

SALVATION FROM THE DALIT PERSPECTIVE: EARTHLY OR ESCHATOLOGICAL

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1. Introduction

Salvation (*moksha*) and liberation (*mukti*) are often conceived as the goals of religious yearning and philosophical search of the

humans. While the former stresses the eschatological end, the latter looks into the existential situation from which one is to be liberated. The students of Indian religions and cultures speak of two traditions, namely, (scriptural tradition of *vedas* and other sacred books) and the oral traditions of culturally backward peoples through their myths, folklores and primitive rituals. The Scholars who have an ethnocentric attitude think that the Sanskrit religious tradition is the great tradition because it is 'intellectual, mystical, classical and 'higher' philosophy, and the oral as the little tradition.

The socio-political, philosophical and religious concepts and theories of the Sanskrit - tradition have monopolized the attention of the scholars to such an extent that the little traditions are almost left in complete oblivion. From the pre-historic to the present time, the primal people have been a significant segment of the world population. In India, as per the 1981 census, the tribals form about 7.8% and the original settlers (*adivasis*) 15.7% of the total population. In epic literature these original inhabitants were known as *dasas*, *vanaras*,

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rakshasa, nishadas, nagas, yakshas, sabaras and kiratas. Their celebration of life through music and dance fostered the conservation of and a symbiotic relationship with nature through their millennia-old healthy practices, myths and rituals, respect for mother earth, sacredness of land, forest and resources, and ecological ethics. The egalitarian ethics of their culture, communitarian concern, democratic values, anti-greed and anti-pride altitude, simplicity and holistic vision of life stand as a challenge to the dominant world view off the great tradition, which enslaved these people and kept them as their servants and slaves. The present article in an attempt to show the ultimate concern or the concept of salvation these ancient peoples could have developed or should develop in the course of time.

2. The Issues Involved

The *Manusmriti*, quotes with approval, in its first chapter, the Rig Vedic vision of the origin of man : "When they divided up man... His mouth became Brahmin, His arms became the Warrior - prince, His legs the common man who plies the trade, the lowly serf was born from his feet." (RV.X, 90,11,12). On the basis of this creation - account the whole society was divided into four *varnas*, which at the end of the vedic period modified itself into the 'caste system'. Thus varna system is the parent of caste. The caste system divides the entire society into various endogamous groups with varying social status on the basis of occupation. Individuals who are born in one group can never become a member of any other group. The lowly serf (*Sudras*) were not given any instructions in the Vedas, and were kept as ignorant, despised slaves to do the meanest works for the upper castes. A part of this caste known as *Adisudras*, the tribals and original settlers, feel that they are the original inhabitants of Hindustan and their natural religion has to be regarded as the religion of the land in opposition to the Hinduism developed by the Sanskrit-traditions. The 'great tradition, instead of recognizing the distinctness and identity of the little tradition, always showed the tendency to absorb the latter into its womb. It is now known as Sanskritization. It "may be defined

as the process, by which a 'low' caste or a tribe or other group takes over custom, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of a high and in particular, twice born (*dvija*) caste".¹

Those who opposed the Brahmin religion or rebelled against the caste system were branded as untouchables and were thrown out of the society. The main causes of the practice of untouchability in Hinduism were the obsession of the Brahmins to maintain purity and to avoid pollution.

Are the untouchable Hindus? They were considered to be outside the pale of Hinduism even though many followed some of the customs and rituals of Hinduism. When the British Raj conducted a census in British India as well as in the six hundred princely states, it is found that a large number of menial castes could not be fitted in any slot. All of them suffered from one common disability untouchability. Their touch, sight or even shadow polluted the caste Hindus. Hindus, under the leadership of Gandhi, began to work against the practice of untouchability in order to prevent the Dalits from going over to Christianity and other religions and to own them in their fold.

