

Rethinking Dalit Theology from the Perspective of Dalithos

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Introduction

*I do not ask for the sun and moon from your sky
Your farm, your land, your high houses or your mansions.
I do not ask for Gods or rituals, castes or sects
Or even for your mother, sister, daughters.
I ask for my rights as a man
Each breath from my lungs sets off a violent trembling
In your texts and traditions, your hells and heavens fearing pollution
Your arms leapt together to bring ruin to our dwelling place.
You'll beat me, break me, loot and burn my habitation.
But my friend! How will you tear down my words
planted like a sun in the East?
My rights: contagious caste riots festering city by city, village by village, man by man.
For that's what my rights are – sealed off, outcast, road-blocked, exiled.
I want my rights, give me my rights.
Will you deny this incendiary state of things?
I'll uproot the scriptures like railway tracks. Burn like a city bus your lawless laws
My Friend! My rights are rising like the sun.
Will you deny this sunrise?¹*

The poem by Dalit poet Sharankumar Limbale poignantly, but powerfully, captures the spirit of resistance of the rising Dalit consciousness in India. The Dalit communities previously notoriously known as the untouchables are the victims of the Indian Caste-System - an ambiguous system, the hierarchy of which is grounded on notions of purity and pollution. This paper in particular seeks to critically analyse Dalit theology from the perspective of Dalithos or Dalit ethos taking into consideration a holistic picture of the Dalit life situation as the epistemological premise. This will involve paying attention to Dalit religion, culture, Dalit world views which are reflected through their myths of origin and the embodied experiences of the Dalits. On the basis of the epistemological premise of *Dalithos* this paper seeks to offer a critique of Dalit theology in order to initiate thinking on possibilities for a Christian Dalit Theology, which can focus more pragmatically on Dalit

liberation. However in order to understand the Dalit situation it is essential to have an idea of the Dalit situation and how oppression against the Dalits takes place.

The Ideological Nature of Dalit Discrimination

‘Dalits’ are those communities which fall beyond the four-fold *Varna* (means colour –refers to caste) system. Their position is much inferior to the *Sudras* who are the lowest caste in the fourfold *Varna* system² and they are considered as the *Avarnas* (casteless ones). An oft-quoted passage describes the precarious existence of the Dalits as follows:

More than one-sixth of India’s population, some 160 million people, live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society because of their rank as untouchables or Dalits – literally meaning “broken” people – at the bottom of India’s caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state’s protection. In what has been called “hidden apartheid” entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. National legislations and constitutional protections serve only to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the “pollution line”.³

Having had a brief overview of the Dalit situation, it would be pertinent at this juncture to highlight a few ideologies behind the discrimination of the Dalits and show how Dalits respond to these ideologies.

The ideology of purity and pollution is fundamental in the discrimination of the Dalits. The idea of pure and impure is based on a mythical theory known as the ‘Purusha myth’. According to this the four *Varnas* or castes emanated from particular parts of the body of the primeval being - the Purusha – the Brahmins (Priests) from the head/mouth, the *Kshatriyas* (Rulers/warriors) from the arms/shoulders, the *Vaishyas* (Merchants) from the thighs and the *Sudras* (artisans/servants) from the feet. The Dalits were not even formed from the body of the primeval being. Hence they are not human beings and so are considered to be sub-human and polluting and polluted. The other ideology which needs to be mentioned is the ideology of Karma according to which the present state of the Dalits is considered to be the result of their wrong deeds in the past. Through the religious manipulation of guilt the ideology of karma insidiously enslaves the Dalits, making them incapable of self-emancipation, particularly through the consistent and sustained reinforcement of the notion that they rightly deserve their present inferior and degraded status.

However Dalits have resisted these ideologies in their own way. These modes of resistance are one of the embryonic expressions of *Dalithos* and need to be taken into consideration for the rethinking of Dalit theology. This section is an attempt to highlight the incipient and inchoate ways in which Dalits resist ideologies of captivity. This I contend to be a significant aspect of the Dalit attempts at self-emancipation which need to be taken into consideration in the articulation of Dalit theology. In this paper I particularly propose to utilise Dalit mythography as a representation of Dalit resistance because Dalit mythography holds in dialectic tension the autonomy of Dalit expression as well as their subjectivity in a highly constrained life situation. A tension which is symptomatic of the subalternity of the Dalits!

