Babu, 2023). Very few community members held positions of leadership in politics or the church. Mathew et al. (2023) similarly discuss caste distinctions that occur in a Christian context. These are the reported experiences from local studies. They establish that discrimination is perceived and described and not its extent across Kerala.

Institutional eligibility should be considered at four separate levels. The first is the legal recognition. Dalit Christians are not Scheduled Castes under the SC Order (Government of India, 1950). The second one is eligibility for certain reservations. They are not entitled to the SC reservations, but in Kerala they have a small share in the state public service recruitment as a backward class (Government of Kerala, 1958). Third eligibility for other schemes like loans and scholarships of KSDC (n.d.). The fourth is the actual availability, access and adequacy of these provisions, about which the literature reviewed provides little evidence. Zachariah et al. (2026), examining the national position (category B), link the denial of SC-specific affirmative action to disadvantages in education, occupational mobility and asset building. These links are hypothesised to explain how disadvantages reinforce one another across generations, not tested effects.

6.9 Summary Evidence

There are consistent reports, supported by category A evidence, of disparities between Dalit Christians and other Christians in relation to land, education, occupation, housing and economic security. There is reported discrimination and little representation. Its coverage, however, is narrow: the state-level comparisons are based on a single survey from 2014, and the more recent evidence is drawn from a

single parish, a single family, and one compilation of institutional data. Results support an interpretation of exclusion as both relational and institutional but are unable to isolate the contribution of caste origin, religious identity or eligibility rules nor estimate present prevalence.

7. Discussion: Implications for Inclusive Development

The discussion is structured around three questions: what patterns of disadvantage are consistently documented; what these patterns suggest about the relationship between material, relational and institutional exclusion; and what the evidence cannot establish.

7.1 What is well documented in terms of patterns of disadvantage?

The evidence from category A sources points in the same direction. Dalit Christians are disadvantaged compared to other Christians in terms of landholding, degree attainment, occupational security and migration (John, 2017) and housing quality and ration-card status (Zachariah, 2016). More recent local evidence also points in the same direction, with low ownership of agricultural land, dependence on agricultural labour and widespread indebtedness in Mannanam (Tiji & Babu, 2023) and thin representation amongst staff in the colleges covered by Paul (2024). Caste discrimination and limited leadership have been reported in the survey and qualitative evidence (Mathew et al., 2023; Tiji & Babu, 2023). This pattern suggests, as per the distinction made by Dörffel and Schuhmann (2022), a gap between development achievement and development equity. Kerala's achievements are real, but the evidence shows that at least in 2014, the relatively favourable position of Christians as a whole masked a significantly worse position for one group within it. This is not to imply that Dalit Christians have not gained from the development of Kerala. The evidence is consistent with a general improvement and a continuing relative disadvantage.

Table 3. Status of claims by inclusive-development criterion

Criterion	Established by the evidence (descriptive)	Suggested by the evidence (interpretive)	Unresolved
Equity of outcomes	Disparities with other Christians in land, education, housing and ration-card status in 2014; low agricultural landownership and high debt in one parish in 2023	Disparities may be persistent and linked to historical caste restrictions on assets	Current statewide extent; trends since 2014; variation by denomination, gender and region
Access to opportunity	Lower degree attainment, greater reliance on wage labour, lower migration in 2014	Asset, education and livelihood disadvantages may reinforce one another	Relative weight of caste, eligibility rules and other factors
Institutional recognition	Exclusion from SC status under the 1950 Order; eligibility for backward-class reservation and some state schemes	Religion-based eligibility may leave caste-based disadvantage only partly addressed	Reach and adequacy of existing provisions; implementation of Koshy Commission measures
Voice and accountability	Reported discrimination and few leadership roles in one parish; low staff representation in surveyed colleges	Participation may occur on unequal terms (unfavourable inclusion)	Influence on decisions in church, local government and institutions

7.2 What do these patterns tell us about the relationship between material, relational and institutional exclusion?

The combination of frameworks adds most in the co-occurrence of these disadvantages. According to social exclusion theory, the pattern is consistent with cumulative disadvantage (Silver, 2007). Limited assets may reduce livelihood options, precarious earnings may limit investment in education and housing, and lower educational attainment may, in turn, restrict access to secure employment. The relational evidence suggests these material processes do not function in a neutral way. Mohan's (2015, cited in Thomas 2024) account of the historical opposition to Dalit Christian land acquisition is an example of how caste power, rather than mere scarcity, shaped access, a relational characteristic of inclusion as described by Gupta and Vegelin (2016). Reported discrimination and few leadership roles in Mannanam, together with low staff representation in the colleges surveyed, suggest that inclusion in church and institutional life may be on unequal terms, in Sen's (2000) sense of unfavourable inclusion.

