

## CASTE WAR AND CHRISTIAN PEACEMAKING IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

The evil of caste discrimination, often manifested in violent forms, has wreaked havoc on the Indian society in warlike proportions. The paper explores whether the notion of ‘caste war’ is far-fetched and demonstrates how the burgeoning caste rivalry and mushrooming atrocities against Dalits represent an increasingly divided India where caste-based internal enmity has far worsened of late. Offering ‘war’ terminology as the right prism and needed corrective to epitomize the warlike hostility that caste has instantiated in the Indian society, the paper advances Christian peacemaking as the urgent intervention. To this end, the paper is divided into two unequal parts, with the first part engaging the notion of caste as war and the second illustrating how Christian peacemaking would pursue a triple fold framework that unceasingly promotes the Christian social justice agenda, Dalit agency, and annihilation of caste within the Church and society.

**Keywords:** Annihilation of Caste; Caste War; Dalit Agency; Peacemaking; Social Justice

One of the insightful and widely-circulated quotes from the Bollywood movie *Article 15* was actually an ominous dialogue referring to the stark reality of the caste system on ground. Taking a grim view of the evil of caste, the hero says, “This is war; but

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everyone who lives here thinks it's happening somewhere else."<sup>1</sup> The titular theme of the movie is an actual reference to Article 15 of the Indian constitution spearheaded by the Dalit leader and revolutionary B.R. Ambedkar which sets out that 'the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of race, religion, caste, sex, and place of birth.' However, the film struggles with the conflicting reality of caste killings in the backdrop. Based on Uttar Pradesh's 2014 Badaun gang-rape and murder, the central plot of the movie revolves around two lower caste teenage girls who went missing on 26 May 2014. A couple of days later, the villagers found the girls hanging from the branches of a mango tree, the scene painfully evoking the poignant wording of *Strange Fruit*.<sup>2</sup>

Is the notion of caste as war far-fetched? I think not. Findings on caste rivalry and mushrooming atrocities against Dalits throw light on an increasingly divided India where caste-based internal enmity has far worsened in modern times. Because a rendering other than 'caste war' would either largely minimize or belie its pernicious import, I hold that 'war' terminology lends credence to locate the social evil of caste with its insidious subtlety and ghastly grasp on the Indian society. Therefore, I am led to believe that the attempt to portray caste as war is not disproportionate but a needed corrective. My intent here is to say that the warlike hostility that caste has instantiated on a regular basis in the Indian society has to be urgently intervened by Christian peacemaking. To this end, I divide my paper into two unequal parts, with the first part engaging the notion of caste as war and the second concentrating on how Christian peacemaking would pursue a triple fold framework in the Indian context: priority to social justice and its furtherance by the Church, empowering the Dalit agency true to the agenda of social justice, and annihilation of caste within the structures of the Church as a radical beginning.

### **The Notion of Caste as A War**

India fought its last war with China in 1962 which concluded with the Indian defeat in 1965. The Chinese aggression then cost the lives

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<sup>1</sup>Skye Arundhati Thomas, "How a Bollywood Film Declared War on India's Brutal Caste System—And What It Got Terribly Wrong," *Frieze*, July 30, 2019. Available Online: [frieze.com](http://frieze.com).

<sup>2</sup>"Strange Fruit" is a poem by Abel Meeropol (1903-1986) that lyricized the brutality of lynching via the rich description of a lifeless body hanging from a flowering tree. Badaun gang-rape of Dalit girls reminds us that caste discrimination is not yet a thing of the past. Available Online: [loc.gov](http://loc.gov).

of 4000 Indian soldiers.<sup>3</sup> The periodical armed conflicts with Pakistan demonstrate that the tussle with the 'persistent offender' continues with no end in sight. The South Asia Terrorism Portal has reported a total number of deaths of civilians and security forces as 49142 and 22642 respectively between 2000-2021 (till May 04, 2021)<sup>4</sup> due to violent attacks from and armed conflicts with Pakistan. Kargil War (in which 500 Indian soldiers died),<sup>5</sup> cross-border terrorism, and Pakistan-incited terrorist attacks within India have collapsed Indian stability besides bringing havoc upon the country's infrastructural establishments and properties. It is certainly bad for India to constantly live through the fear of aggression from two of its most prominent 'enemies' in the region. Horrific and devastating as the data of hostility from its neighbours appears, yet what is more ravaging is not what happens across Indian borders as what happens within them. In other words, we need to take our eyes off from overt form of enmity to focus on covert forms (and overt forms too!) that endanger fraternity among citizens who are supposed to live as brothers and sisters.