Dalit Myths and contestation of the Status Quo:

An important aspect of Dalit resistance which emerges consistently in Dalit mythography is the reconfiguration and re-conceptualisation of their socially-ascribed inferior identity. In the Dalit communities myths are employed to creatively and corporately re-imagine the collective identity of the Dalit communities. Through this process Dalits often subversively revalidate dominant world-views of their identity which ascribe an inferior status to them. It is an affirmative and identity-enhancing exercise.

Pauline Kolenda in her study of the untouchable sweepers in North India, brings out how their myths of origin reflects a refusal to accept the doctrine of Karma which maintains that being born as a Dalit is the result of one's actions in the previous birth.⁴ If the Dalits/Untouchable Sweepers were to apply the karmic explanation to their present low status, they would be admitting that they deserved such a status – that they had been wicked in their past rebirths' and so are solely responsible for their birth in an impure caste. However the Dalits refuse to apply the Karma Doctrine to their low-status. Rather they make references to collective myths of origin, which maintain that they were once a high caste and fell due to a terrible accident motivated by the best of intentions.

According to one particular myth, the original Dalit was a Brahmin who came upon a cow caught mired in the mud. Intending to help the cow (a meritorious intent), he pulled the cow by its tail. But the cow died and since he had been in contact with a dead cow, a polluting contact- his older brothers outcast him and he became the first 'untouchable'. We see that this myth functions to protect Dalits from the anxiety of karmic explanation. They do not subscribe to the theory of karma. Moreover it also gives them a positive sense of having been once higher. Remythologisation is a

domain of specific meaning making for the Dalits. Through this they tactfully contest the hegemonic outlook of the dominant castes. What is reflected in Dalit myths of origin is their dissent towards doctrines that relegate them to sub-human status.

The arena of emancipatory meaning making hasn't been confined to Hinduism alone. Maliekal points to how subaltern communities read their subalternity into the biblical text in order to valorise their identity. Ebenezer a village elder from the Madiga Caste (a Dalit Sub-caste) in Andhra Pradesh boasted on the basis of the narrative of Thomas' encounter with the risen Christ that Thomas the apostle was a Madiga because he dared to place his fingers into the raw and wounded flesh of Jesus. Though the bible doesn't say that Thomas actually put his fingers in Jesus' wounds, but was only invited by Jesus to do so, Ebenezer, (himself a Madiga), by creatively prolonging the biblical story and incorporating the story of the Madigas (who are traditionally associated with skinning dead animals and converting their hides into Dalit drums) into the text resourcefully re-reads the text in an etiological manner removing the stigma associated with the Madigas. Moreover, on the basis of Thomas's apostleship the Madigas can make a creative case to subvert the marginalisation and subordination of Madigas within the Christian Church.

Hence Dalit myths need to be viewed as resources of Dalits in particular circumstances and particular times through which the distinctive identity of the Dalits and their problems can be addressed in terms currently meaningful to them and others. This practice reflects the incipient urge of the Dalit communities to resist the identity often ascribed to them. Through re-mythologisation Dalits (as the subjects in the re-configuration of their corporate identity) engage in a process by which the past is made meaningful in terms of the present, and the present is grounded in the past. The hoped for result, is a cultural construction of reality with which to counter the dominant world-view. It is an ideological effort to create a sense of historical reality and to enable Dalits to participate and effect changes in that reality. Dalit myths aim at 'redefining the social situation in such a way as to encourage attempts to change it'.

It is not only in re-mythologisation that the Dalit aspiration for change has been expressed. Change of religious identity is one area through which Dalits have both resisted and moved beyond the caste system. Dalit *Chamars* (another Dalit sub-caste) of Madhya Pradesh have adopted *Satnam Panth*, which is both an alternative caste and a sect which has an egalitarian ideology and has given them an alternative identity free from Hinduism. Various strategies of religious change have been adopted in order to gain a greater degree of dignity, equality and respect. Some have remained within the Hindu religious structures however seeking a greater approval, by changing their life style imitating the higher castes – a process known as Sanskritization. Some have adopted the strategy of resistance which involves finding some ways of preserving some autonomy in the face of dominant

religion. They have through folk tales and the practice of possession found ways in which they can reflect their resentment towards dominant religion like the *Theyyam* dance form in Kerala.

Others have rejected traditional definitions and have chosen new 'egalitarian' religions like Buddhism 1951-1961 and Christianity 1930's. Dr. B R Ambedkar with his slogan, 'Educate, Agitate and Organise', has been a great influence in Dalit liberation. He believed education to be a real form of liberation and urged Dalits to educate themselves. His views have proved to be true to a great extent. What is crucial for us to recognise in all these forms of resistance is that they reflect the Dalit aspiration to move beyond their present state. It reflects their sense of discontentment with the status quo and the articulation of their intentions and aspirations to subvert it, however through a variety of modes and media.