The institutional dimension links the other two. The eligibility rule dissociates basis of disadvantage (caste) from that of support (religion). Social exclusion locates this rule as a possible instance of institutional exclusion, of the kind that Sen (2000) calls active exclusion because it is the product of deliberate legal design. Then inclusive development goes further, beyond social exclusion, to ask whether the support that is still available by way of backward-class reservation and state schemes is proportionate to the disadvantage documented. Universal policy can also mask caste, as Sreekumar (2023) found for Dalits in health policy, such that a community may be excluded from targeted recognition while its disadvantage is also not captured by universal provision.

The argument that follows is that in the case of Dalit Christians in Kerala, material, relational and institutional exclusions are best understood as interlinked rather than as separate policy problems. There is some evidence for this claim: the three forms of disadvantage are recorded together, and the historical and institutional origins illustrate how caste relations and rules of eligibility have structured access. It doesn't show how strongly each dimension drives the others. The proposition is thus a theory-based interpretation that is suggested for testing, not a verified finding. The theoretical implication is that assessments of inclusive development in socially differentiated settings need to consider eligibility rules and social relations as well as outcomes, because the processes that mask disadvantage (aggregation by religion, religion-based eligibility, universal policy categories) are part of how exclusion works.

7.3 What Cannot Be Established by the Available Evidence?

Three limits are salient. First, the evidence cannot establish the current extent of disadvantage across Kerala, as the state-level comparisons are based on 2014 data and the recent evidence is local. Second, it cannot establish causal relationships: it does not show that exclusion from SC status caused the educational gap, that low staff representation reflects discriminatory recruitment, or the extent to which historical asset inequality explains current livelihoods. Third, it is not able to ascertain if the existing provisions like backward class reservations, KSDC schemes and measures flowing from the Koshy Commission reach Dalit Christians or are adequate to their needs. The lack of data on these points is telling in itself: when caste origin and religion are not recorded together, community-specific inequalities remain invisible, and needs cannot be measured or programs evaluated. Section 10 presents the research agenda based on these gaps.

8. Policy Priorities

The policy priorities below are not proposed independently of the synthesis but are derived from it. Each deals with a barrier identified in Section 6 or an evidence gap identified in Section 7.3. Table 4 presents five priorities, for each of which it outlines the documented barrier, the recommended action, the implementing authority, the evidence status and a monitoring indicator. Evidence-supported measures directly address documented barriers or gaps; measures noted as needing evaluation are reasonable responses that have not been tested for effectiveness in this population.

Table 4. Prioritised policy measures

Priority	Documented barrier	Recommended action	Implementing authority	Evidence status	Monitoring indicator	Feasibility
1. Access to existing assistance and institutional eligibility	Religion-based SC eligibility; unknown reach and adequacy of backward-class reservation and KSDC schemes; Koshy Commission measures not publicly tracked	Review reach, uptake and adequacy of state provisions; simplify access and grievance redressal; publish an action-taken report on Koshy Commission recommendations relevant to Dalit Christians; contribute evidence to the national review of SC eligibility	Government of Kerala (SC/ST/BC Development, Minority Welfare); KSDC; Union government and Parliament for the SC Order	Gap documented; remedies require evaluation	Published eligibility criteria; uptake data; public action-taken statement	State measures immediate; SC Order change national
2. Educational progression and occupational mobility	Lower degree attainment; concentration in wage labour; low representation in surveyed institutions	Need-based scholarships, mentoring and coaching for higher and professional education; transparent recruitment, published criteria and complaint mechanisms in aided and church-managed institutions; placement support	Government of Kerala (Higher Education, Labour and Skills, aided-sector regulation); institutional managements	Disparities documented; interventions require evaluation	Transition and completion rates by community; applications, selection and staff composition where lawfully collected	Immediate

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Priority	Documented barrier	Recommended action	Implementing authority	Evidence status	Monitoring indicator	Feasibility
3. Land, housing and livelihood security	Low agricultural landownership; poor housing; high debt	Distinguish lack of house plots, inadequate housing and lack of productive land in local assessments; link housing support to secure tenure; ensure credit reflects repayment capacity	Local self-government institutions; Government of Kerala (Housing, Revenue); KSDC	Disparities documented; interventions require evaluation	Household housing, tenure, asset and debt indicators	Immediate
4. Institutional accountability and community participation	Reported discrimination; few leadership roles	Involve Dalit Christian organisations, including women and young people, in programme design and review; establish and report on procedures for complaints of caste discrimination in public and religious institutions	Local governments; church bodies; Government of Kerala	Local evidence; interventions require evaluation	Documented complaints and responses; evidence of community influence on decisions	Immediate
5. Disaggregated data and programme evaluation	No regular data recording caste origin with religion; reliance on KMS 2014	Record caste origin with religion in state surveys; conduct periodic community-specific assessments; evaluate existing schemes on outcomes rather than spending	Government of Kerala (Department of Economics and Statistics, Kerala State Planning Board); research institutions	Evidence-supported (gap documented)	Repeated, comparable indicators by community, gender and region	Immediate to medium term