National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights reports that a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes; 6 Dalits are kidnapped or abducted every week; 3 Dalit women are raped every day; 13 Dalits are murdered every week; 27 atrocities are committed against Dalits every day.<sup>6</sup> *Religion Unplugged* claims that

Crimes against the marginalized community have increased by more than 7% in the last year, according to a data recently released by India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Nearly 46000 crimes against Dalits were recorded nationwide, with the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh recording the highest number of cases at 11,829, or 25% of the cases.<sup>7</sup>

The appalling figures of atrocities against Dalits are certainly not suggestive of a civilized society that wants to live in peace. Invisible in governance and bureaucracy but visible in actions and

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<sup>3</sup>Amrita Nayak Dutta, "On This Day in 1962, India Learnt A Harsh Lesson From China," *The Print*, October 20, 2018. Available Online: [theprint.in](http://theprint.in).

<sup>4</sup>"Data Sheet - South Asia," South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). Available Online: [satp.org](http://satp.org).

<sup>5</sup>Ilyas M Khan, "Kargil: The Forgotten Victims of the World's Highest War," *BBC News*, July 26, 2019. Available Online: [bbc.com](http://bbc.com).

<sup>6</sup>"N," National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). Available Online: [ncdhr.org.in](http://ncdhr.org.in).

<sup>7</sup>Hanan Zaffar and Danish Pandit, "Violence Against India's Marginalized Dalits Rising, New Data Shows," *Religion Unplugged*, October 26, 2020. Available Online: [religionunplugged.com](http://religionunplugged.com).

consequences, caste comes with a Janus-faced scheming. Its deceptive ideological impositions often camouflaged, what one is carried away by is often the barbaric atrocities that are perceivable. Comparatively, its ideological side is worse than the external manifestations so much so that it can even elude the perusal of an alert mind. Thanks to its notorious invisibility, more often than not, its warlike devastation is either undermined or deliberately overlooked though the effects of this war is heavy and grisly on Dalits as victims. Because what is invisible is often truer than what is laid bare, political jingoisms and sparkling claims about an India that is not become perfect hides for it to sustain and thrive.

One of the manipulative strategies of dominant castes was to stifle the horror of caste in order that the contemporary complexities of this dreadful practice remain elusive unless we pay close attention to its taken-for-granted side. Commenting on the asymmetrical reality of the hypervisibility of the lower castes and the invisibility of the upper castes, professor and activist Satish Deshpande remarks that, "Caste can be understood only if we pay as much attention to it when it is invisible or infra-visible as we do when it is hyper-visible or ultra-visible."<sup>8</sup> This sociological asymmetry exposes clearly the discrepancy between the abolition of caste and its intensification. Journalist and writer Aatish Taseer highlights this modern paradox: "The spread of modernity in India has certainly undermined caste, but it has also made the need to assert it more vehement. And the unfolding story in India is not one about the disappearance of caste, but rather of its resilience."<sup>9</sup>

Seen thus, caste seems to have a continued relevance for exercising domination. In the modern India, caste owes its success to its adaptive framework. Cultural anthropologist Deepa Reddy highlights two important and intimately related features of caste in contemporary India: "Its *fluidity*, in contrast to its presumed doctrinally-given rigidity, and *therefore* its capacity to strategically deploy established, essentialized notions of itself in a movement that seeks less to undermine caste than to restore dignity to re-claimed caste identities."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, to describe the subtle workings of caste, Amrita Ghosh, a researcher of cultural and postcolonial studies and

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<sup>8</sup> Satish Deshpande, "Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the 'General Category,'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, 15 (April 2013) 32-39 (33).

<sup>9</sup> Aatish Taseer, "India's Eternal Inequality," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2016. Available Online: [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com).

<sup>10</sup> Deepa S. Reddy, "The Ethnicity of Caste," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, 3 (2005) 543-584 (547).

Arun Kumar, a UK-based historian employ the concept of *habitus* by French philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. As a normative world and set of dispositions, *habitus* shapes the instant cognitive response and bodily behaviour of individuals who practice it in order that such responses are natural, given, and unproblematic despite the division witnessed in the context. “The job of caste *habitus*, then, is to safeguard this division in normal times and times of crises. It normalises and justifies hierarchy, difference, violence, humiliation, and systemic othering of the lower castes and Dalits.”<sup>11</sup>

Successfully masking the divisive inworking of caste, then and now, what is only the majoritarian consensus about it is that caste discrimination (not caste as such!) is the unwanted side of the Hindu article of faith. Arundhati Roy in her essay on “Doctor and Saint,” an introduction to Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, brings out the heart of disagreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar over what they each respectively advocated relentlessly. When Ambedkar exposed the real violence of caste as the “*entitlement: to land, to wealth, to knowledge, to equal opportunity,*”<sup>12</sup> the Hindu reformers elided the question of entitlement and cleverly narrowed the question of caste to the issue of untouchability, citing the practice as an erroneous element of the religion in need of only reformation and not annihilation.<sup>13</sup> Their intransigent hold on caste system thus continues the evil only to indict anyone who would dare to question it.