Under the leadership of Sri.Aga Khan muslims made a memorandum to the viceroy stating that those who were not really Hindus were also being counted among the Hindus. Census authorities issued a memorandum with following specific norms to determine whether a person deserve to be included among the untouchable, menial castes or depressed classes:² (1) Deny the supremacy of the Brahmins, (2) Do not receive a *mantra* from a Brahmin or other recognized Hindu guru, (3) Deny the authority of the Vedas, (4) Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests, (5) Have no Brahmin priests at all, (6) Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temples, (7) Cause pollution (a) by touch,or (b) within a certain

¹ James Masey, *Indigenous Peoples: Dalit: Dalit Issues in Today`s Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), p.112.

² The term Depressed class as a British innovation from an article written by Annie Besant in the Indian Review, February 1909 with the caption "The Uplift of the Depressed Classes" (p.2).

distance, (8) Bury their dead, (9) Do not worship Hindu gods, (10) Eat beef and do not have reverence for the cow.³

Ambedkar in his work *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables* argues that the untouchables are not Hindus, but a separate religious minority. If the term "Hindu" is used in a territorial sense, then every one who is an inhabitant of Hindustan is a Hindu. In that sense it can certainly be claimed that the untouchables are Hindus. But so are the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jews, Parsis etc. The second sense in which the word "Hindu" is used is a religious sense... The Hindu and the untouchables practice their cults in set segregation so that notwithstanding the similarity of their cults they remain as separate as two aliens do..". Above all, the term in its social sense indicates whether the untouchables can be held to be part of Hindu religion. "Is there any human tie that binds them to the rest of the Hindus? There is none. There is no connubium. There is no commensalism. There is not even the right to touch, much less to associate. Instead, the mere touch is enough to cause pollution to a Hindu. The whole tradition of the Hindu is to recognize the untouchables as a separate element and insist upon it as a fact"... According to the traditional terminology, Hindus are called *savanas* and the untouchables are called *avarna*. It speaks of the Hindus as *Chaturvarnikas* and of the untouchables as *Panchamas*. Such a terminology could not have come into existence, if separation had not become so prominent and its observance so necessary as to require coining up special terms to give expression to the fact.⁴ Thus for Ambedkar caste is an essential feature of Hinduism and a man who does not belong to a recognized caste cannot be a Hindu. The modern terminology refers to all the original settlers, tribals and untouchables and a part of the sudras as Dalits. They are also referred to as the *Chandalas*, *Ati Sudras*, *avarnas*, *Panchamas*, *Antyajas*, *Antyavasin* etc. in the Hindu religious scriptures. Ambedkar preferred to call them

³ James Massey, *op cit.* p.62.

⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi have Done for the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker Co. 1945), pp. 175-177.

untouchables, whereas for Gandhi they are Harijans (people of God). To the Britishers they were untouchables and Depressed classes. They are referred to as the scheduled castes in the constitution of India. 'Dalit' is a recent term adopted by the Dalits themselves to indicate the fact that they are the most oppressed exploited and dehumanized section of Indian society.⁵

The term dalit has its root in dall (poor; be low, be reduced, helpless) in Hebrew and in dal (to crack, open, split, crush, destroy, downtrodden etc.) in Sanskrit. The term has a long history of evolution.⁶ The Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra which popularized this term tried to broaden the scope of its use by including: "members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited, politically, economically and in the name of religion."⁷ But the following definition seems to be more to the point. "Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in Humanism. He rejects existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate and heaven, because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited man in his country."⁸

Though due to the anti-propaganda of high caste Hindus and Gandhi many castes were reluctant to be treated as untouchables, as many as 429 castes were included in the scheduled castes order, 1936. Now the scheduled castes order appended to the constitution (Aug.10, 1950) includes more than nine hundred castes. Attracted and encouraged by the social and political benefits reserved for the ex-untouchables in the Indian Constitution (1950), new-castes are now making representations to the governments at the centre as well as the state to include their names in the list of the scheduled castes.

⁵ James Massey, *op. cit* p.81.

⁶ For a detailed account of this evolution refer Bhagvan Das, James Massey (ed), *Dalit Solidarity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), pp.9-14.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 12-13

⁸ *Ibid*.