Having gained these insights into Dalit resistance, if we turn our attention to Dalit Christian theology and especially the way in which certain Dalit Christological articulations have focussed excessively on the image of the suffering Christ as an appropriate Christ-image for the Dalits, there seems to be a tacit reinforcement of the very identity of Dalitness which the Dalits seek freedom from. This could be counter productive for Dalit liberation. Explicating the implications of the suffering servant image for the Dalits A. P. Nirmal the pioneer of Dalit Theology says:

But the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He is a servant God- a God who serves. Service to others has always been the privilege of Dalit communities in India. The passage from Manu Dharma Shastra say that the Shudra was created by the self-existent Svayambu to do servile work and that work is innate in him. Let us remember the fact that in dalits we have peoples who are below the shudras...Service is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the sva-dharma (natural act) of our God and since we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege.

Nirmal's thesis that God is a servant God is meant to enhance and affirm the humanity of the Dalits that through their services as scavengers and slaves they have participated in this 'servant-God's-ministries'. God's servant humanity is reflected in the Dalit. This affirmation also has the possibility of enhancing Dalit self understanding as bearing the image of God, but it could also imply passive acceptance of their religiously imposed inferiority and acquiescence to the prevailing status quo. By the glorification of suffering and, re-creation of Jesus in the image of the Dalits (I am not against this, but am concerned about the liberative potential of this image) Dalit theology reinforces, rather than changes the status quo.

My contention is that, Dalits live in a situation of oppression and telling them that Christ is one who suffers with them will imply the danger of making them masochistic in their attitude towards suffering. George Casalis' reflection upon the christological image of Jesus as the 'abject Lord' among persecuted communities of Latin America makes this link with masochistic resignation clear. According to Casalis:

*When the faithful people pray before these (abject-Lord) images or venerate them, when their spirit is seared all through life by a pedagogy of submission and passivity, evidently it is their own destiny that they encounter here – and worship, and accept with masochistic resignation.*⁵

The link between a pathos-based Christology and masochistic resignation is not one which can be ignored or glossed over. Pathos-based Christologies help people to accept their present as one in which God shares but not as one which needs to be challenged and transformed. The rationale for this is simple - why challenge something in which God is passionately involved in? Thus, God is recruited as an ally in suffering. In such instances, it would be fair to argue that Christology merely operates as a palliative, inuring the suffering people to the existing suffering (caused by systematized and structural oppression, institutionalized discrimination and religion-validated hierarchy), when the suffering Jesus is inordinately romanticised. Critical attention needs to be paid to the question whether that is a truly liberating christological image.

One of the serious problems that Dalit leaders have identified as being an impediment for Dalit involvement in transformation as well as the positive realisation of their own inherent dignity and worth was the internalisation of their inferiority and slavish mentality. Appropriating the suffering servant image does not address this issue. A report by the Backward Classes Commission, popularly known as the Mandal commission, highlights the pervasive influence of the caste system in the psychological conditioning of the Dalits to the extreme extent of making them accept their socially inscribed inferiority and subservience as being ontological. According to a the report, 'The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes into accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as part of the natural order of things'.⁶ Even Ambedkar's own concern for the Dalits was for the 'need to get rid of the slavish mentality drilled into them by the caste system. He points to their need to purify themselves from the 'inferiority complex that had gripped their minds and hearts for ages and weakened their spirit and dried up their motivation'.⁷

The affirmation of the servant nature of God suffers the risky possibility of reinforcing the deeply inculcated sense of inferiority of the Dalits, rather than help the Dalits to transcend this Dalitness. Hence, one can argue that Christian Dalit theology is in continuum with the Vedic ideals which sought the strategic perpetuation of the slavish-mentality of the Dalits. Through the suffering servant image Dalit theology amplifies and romanticises Dalit servanthood, which is recognised as both a product and continuing source of Dalit oppression. Also such Christology offers little space for Dalits to question injustice and discrimination.