Both kept elusive and sanctified by religion, caste spreads its vicious tentacles from policy making at the top-level of governance to a village level administration across India. With the current push for unprecedented nationalism, Hindu ideologues intend to overtake Indian higher education and the ‘saffronization of education’ is a project already underway with most of its work already complete. Beginning with the death of Rohith Vemula,<sup>14</sup> part of purifying

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<sup>11</sup>Amrita Ghosh & Arun Kumar, “Casteism Continues to Thrive Among Indians Abroad – Through Surnames,” October 5, 2020. Available Online: scroll.in.

<sup>12</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Doctor and the Saint,” in *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand, London: Verso, 2014, 98.

<sup>13</sup>See Roy, “The Doctor and the Saint,” 100-101.

<sup>14</sup>Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD candidate committed suicide on January 17, 2016. When the local unit of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of Modi’s BJP lodged a complaint against Rohit Vemula and four others for raising issues under the banner of the Ambedkar Student’s Association (ASA), the young scholar’s fellowship of INR 25000 at the University of Hyderabad was suspended and they were removed from their hostel rooms. Finding it difficult to manage their expenses, they set up a tent on the campus and began a relay hunger strike hoping to win justice for their cause. However, when Vemula’s hopes had vanished following the dominant politics at the university against Dalits, he left

Indian higher education lies in dealing a death blow to the legitimacy of caste reservations, a single channel of justice for lower-caste representation in the civil service and education.<sup>15</sup> As a lecturer in Colonial/Post-Colonial History, Shalini Sharma opines that the Hindutva activism has made possible an ideological sea change that blatantly accuses caste system as a colonial construction (by Christians from England!) and minimizes the contribution of Muslims to Indian history. She writes, "In India, 'decolonization' has become the rhetoric of militant nationalism."<sup>16</sup>

Obliteration of Dalit identity and existence is carried on through Bollywood movies that alienate and eclipse all who do not belong to the proper Hindu fold. Exploring the representation of Indian-ness in Karan Johar's films, Rebecca Samuel Shah and Joel Carpenter trace their quadrilateral trajectory: the homeland link (for the Indian diaspora), safeguarding Indian culture (for the second generation of globalized Indians), celebrating achievements (of Indians in the realm of education and economics), and mediating the Other (aggressive Indian-ness creating the boundary between 'us' and 'them,' the less truly Indian).<sup>17</sup> The authors analyse the disturbing import of Karan's movies.

Johar's characters, in the final analysis, are entirely "Hinglish" – speaking and represent the Hindu upper middle class. Interestingly, the labouring classes and lower-caste people are nearly absent in these films and even eclipsed by the opulence of the lead characters. Such portrayals appear to alienate the poor who live in the other India.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the push for aggressive Hindu nationalism rings a death knell for Dalits by its commitment to perpetuate caste system with no respite. Seth Schoenhaus cautions how Hindutva strategies that target Dalits as its vote bank could well define their role as just

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behind a searing note that talked of his unfinished dreams and lamented "My birth is my fatal accident." From then on, Vemula has become the symbol of victimization of Dalits in Indian higher educational institutions. See "My Birth is My Fatal Accident: Rohith Vemula's Searing Letter Is an Indictment of Social Prejudices," *The Wire*, January 17, 2019. Available Online: [thewire.in](http://thewire.in).

<sup>15</sup>Shalini Sharma, "India: How Some Hindu Nationalists Are Rewriting Caste History in the Name of Decolonization," *The Conversation*, May 9, 2019. Available Online: [theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com).

<sup>16</sup>Sharma, "India."

<sup>17</sup>Samuel Thambusamy, "Bollywood and the BJP: An Analysis of Indian Identity in Karan Johar's Films," in Rebecca Samuel Shah & Joel Carpenter, ed., *Christianity in India: Conversion, Community Development, and Religious Freedom*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2018, 151-178 (166).

<sup>18</sup>Thambusamy, "Bollywood and the BJP," 173.