The table distinguishes between two kinds of measure. The definition of Scheduled Castes is under review by the Balakrishnan Commission and it is up to the Union government and Parliament to decide whether to change it under Article 341. All other measures are within the competence of the Government of Kerala, local governments and institutional managements and feasible without legal reform.

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The Koshy Commission is an example of the need to distinguish between recommendations, government decisions and the results of implementation. The report was officially published in February 2026 and accepted in principle by the Government of Kerala (Government of Kerala, 2026). Recommendations included special recruitment to rectify under-representation in government services and a separate body to look into the representation of Latin Catholics and Dalit Christians in government employment (Express News Service, 2026). The criterion for these measures to have improved the opportunities for Dalit Christians is not acceptance and publication. This is why the first priority includes a publicly accessible statement on recommendation-wise actions taken, supported by community-specific outcome data, to help assess their implementation and reach.

9. Study Limitations

This is a conceptual review based on published literature and secondary evidences .It does not generate primary data. It does not estimate causal effects. There are a few limitations. First, the sources were purposively selected and despite the search procedures described, relevant studies especially unpublished theses and Malayalam language sources might have been missed. Second, publication bias is possible: studies that find disadvantage may be more likely than those that do not to be published. Thirdly, the evidence on Dalit Christians in Kerala is thin: the state-level comparisons are based on a single data set in 2014 and the more recent evidence is from a single parish, a single family and a single institutional compilation. The review therefore cannot say how bad disadvantage is across Kerala now, or whether disparities have narrowed. Fourth, the studies differ in period, coverage, method and definitions, limiting direct comparisons. Fifth, some of the sources used for recent policy developments are news reports instead of official documents. Finally, aggregate group differences do not imply that all members of a community are disadvantaged in the same way. These limitations restrict the findings in several ways. The descriptive results are limited to the populations and the years studied and are not generalisable to all Dalit Christians in Kerala today. The interpretive claim of Section 7.2 is not verifiable nor falsifiable with the evidence at hand. The policy priorities are thus articulated as responses to identified gaps and most are flagged for evaluation. The conclusions should be interpreted as a synthesis of documented disparities and plausible exclusionary processes rather than as a representative assessment of Dalit Christians in Kerala.

10. Future Research Directions

This review can only conclude that disparities exist and that exclusionary processes associated with disparities are plausible. There are two priorities. The first is representative surveys which record caste origin, along with religious affiliation, to estimate the current extent of disadvantage and to explore differences by denomination, gender, region and class. The second is an evaluation of existing support programs, including backward-class reservation, KSDC schemes and measures emanating from the Koshy Commission, to show whether they reach Dalit Christians and to what effect. Beyond that, longitudinal or repeated cross-sectional data would tell us if disparities have narrowed since 2014 and how mobility shifts across generations. Using data on applications and selection, studies of recruitment in aided institutions would help to distinguish unequal outcomes from discriminatory practice. Qualitative research on church and local governance participation should clarify the relationship between presence and influence. Such work should be done with Dalit Christian organisations and with the privacy of the participants.

11. Summary

The present paper has tried to explore the position of Dalit Christians in the development experience of Kerala through the twin lenses of social exclusion and inclusive development. Its central insight is that the community's disadvantage is hidden twice, by Kerala's favourable state averages and by the relatively favourable position of Kerala's Christians. The mismatch between the caste basis of disadvantage and the religion-based rules of eligibility is central to understanding it. Social exclusion helps to identify possible links between material deprivation, caste relations and institutional rules; inclusive development provides the criteria for assessing the justice of the outcomes and modes of participation that result.

The evidence supports this argument descriptively, not causally. It consistently reports disparities in land, education, occupation, housing and economic security, along with reported discrimination and thin representation, but it rests on a narrow and partly dated base. The unknown, such as the current degree of disadvantage, the sufficiency of existing provisions and the results of recent policy decisions, is as important for policy as the known. To advance inclusive development for Dalit Christians therefore calls for both better evidence and accountable action: data that make the community visible, transparent review of the provisions available to them, and genuine opportunities for its members to shape the decisions that affect them.

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