We also need to question whether the Dalits themselves need such a god image. Arguing how even their choice of God reflects a strong sense of pragmatism, Arul Raja says that 'Dalits respond to only that brand of the divine which seeks to transform their vulnerabilities into empowerment'.⁸ If we analyse Dalit Christology from this perspective one can see a tension between 'emic' and 'etic' theoretical conceptualizations of Dalit Christology. The clash between the 'emic' and the 'etic' conceptualisations (initially used in the theory of linguistics but now extended to social and cultural theory) merely denotes the tensions and differences between perspectives and conceptualizations which emerge 'inside' and 'outside' a community. This clash of perspectives is helpful in analyzing Dalit Christology. We can easily demonstrate that Dalit Christology has not taken serious considerations of the Dalits' own 'concept' and 'image' of God or worked its Christology in critical interaction with 'inside' conceptualizations. Rather it has imposed models from above which may not find acceptance among the Dalits. To rectify this we need to pay attention to 'emic' conceptualisations, which can be found in their myths of origins.

Critique of Deuteronomic Creed as a Relevant Biblical Paradigm

The other biblical paradigm that Dalit theology has adopted is the biblical paradigm of the Deuteronomic creed, which is a creedal reaffirmation of the dominant Exodus paradigm which has been expounded by liberation theologians. This paradigm also needs to be critically scrutinised from the perspective of *Dalithos* in order to curtail the counter productivity of Dalit theology for Dalit liberation. The choice of the Deuteronomic creed, though understandable as affirming their historical consciousness, should be subject to critical scrutiny. One has to read this paradigm in the light of the Dalit consciousness that they are the victims of undeserved violence and victimisation. The Dalits consider themselves as the Adi-people, original inhabitants of the land. Therefore when the exodus paradigm of liberation is appropriated for the Dalit situation, their experience resonates more appropriately with the experience of the oppression and displacement of the Canaanites than with the Israelites.

I am aware that Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez uses the Exodus paradigm to emphasise that the Exodus event was the story of God ‘who leads Israel from alienation to liberation’. The event as such was ‘the breaking away from a situation of despoilation and misery’.⁹ Black liberation theologian James Cone utilises the paradigm to emphasise that the God of the Old Testament is an active God who participates in the human story of liberation. He interprets the event as a unanimous testimony of Yahweh’s commitment to justice for the poor and weak.¹⁰ However there is a need to recognise that the text is not value free and the ‘narrative is disdainful of the rights of indigenous people’.¹¹

Expressing his distrust over using the Exodus paradigm Robert Allen Warrior highlights the importance of considering the Canaanites as an important hermeneutical category when using the paradigm for liberation theology. From his situatedness as a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians, Warrior discerns parallels between the Native Americans and the Canaanites. He points out that the ‘obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites’. They were the ones who already lived in the Promised Land. Warrior points out that ‘it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation. Especially ignored are those parts of the story that describe Yahweh’s command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population’.¹² In solidarity with other tribal people around the world, Warrior reads the Exodus story with Canaanite eyes. Understanding the fact that the Deuteronomic creed is inextricably linked to the Exodus paradigm in the sense that it is a later recapitulative passage - reading the passage from a Dalit ethological perspective prompts the question as to who are the real poor of the Exodus paradigm? What happens to the Canaanites and rest of the inhabitants of the Promised Land who are exterminated in the process of the Israelite occupation of the land flowing with milk and honey?

When Dalit theology, by adopting the Deuteronomic creed as its paradigm, draws analogies with this memory and affirms it as the story of their roots (Dalit) it is highly incompatible and inappropriate with Dalit reality of landlessness and continued violence. It is in fact the reverse of the Dalit historical condition, because the conventional understanding of Dalit history is that of a subjugated history of the indigenous people conquered by foreign Aryan invaders. Therefore, before using the Deuteronomic creed for Dalit theology the pertinence of the Deuteronomic paradigm to those facing the reality of displacement and subjugation in their native lands should be brought into focus. Thus, we have to acknowledge that the suitability of expounding the Deuteronomic paradigm or any Exodus related paradigm as foundational for Dalit theological articulation has limited value and force.

Moreover, the idea of God which emerges from the Deuteronomic paradigm is highly estranged in its conformity to the images of Dalit gods and goddesses. The image of God of the Deuteronomic paradigm: is more in continuity with the image of the Hindu Brahmanic weapon wielder gods, who, according to Illaiah were 'propagators of violent wars', 'basically war heroes and mostly from wars conducted against Dalit bahujans'.¹³ Hindu Brahmanical gods like Indra, Brahma and Vishnu and the Avatara (incarnation) gods like Vamana, Rama and Krishna are known for their violent and treacherous wars against the indigenous Dalit (Adi-Dalit bahujans). The Aryan god Brahma is identified as the leader of the Aryan invaders and 'killer of Indus people' who was made not only to be a cult figure but was projected and propagated as god himself.¹⁴ Vishnu wields the 'Vishnu Chakram' a vicious circular weapon; Shiva wields a trishula (trident). The lack of respect for life and use of violent means to establish control are identified as constituting the very epistemology of Brahmanism by Illaiah.¹⁵