'voters' and not as 'Hindus' who have found perfect communion like any other upper caste Hindu. He writes,

As groups existing below the caste system and outside common society, Dalits have been increasingly flocking to the Hindutva message of caste unity, especially without a strong Ambedkar-like leader to remind them that the Hindu caste system and the upper-caste Hindutva supporters had oppressed them in the first place.<sup>19</sup>

The causal relationship between Hindu nationalism and the sustaining of caste system as its predominant agenda can be explained from the burgeoning attacks against Dalits on the one hand, and the construction of Dalits as mutineers against caste stratification sanctioned by the Hindu religion on the other. Thus, the battle against Dalits is still continued, sometimes having them on board to oppose the unsuspecting rest. Representing quite well the automated, divisive, and hegemonic command of the workings of caste, American writer Isabel Wilkerson analogously speaks of it as "the wordless usher"<sup>20</sup> whose voice carefully monitors that we belong to where we should be, thus ensuring that we not just occupy 'only' 'our' seats but consciously refrain from occupying those of 'others' who symbolize the occupants of higher rungs in the social ladder.

This near impossibility of the prospect of emancipation for Dalits from caste discrimination within Hinduism led Ambedkar, the intuitive leader to posit Dalits as "subjects of suffering defined by a permanent antagonism to the caste Hindu order."<sup>21</sup> Historian Anupama Rao holds that Ambedkar wanted to achieve this by three resolutions: a political resolution (through a separate electorate for Dalits), a religious resolution (through conversion out of the Hindu fold), and a constitutional resolution (through Dalit disenfranchisement and abolition of untouchability central to Indian civil rights).<sup>22</sup> Despite these historical cautions present, the lack of Dalit leadership in the modern times has facilitated the successful

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<sup>19</sup>Seth Schoenhaus, "Indian Dalits and Hindutva Strategies," *Denison Journal of Religion* 16, a. 1 (2017) 55-67 (65).

<sup>20</sup>Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York: Random House, 2020, 17. It is fascinating to note that in her seminal and sensational work, Wilkerson talks of racism employing the category of caste as she finds the term 'race' inadequate to capture the misery of the people of colour in all its magnitude. For this reason, including the title of her work, she replaces race with caste.

<sup>21</sup>Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, 23.

<sup>22</sup>Rao, *The Caste Question*, 23.

inroads of aggressive Hindu nationalism into Dalit life that finds itself in the crosshairs of the caste war.

Nevertheless, what explains the newly building up anti-Dalit tension from the dominant upper castes is Dalits' recipe of success in educational and economic realms. On the side of caution, we cannot feel overly optimistic about Dalit resurgence for the simple fact Dalit life continues to remain vulnerable to ideological marginalization and vicious atrocities in the name of caste. Seth Schoenhaus maintains that "Caste tensions and even warfare, while nothing new in Hindu society, were undoubtedly exacerbated with the affirmative action policies toward the end of the twentieth century."<sup>23</sup> Echoing the same, British social anthropologist David Mosse believes that the idea of Hindu nationalism is a reaction to the liberative missionary practices towards Dalits in the Indian context. He opines that "The development of a homogenizing, some say "Semitized," Hinduism with unified creed and cult was above all a mimetic reaction to the Christian missionary "other."<sup>24</sup> The upper caste anger that is directed against the minority Christians is thus the 'earned reward' for Christian liberative praxis within the context of India.

The phenomenon of caste war is thus twin-faced: that when Dalits are left unempowered, they are oppressed; and when uplifted, they still encounter the hostility of the dominant castes. As Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit writer rightly says, "There is a conflict between the past and the future that younger Dalits envision for themselves."<sup>25</sup> In the event of sustained antagonism that preys on Dalits, what should characterize the agenda of peacemaking that Christians will initiate? In my opinion, the upper caste resistance to Dalit empowerment is an adequate indicator that something constructive and liberative that disturbs the *status quo* is happening in the lives of Dalits. The social justice agenda and preferential option for the poor spearheaded by Christian educational institutions have tremendous impact in the lives of Dalits. In as much this is true, yet it is not time to rest on our laurels precisely because we have reached a point where we have to accelerate the pace of Dalit emancipation and thus helping them find their voices through robust measures. "Access to education and the clout wielded by their vote in local and national elections have empowered Dalits to dream of a better future. But the aspirations of

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<sup>23</sup>Seth, *Indian Dalits and Hindutva Strategies*, 60.

<sup>24</sup>David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*, California: University of California Press, 2012, 199.