The plight of the one time untouchables was really unimaginable. The source of their suffering was mainly from the division of society into pure castes and impure castes on the basis of occupations. Narada, another law-maker after Manu writes:

Know that there are two sorts of occupations, pure work and impure work. Impure work is that done by slaves. Pure work is that done by labourers. Sweeping the gateways, the privy, the road and the place for rubbish: shampooing the secret parts of the body, gathering and putting away the left over food, ordure and urine.

And lastly, rubbing the masters limbs when desired: this should be regarded as impure works. All other works besides this is pure. Thus have the four classes of servants doing pure work been enumerated. All the others who do dirty work are slaves, of whom there are fifteen kinds.⁹

These workers were treated as the most despised people. "They were condemned to live outside the villages and earn their livelihood by removing the dead animals, garbage, sweeping the streets and drains. They had to live in the company of donkeys, dogs and pigs."¹⁰ A sudra or outcaste can never hope for a deliverance from his caste degradation.

The Christian Dalit Gursam Jashuva Kavi, the Poet Laureate from Andhra Pradesh powerfully expresses the experiences of caste prejudice and rejection of the Dalits in his classic work. The Bat (gabbilant). In this poem he condemns the monstrous practice of untouchability, the hypocrisy and futility of learning and education which cannot banish ignorance and caste prejudices. The untouchable (*avarna* = casteless) seeing his terrible fate declares":

Why should I a casteless man
Beget Children to drown them in miser
Why should a born slave take a wife
Instead I'll take the vow of Brahmacharya.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.59

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.59

Religion has failed to perform its task:
 Equality and friendship are mere words
 Rules and regulations are only slippery knots
 Mercy and kindness are but crocodile tears
 I condemn these strange ways of religion ¹¹
 The poet father decries the practice of
 untouchability among the untouchable
 themselves saying:
 It is a shame to speak of untouchability
 Practiced by the untouchabale Mala and Madigas
 Neither Shiva nor several Krishnas nor many Christs
 Can unite those two castes, I dore say. ¹²
 Despite their prestigious B.A and M.A degrees
 Their rivalries increase but not compromise,
 Of what use are religious teachings to them,
 Evil people, afflicted by caste factionalism'¹³

3. Dalit Situation: A Man-made Problem

i. *A sub-human social existence*

The study of the Dalit in different states in contemporary India shows that they have a subhuman social existence and they lie in abject poverty economic exploitation, sub-culture of submission and political powerlessness. They have been kicked raped, and burnt, refused minimum wages, their properties have been destroyed and they have been killed brutally. They are discriminated against with references to living wage, share-cropping, money-lending, drawing water from public wells, entry into the temples, service of tea and snacks in the hotels, service in the grocery, shops, services of the barber, washerman, cowhardsman, preists, community feasts and marriages with caste Hindus. Without access to the vital economic resources and bargaining power, they become the most exploited peripheral group in the Indian society.

¹¹ *Gaddilarn*. Part II, Stanzas 53,56

¹² *Ibid.*, Part II, 95

¹³ *Ibid*, Part II, 128

Concerning the concrete political situation of Jari and Kesharpur, two village in Orissa, the research scholar R.B.Tripathy gives the following account. It also suggests the way of liberation the Dalits can look for.¹⁴

The numerical strength, better economic opportunities, urban contact, better communication, better exposure to mass-media, help of external leadership... the presence of Harijan elites in the village, greater economic benefits due to better awareness of governmental programmes, participation in political process through general elections have helped the Harijans in Jari to resort to protest political actions against their socio-economic disabilities. Small number, less urban contact, under developed communications, less exposure to mass-media, absence of the help of external leaders, absence of Harijan elites in the village, very low political participation have discouraged the Harijans in Kesharpur to resort to potest political action against their socio-economic disabilities.¹⁵

ii. *Annihilation of caste*

When old religion and philosophy of the land stand abashed and helpless, new analysis of the situation should come up in support of the Dalit - People's struggle for liberation and justice¹⁶. Babasahab Ambedkar in his *Annihilation of Caste* says that "caste is the real explanation as to why the Hindu has let the savage remain a savage in the midst of his civilization without blushing or without feeling any sense of remorse or repentance"..... "He cannot consent to lose it by establishing contact with the aborigines, the remnants of the hateful anaryas of the Vedic days."¹⁷...Turn in any direction you like, caste is