The other problem with this biblical paradigm is its oppositional and polemic dynamic where the oppressed and the oppressors are portrayed in antagonistic terms. As we have already seen the pattern of liberation in this model is one of 'replication of subjugation'. Upon their liberation, the 'once-oppressed' now subjugate and conquer the 'Promised Land' and displace the locals. As a model of 'capture' and 'recapture', this model can be translated as a cyclic process of unending conflict in a situation like the Indian caste-context. This is unhelpful for the issue of caste. There is need for a more integrative model where both the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressors' are critically challenged to work in an integrative and dialogical manner for a non-exclusive and non-dehumanising society.

Conclusion: Quovadis Dalit Theology?

In the light of our analysis of two of the dominant theological paradigms of Dalit theology from the perspective of *Dalithos* we can argue that Dalit theology could improve its potential for praxis if it takes into consideration, *Dalithos* as an important interpretive category. In this paper we have predominantly focussed on *Dalithos* in relation to Dalit mythography. But the parameters of *Dalithos* can be derived from other expressions of Dalit life like Dalit festivals, Dalit folklore, their communitarian modes of living and expressions of solidarity. *Dalithos* can nowadays also be gleaned from the cover pages of various Dalit magazines as well as the various tracts which express the resistive and the constructive elements of *Dalithos*. Using *Dalithos* can enable Dalit theologians not only to pay attention to the experiential-expressive dimension of Dalit religion and culture, which helps to derive an *emic* (intrinsic) framework for Dalit theology that takes into consideration the 'insider/native' experiences, world-views and conceptualisations of God and liberation. Rather it can also help avoid the pitfalls of the present *etic* (extrinsic) conceptualisations of Dalit theology.

¹ In Arjun Dangle (ed.), *Poisoned Bread: Translations From Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Ltd, 1992)

² The *Vedas* divided the Hindu society in the post-vedic time into four categories or *varnas*. These *varnas* were associated with privileges as well as well-defined and particular social occupations. The four *varnas* were *Brahmin* (priest and teacher), *Kshatriya* (ruler and warrior), *Vaishya* (trader) and *Sudra* (servant). A popular term, that was used to denote the first three *varnas* were '*Dvijias*' or the 'twice-born'. The people belonging to the '*Dvijias*' were entitled to wearing the sacred thread and studying the *Vedas*, while the *Sudras* (the people of the fourth *varna*) did not possess any such rights. They were considered as slaves and the only right they had was to serve the three other 'higher' *varnas*. See Rebati Ballav Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-human Society*, (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994), pp. 6 ff.

³ *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables"*, (Human Rights Watch Report), (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp. 1,2.

⁴ Pauline Kolenda, 'Religious Anxiety and the Hindu Fate', in E.B. Harper (ed.), *Religion in South Asia*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press)

⁵ George Casalis, 'Jesus: Neither Abject Lord nor Heavenly Monarch', in J. M. Bonino (ed.), *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, (trans. by R. R. Barr), (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977), (pp. 72-76), p. 73.

⁶ Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Govt of India, First part, Vol. I & II, 1980, p. 1. Cited in James Massey, 'Historical Roots', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), (pp. 159-167) p. 45.

⁷ Anthony Raj Thumma, *Dalit Liberation Theology: Ambedkarian Perspective*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 83.

⁸ A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Living Streams Across the Parched Land: Some Tenets of Dalit Spirituality', in *CTC Bulletin*, 2004, (pp. 1-8), p. 3. <http://daga.dhs.org/cca/resources/ctc/ctc01-04/ctc0104d.htm>.

⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, (London: SCM Press, 1988), (rev. edn.), p. 89.

¹⁰ James Cone, 'Biblical Revelation and Social Existence', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 28, 1974, (pp. 422-440), p. 429.

¹¹ Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 281.

¹² Robert Allen Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians', in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), (pp. 287-295), p. 289.

¹³ Kancha Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, (Calcutta: Samya, 2005), (2nd edn.), pp. 100-101.

¹⁴ Kancha Illaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict in History', in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, Vol. 2, (New Delhi, London: Sage Publications and Thousand Oaks, London, 2001), (pp. 108-128), p. 114.

¹⁵ See Illaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism', pp. 114 -121.