<sup>25</sup>Nirmala George, "India's Angry Dalits Rise Against Age-Old Caste Prejudices," *Associated Press*, August 30, 2016. Available Online: [apnews.com](http://apnews.com).



the Dalits are often resented by upper-caste Hindus.”<sup>26</sup> As long as the everyday resentment to Dalit life haunts them, the Christian agenda cannot backtrack on its vigorous framework of advocating annihilation of caste as the successful completion of its social justice program.

### **The Agenda of Christian Peacemaking**

American theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill lays out an ideal pathway that peacemaking could follow. She writes:

In the real world, peacemaking or peacebuilding must *usually* proceed in circumstances where it is precisely justice, equal respect, and human rights are sorely lacking or entirely absent. To act when oppressive power makes action risky, or to take risks for those who have no power, is a hallmark of God’s inbreaking reign.<sup>27</sup>

Pursuing this path would mean that to resolve caste war in India, Christian peacemaking should contain three interdependent components, namely, furtherance of social justice following CST principles, promoting Dalit agency through their emancipation, and annihilation of caste in the Church as a revolutionary beginning. Each of the three should be explored both as concepts and in the context.

### **The Agenda of Social Justice and Its Furtherance**

Justice is integral for peace. As such, the Christian response to caste war should encompass the two complimenting virtues. This is why Pope Paul VI held emphatically that “If you want peace, work for justice.”<sup>28</sup> Since justice is the forerunner of peace, a holistic understanding of it would enhance our perspective toward peacemaking. Here, turning to Aquinas for the conceptual exploration of justice is necessitated both to sharpen our perspective and to act as a corrective against any possible devaluation of it. The angelic doctor establishes justice as a relational virtue that qualifies human actions to be fair towards the other. Defining Justice, Aquinas writes that “Justice is a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will” (*ST II-II, q. 58, a. 1*). For Aquinas a virtue is properly called a *habitus* which is formed in us by a repetition of personal actions.<sup>29</sup> “For since every virtue is a habit

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<sup>26</sup>George, “India’s Angry Dalits Rise Against Age-Old Caste Prejudices.”

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peace Makers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019, 362.

<sup>28</sup>Pope Paul VI, “If You Want Peace, Work For Justice,” *Message for the Celebration of the Day of Peace*, January 1, 1972. Available Online: vatican.va.

<sup>29</sup>See Servais Pinckaers, (translated by Mary Thomas Noble), “Rediscovering Virtue,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 60, 3 (1996) 361-378, 373.

that is the principle of a good act, a virtue must needs be defined by means of the good act bearing on the matter proper to that virtue. Now the proper matter of justice consists of those things that belong to our intercourse with other men" (*ST II-II*, q. 58, a. 1). In addition, he holds that "since justice by its name implies equality, it denotes essentially relation to another, for a thing is equal, not to itself, but to another" (*ST II-II*, q. 58, a. 2). Establishing equality also as the mean of justice, Aquinas maintains that "The matter of justice is external operation, in so far as an operation or the thing used in that operation is duly proportionate to another person, wherefore the mean of justice consists in a certain proportion of equality between the external thing and the external person. Now equality is the real mean between greater and less" (*ST, II-II*, q. 58, a. 10). Hence for Aquinas "each man's own is that which is due to him according to equality of proportion" (*ST II-II*, q. 58, a. 11).

If justice is about fairness and equality, it is to be applied emphatically for the caste-ridden Indian context where fairness toward Dalits is negligible and therefore conveniently ignored for such 'non-persons.' Following the logic of Aquinas which privileged the virtue of justice over the other acquired cardinal virtues, American virtue ethicist James F. Keenan offers a splendid summary of the import of Thomistic virtues by stating that "The end of virtue was really to be the just person, and justice was the virtue for having ordered relations with others."<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, explicating the Thomistic virtue of justice as providing the real means for human action, he emphasizes that "Justice expresses the greater good both by the fact that it is in the rational appetite and thus nearer reason, and because it alone orders not only the agent, but the agent in relationship to others. For this reason justice is the chief moral virtue."<sup>31</sup> Another virtue ethicist Servais Pinckaers illustrates the virtue of justice as a capacity that moves the agents to give others what is due to them. To this end, he asserts that,

[Justice] implies the existence within us of a capacity to open ourselves to others, to recognize their rights and honour them. Justice is more than respect and the desire not to infringe on others' rights. It is the beginning of a certain kind of love, an esteem for another that inclines us to give him his due.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Daniel Harington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, 122.

<sup>31</sup>See James F. Keenan, "Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas" in *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 709-729, 719.