¹⁴The picture of the Dallit given below is confirmed by an empirical study of the Dalit in the two villages of Kesharpur and Jari in contempoary Orissa. The reference is to: Rebati Ballow Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-Human Society* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.x

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.43.

the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster."¹⁸

Ambedkar believes that the Hindu society has to become a classless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself.¹⁹ Gandhi in his comment on Ambedkar's view wrote: "Caste has nothing to do with religion... But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. *Varna and Ashrama* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *Varna* teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties."²⁰ But years ago Gandhi, writing on 'caste versus class' in his *Young India* argued that caste system was better than class system on the ground that caste was the best possible adjustment of social stability. Later, however, he prefers *Varna* over caste. Then the question Ambedkar raises is "how are you going to reduce the four thousand castes, based on birth, to the four *Varnas*, based on worth."²¹

The first and foremost salvation the dalits in India long for in the liberation from the caste system even in the form of *Varnavyavastha*. It degrades the masses by denying them opportunity to acquire knowledge and emasculated them by denying them the right to be armed. Although Gandhi admitted caste as harmful both to spiritual and national growth,' but he upheld the value of *varnavyavastha*. It is interesting to note whether Gandhi's interpretation of the concept of *Varna* agrees with the nature of the *Varna* as commonly understood and preached by Swami Dayanand Saraswati and his followers, the Arya Samajists. Ambedkar writes "The essence of the Vedic conception of *Varna* is the pursuit of a calling which is appropriate to one's natural aptitude. The essence of the Mahatma's conception of *Varna* is the pursuit of ancestral calling

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 81 (*Harijan*, July 18, 1936).

²¹ *Ibid.*, P.52

irrespective of natural aptitude." ²² Here infact, *Varna* becomes merely a different name for caste for the simple reason that it is the same in essence- namely, pursuit of ancestral calling. In contract to Gandhi's view of varna, the vedic view of varna is less offensive, though not admissible from the point of view of the Dalits. The Vedic concept of *Varna* "did not admit birth as a determining factor in fixing the place of an individual in society." ²³

iii. Conversion to non-Hindu religions and Hinduism

The Dalits in India view conversion to world religions as a means for liberation and salvation. There was a spurt of conversion of the dalits to Sikhism, Islam and Christianity which they perceived as preaching equality, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These dalits were in upward mobility in the social status. The upper class christians in Kerala, and the Sudras who had become christians in the 17th and 18th century in Tamil Nadu were not prepared to accept the new comres as equals. Though the socio -economic status of these dalits has not much improved, after their conversion, they experienced subjective change and so most of them have not renounced the religion of their choice, despite material inducements in the form of Scheduled Caste reservations. They use the solidarity of the religious body as a tool to prevent the caste based discrimination. "The converts viewed their baptism as a step in their liberation from caste oppression. To them it was a now identity. As studies have shown subjectively it has remained a strong factor. Their self image has changed considerably." ²⁴

If *Varnavyavastha* (fourfold caste system) is an essential aspect of Hinduism, the Dalits (untouchables) cannot be regarded as Hindus, nor can they be converted to Hinduism. At one time Hindu religion was missionary. Unless we suppose that the Hindu religion did in

²² *Ibid.*, p.94.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.95.

²⁴ Walter Fernandes, *the Emerging Dalit Identity*. The Re-assertion of the Subalterns (New Delhi :Indian Social Institute: No.61, 1996).

some degree do the work of proselytization, it is not possible to account for its spread over a vast continent and inhabited by diverse races which were in possession of a distinct culture of their own. But in the course of time Hindu religion ceased to be missionary. The orthodox Hindus who believe that Hindu religion was never a proselytising religion and that Hindu must be so by birth reject the Sudhi movement, a movement to reclaim those who were converted to Islam, Christianity and Sikhism to the Hindu faith.