<sup>32</sup>Pinckaers, "Rediscovering Virtue," 369.

While approaching social and economic issues, Indian theologian Shaji George Kochuthara favours justice as the ideal yardstick to translate the principles articulated in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) to action in the context. Commenting on Church's option for the poor, he insists that "This preferential option is rooted in the biblical concept of justice, namely, God has a preferential love and concern for the poor, the marginalized, and the suffering. CST is also aware of the structures of sin which continue to keep the poor as poor or make their condition worse."<sup>33</sup>

Challenges and limitations apart, the Christian program of social justice for Dalits in India includes decisive steps toward addressing caste discrimination in the society. As such, I can confidently claim that December 8, 2016 became a watershed moment for Indian Christianity when the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) released *Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India: An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities* wherein it declares that "The term 'Dalit' does not indicate a negative connotation or a caste identity. It rather seeks to restore an affirmative, humanizing, and empowering identity which is a demand of our faith. Thus, it is not only a matter of sociological and cultural category but a theological category as well" (No. 81).<sup>34</sup> Proud as I am, yet with clear vision and trajectories outlined, the message of the official Church still has a long way to go before it becomes fully internalized and integrated with the life and faith of Indian Christians.

Such theological prominence aiming at justice for Dalits has been bolstered by affirmative action programs in the Indian Church. Besides the 2016 CBCI policy, there have been constructive policies in place to uplift Dalit Christians while many are underway. Some examples could include the creation of SC/ST Commissions (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe) at diocesan, regional, and national levels to ensure that the liberative proclamation of 'The Preferential option for the Dalits' is properly carried out. Prioritizing Dalit admissions in schools, institutes, colleges, higher education, and seminaries, providing more employment and empowerment opportunities based on reservation system within the dioceses and religious congregations, training the SC/ST students for civil service employment opportunities, building awareness about the evil of

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<sup>33</sup>Shaji George Kochuthara, "Economic Inequality: An Ethical Response," *Religions* 8, 141 (2017) 1-14 (7).

<sup>34</sup>Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), "Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India: An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities," December 8, 2016. Available Online: [cbci.in](http://cbci.in)

casteism, conscientizing the Christians and catechising the students on the sinfulness of caste discrimination, etc. are some noteworthy mentions here. However, despite such tangible signs of hope, it has to be honestly acknowledged that there are challenges still experienced on the ground that hinder the full-scale implementation of such Kingdom vision.

### **Promotion of Dalit Agency**

The flip side of Christian social justice program is to prioritize and promote the Dalit agency. In the context of India, the Thomistic virtue of justice reflecting fairness and equality would signify not just the Church shouldering their cause but making them the potential agents of their own emancipation. The magic of fairness that the Church wants to achieve in the society would thus commence with the enabling of Dalit agency within the Church in the first place. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff reiterates on the agency of the poor as a crucial signpost within liberation theology. He opines that “We can speak of liberation only when the poor themselves emerge as the primary agent of their journey, even when they have support from others.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Indian theologians too highlight the path of Dalit agency as the desired objective of Christian affirmative action. Articulating how doing Christian ethics in the cultural complexity and social inequality in India should accord the methodological priority of protest and Dalit agency, Clement Campos has it that

The moral response to discrimination on the basis of caste is in the first place one of protest. Protest is not only a revolt against unjust structures but also an effort to indicate the absence of a public conscience. Protest is a tool in the hands of the powerless, the first step in the praxis of liberation. The moral content of protest is to affirm the moral worth and the dignity of the individual human person. This protest involves, on the part of the victims, a rejection of the worldview of the oppressor and of the oppressor’s value system, as well as a noncompliance with their own victimization. A final step is empowering the victims to become moral agents of their own destinies.<sup>36</sup>

Another Indian theologian Felix Wilfred also emphasizes that theologization of Dalit life-realities cannot be effectively done without their participation as subjects and agents of research and not

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<sup>35</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Clement Campos, “Doing Christian Ethics in India’s World of Cultural Complexity and Social Inequality,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics*, ed. James F. Keenan, New York: Continuum, 2007, 82-90, 86.

anymore as objects, thus enriching both theology and community.<sup>37</sup> The British social anthropologist David Mosse highlights Dalit agency in what it has achieved within the Church through its protest movement. He explains that,

The proximate condition that drove a radical dalitization of Tamil Catholicism was an *internal* movement of protest against the incongruity of Christian universalism and the persistence of caste. In other words, out of its own deep contradictions, Tamil Catholicism provided an institutional and symbolic milieu for a language and practice of protest.<sup>38</sup>

Holding the line, Jayakiran Sebastian a prominent theologian from the Church of South India (CSI) underlines the emergence of Dalit theology as a separate discipline replacing the dominant forms of discourse. Identifying it as the non-negotiable instance of Dalit agency, he affirms, “The resurgence of Dalit pride and the increasing recognition of the vital role played by Dalit communities in the political landscape of India have resulted in the flourishing of studies dealing with the variety and range of the Dalit experience.”<sup>39</sup> In his view, the growing interrogations into various aspects of Dalit experience symbolise the scope and achievement of Dalit agency. Within the context of the Catholic Church of Tamilnadu, Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM), *Uzhaikum Makkal Urimai Iyakkam* (Working People’s Rights Movement), and two prominent Jesuit social action centres for Dalits – PALMERA, and Dr Ambedkar Cultural Academy (DACA) are some well-known movements that champion Dalit agency although their success, influence, and popularity are far from satisfactory. The age-old caste prejudices still impede the conceptual and contextual intrusion and as such, affirmation of Dalit agency, popularizing Dalit perspectives, and affirmative action programs on their behalf are still efforts in the offing despite having a historical record of Christian mission in the context.

### **Annihilation of Caste**

An allied but inalienable part of Christian peacemaking is annihilation of caste that should begin from the Church before it tastes its eventual success in the larger secular society. Caste system withstands any progressive inbreaking due to its ideological rigidity

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<sup>37</sup>See Felix Wilfred, *Theology for an Inclusive World*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2019, 270-72.

<sup>38</sup>Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree*, 198.

<sup>39</sup>Jayakiran Sebastian, “Can We Now Bypass That Truth?” –Interrogating the Methodology of Dalit Theology,” *Transformation* 25, 2/3 (April & July 2008) 80-91, 81-82.

and successfully implanting it in even unsuspecting Hindus. This *Brahminic* ideological model of Hinduism has conspired against a casteless society by exemplifying the caste-based stratification as a normative content of the Hindu religion and culture. This is why in his book *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the Father of Dalits delineated caste system as *Brahminism* incarnate and one's annihilation cements the defeat of the other.<sup>40</sup> Another prominent Dalit scholar Kancha Ilaiah has always been vociferous about *Brahminism* as the theoretical enemy of Dalitism. He writes, "Theoretically, it is important to attack the epicentre of caste—*Brahminism*—and in politico-economic domains it is important to displace the brahmins, baniyas, kshatriyas from centres of power."<sup>41</sup> There are similar voices within Catholicism and Christianity about eradicating the inherently unequal caste classification. In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis leads us to a pragmatic analysis of how divisive and discriminatory structures alienate and marginalize a section of the human community. "Those who look down on their own people tend to create within society categories of first and second class, people of greater or lesser dignity, people enjoying greater or fewer rights. In this way, they deny that there is room for everybody" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 99). In even stronger terms, Pope John Paul II condemned caste as a counter narrative to the gospel values when he uttered that,

Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church's mission of evangelization. Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce caste division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become an expression of the solidarity of the whole Christian community.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>See Dr B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand, London: Verso, 2014, 310. In Ambedkar's opinion, *Brahminism* utilized Hinduism to formalize casteism giving it a religious spin. Hence, Ambedkar was highly critical of *Brahminism* and its agenda of inversion. "The priestly class must be brought under control by some such legislation as I have outlined above. This will prevent it from doing mischief and from misguiding people. It will democratise it by throwing it open to everyone. It will certainly help to kill *Brahminism* and will also help to kill caste, which is nothing but *Brahminism* incarnate. *Brahminism* is the poison which has spoiled Hinduism. You will succeed in saving Hinduism if you will kill *Brahminism*. There should be no opposition to this reform from any quarter" (24.4).

<sup>41</sup>Kancha Ilaiah, "Caste and Contradictions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, 43 (October 22, 1994) 2835-2836 (2835).

<sup>42</sup>John Paul II, "Address of John Paul II to the Bishops of India on Their "Ad Limina" Visit," November 17, 2003. Available Online: Vatican.va.