Ambedkar commenting on this situation writes: "The organization of the Hindu society is characterized by the existence of castes. Each caste is endogamous and lives by antogony. In other words it only allows individuals born in it to its membership and does not allow any one from outside being brought into it. The Hindu Society being a federation of castes and each caste being self-enclosed there is no place for the convert, for no caste will admit him.... Caste is incomparable with conversion."²⁵ By way of conversion to Hinduism, therefore, the Dalits cannot find their liberation from the salvery imposed on them even while being an outsider to the fold.

4. Freedom From the Village System

What is the position of the Dalit, especially the untouchables under the Hindu social order. To know, it is necessary to go to a Hindu village. The average Hindu is always in ecstasy whenever he speaks of the Indian village. He regards it as an ideal form of social organization. It is evident "from the angry speeches made by the Hindu members of Indian Constituent Assembly in support of the contention that the Indian Constitution should recognize the Indian village as its base of the constitutional pyramid of autonomous administrative units with its own legislature, executive and judiciary. From the point of view of the untouchables there could not have been a

²⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babashab Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* vol5 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989), p.423-24.

greater calamity. Thank God the Constituent Assembly did not adopt it."²⁶

Gandhi and the high caste Hindus like Narayan Agarwal persisted in their belief that the Indian village is an ideal form of social organization. But Gandhi's idea of a decentralized government with the village Panchayat as the primary political unit did not take off. His vision, however, was retained in a Directive Principle in the Constitution of India. Article 40 of which directed the state thus:

The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

After 45 years of independence of India the provisions relating to panchayats (administration of village) were introduced in part IX (of the Constitution) consisting of Article 243 - A by the 73rd Amendment (1992) which came into force on April 24, 1993.²⁷

The high regard for the Indian village is not an ancestral belief from the ancient past. It is borrowed from Sir Charles Metcalfe-a civil servant of the East India company. According to him "the village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. This union of the village communities --- contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India through all revolutions..." Many foreigners are led to accept this idealistic view of the Indian village. Many Indians also have adopted this view of the village. But the true picture of a village is that it consists of castes, mainly two sections : touchables and untouchables. In every village the Touchables have a code which the untouchables are required to follow. It includes observances as well as duties the untouchables are required to perform for the touchables. A few of these are listed below.

²⁶ Ambedkar, *Writings & Speeches*, vol.5 , p.19

²⁷ N.I. Rajah, *The Hindu* (Pen Page), January 21, 1997

a) Observances

A contravention of any of these rules is an offence. 1) The untouchables must live in a separate quarter away from the habitation of the Hindus. It is an offence for the untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation. 2) The quarters of the untouchables must be located towards the south, the most inauspicious of the four directions. 3) The Untouchable must observe the rule of distance of pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be. 4) It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to acquire wealth, to build a house, with tiled roof to put on a clean dress; wear shoes and put on silver or gold ornaments, to give pleasing names to their children, to sit on a chair in the presence of a Hindu, to ride on a horse through the village to take a processions of the untouchables through the village, to speak a cultured language and not to salute a Hindu 5) An untouchable is not allowed to come in the quarters of Hindus on their day of fast, nor is he allowed to wear the mark of the Touchables. He must wear the mark of his inferiority to conform to his status.

b) Duties:

Under this head the following may be mentioned:

1) A member of an untouchable community must carry a message of any event in the house of a Hindu such as death or marriage to his relatives living in other villages.

2) He must work at the house of a Hindu when a marriage is taking place, such as breaking feul, and going on errands. 3) An untouchable must accompany a Hindu girl when she is going from her parent's house to her husband's village no matter how distant it is.

Every Hindu in the village regards himself as a superior person above the untouchable.²⁸ The salvation or liberation the Indian Constitution has brought to the dalits is the freedom from this tyranny of the Indian village system.