Demonstrating that anti-blackness in USA was first documented as the colour line, then as racism, and now as caste, James Keenan is engaged in a parallel analogy of caste in India and race in the American society. Just as he concludes his article, making an earnest appeal to decentre and end white supremacy, he assumes a confessional tone:

I hope for you the reader, as you consider our structures of racism and caste, that you too, especially if you belong to the dominant caste, recognize that it is time for decentering, engaging vulnerability, and building a new agenda wherein we learn from others whom we have dominated. I will try to do the same.<sup>43</sup>

What Keenan limns about the American society can help the Indian society to make headway with annihilation of caste from the context. Accordingly, overthrow of caste system can only occur when we can replace dominant narratives with humane discourses and inculcate the virtues of vulnerability that can enable us to enter into another's experience on the level of humans without any attributes and recognition that is willing to accept, empower, and uplift others respectively. On the ground in the context of Tamilnadu, I would like to make a special mention of an anti-caste convention organized by the Tamilnadu Catholic Church. '*Saathi Maruppu – Kristhavatthin Nibanthanai*' (Rejection/Denial of Caste – A Pre-condition/Prerequisite for Christianity) was conducted on a grand scale collecting Catholics, priests, and Bishops from all over Tamilnadu in 2007. More than 10000 people participated and those two days were packed with talks by experts, activists, writers, and speakers, with each session headed by a bishop. It certainly made waves in the Tamilnadu Church. Unfortunately, since the momentum lacked continuity, the thrust of anti-caste convention failed to shape up the laity.

### **Challenges Foreseen**

While our hopes about a casteless society and Christianity are high, the context is still riddled with some pressing challenges. Hence, by way of challenges I foresee that the Church's emphasis on rejection of caste will clash with the ideals of the Hindu majoritarian society for which caste is a founding principle of its religion. The constructive agenda to be a counter-cultural church is certainly a much-needed and welcoming message in the Indian context. However, we must accept the limitation of the Church to only act like a 'containment

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<sup>43</sup>James F. Keenan, "The Color Line, Race, and Caste: Structures of Domination and the Ethics of Recognition," *Theological Studies* 82, 1 (2021) 69-94 (94).

zone' beyond which the ideals of a casteless community will be downplayed and even opposed. Its prospect of success in the secular society is far-off from reality. The society outside is still a large infectious region, waiting to penetrate the walls of the containment zone if not for constant vigilance and a resolute push back. I call this a 'limitation of prospect.'

This limitation of prospect apart, there is also the 'limitation of project.' Accordingly, a minoritarian success agenda cannot be the proof of success for the entirety of the majoritarian society. The analysis is still partial and limited. One cannot deny the vital role of Christians being the change agents. However, their outreach will further be restricted given the nationalistic fervour catching up with the rest of the population though we cannot rule out the presence of balanced, unbiased, and neutral people in the other camp.

Thirdly, there is 'limitation of profile.' To effect and infuse change in a majoritarian society, the Church needs to have a flawless profile. While themselves practitioners of caste, the Christians are marked by a glaring inadequacy to challenge the oppressive structures and relentlessly endorse a casteless society. Besides this blemish on the self, Christian identity has been tampered largely with groundless allegations that Christian loyalty is extraterritorial. As an entity with a 'foreign face,' Christianity struggles especially under the sway of nationalistic campaign that has turned even the ordinary and unassuming Hindus into a prejudiced community. The enlightened minority in the Hindu fold may still fear the possibility of exclusion and may recuse themselves. As carriers of historical antagonism, our profile may not convince the majoritarian community while the chances are that we may further be isolated and enmited. Hence, whatever good Christians might intend for the secular society, yet that we will be viewed through the prism of suspicion appears to be the fate.

## Conclusion

In the novel entitled *Untouchable Spring*, a Dalit character named Rueben speaks these words with a poignant grief: "What a terrible struggle life is! Life is indeed a battlefield."<sup>44</sup> As if to prove the battlefield existence of Dalit life, there comes another fresh example from the awful stock of caste rivalry. Hardly hours after Indian women hockey team lost to Argentina in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, two upper caste men began bursting firecrackers in mock celebration

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<sup>44</sup>G. Kalyana Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, Hyderabad: Oriental BlackSwan, 2010, 261.



outside the Dalit forward player Vandana Katariya's house. Throwing caste slurs, they insulted the family and alleged that the Indian team lost because too many Dalits have made it to the team.<sup>45</sup> Caste war is real. It is not to be underestimated. Advancing a fierce framework of Christian peacemaking that unceasingly promotes the Christian social justice agenda, agency of Dalits, and annihilation of caste would only salvage the situation. Undeterred amid the disparaging remarks and abuses, what should illuminate and determine Christian affirmative praxis is the gospel way that resolutely spells out peace by winning uncompromising justice.

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<sup>45</sup>"Man Held for Passing Casteist Remarks Against Hockey Player Vandana Katariya's Family," *The Wire*, August 5, 2021.