²⁸ B.R. Ambedkar *Writings & Speeches*, vol.5 ,pp.19-22

Though untouchability is abolished by Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, Indian villages are not yet free from the way of life they have developed through the century - old practices.

5. Question of Dalit Identity

The real question in this connection is whether the dalits have identified their identity. Gandhi and upper caste Hindus, who think along the line of Gandhi regard all the outcastes as Hindus. Whereas enlightened dalit leaders resist this identify imposed on them and in this liberation-struggle they try to portray the unique features of the dalithized class to end their stigmatized identity, both as outcastes and Hindus. If both Sudars and Dalits come together irrespective of their religious affiliations, they will account for over 70 percent of India's population and the so-called caste Hindus cannot challenge them in any way. Any movement therefore, in the line of bringing solidarity among dalits is always looked upon by the caste Hindus with fear and suspicion. We shall here touch upon a few elements of dalit - culture which give them a respectable identity of their own.

i. *Dalit religion: Liberation from Sanskritization*²⁹

Ambedkar argues that the original religion of the Dalits in India is Buddhism.³⁰ The absence of Buddhist rituals, which would not yield easily to change, once established, stands against the theory of Ambedkar. The presence of religious practices of Manu's Dharmic Sanskrit Hinduism in the natural religion of the dalits on the contrary, suggests that the dalits religion is a variant of Hinduism. This variant is identified as "little tradition" of the dalits and the Bahujans(Sudars) in opposition to the "great tradition" of the Sanskrit scriptures, which now through a process of sanskritization, try to assimilate the religions of the backward classes.

²⁹ James Theophilus Appavoo, "Dalit Religion," in James Masey (ed) *Indigenous People: Dalits, op. cit.*, pp. 111-121. The present section is based on the findings of the article.

³⁰ Ambedkar, *Writings & Speeches*, Vol.7. p.243

It is difficult to accept the ethnocentric theory that the high caste, hindus and the outcastes are two-traditions of the same religion. If they are to be two-traditions of a single religion, there have to be a commonality between these traditions. In the absence of which their common source of origin could not be established. In the line of similarly we may enumerate a few such as a) beliefs in Gods, b) celebration of festivals, c) offering to the deities. In the last case non-vegetarian food is offered in the "little tradition", whereas in the other, only vegetarian feed in offered. These similarities are common to more or less all the religions and are not enough to prove the two-tradition theory in Hinduism.

Differences, on the contrary, between the two are many. Through the analysis of these differences, J.T.Appavoo tries to prove that the Dalit religion is not the little tradition in Hinduism, and that the Dalits have a religion of their own. From the point of view of the concept of deities worshipped, the rituals, the place of worship and purpose of worship there are marked differences.

In the Dalit religion worship is done in the open place, whereas in the other the worship is always inside a building. The purpose of Dalit worship is gathering together as a community for corporate worship and festivity. In the Sanskrit religion this gathering together is for individual worship and festivity. In the Dalit religion worship is usually conducted under shady trees, groves and river banks, offering non-vegetarian food. The Sanskrit deities divide people. Only the high caste people can go inside the temple. The Dalit deities, however, force people to be in solidarity.

Ordinarily, the Dalits do not attach any holiness to the place of worship or the symbols they have. Their symbols are not consecrated idols or icons but mostly weapons, shapeless stones called as modikallu or just pieces. Only during, the festivals when the whole community is present the symbols acquire holiness. God comes to the people rather than he is chained to the idol. In other words the duty is in the possession of the priest in the Sanskrit tradition, where as in the Dalit religions the worshippers are in the possession of the deity. In

the original religion of the Dalit a place is provided for protest, whereas in Sanskrit religion the protest is killed by fixed rules for of the rituals. When a person is possessed, in the procession of the deity of the Dalits it is believed that the deity speaks through him. As in the Biblical prophesies, what follows is mostly protest against the oppressive elements in the social life.

In the Dalit religion, all the worshippers have equal and active participation. In the Sanskrit religion the worshippers have no participation in the rituals.

The above hints at the dissimilarities between the religion of the Dalit and the Manu's Dharmic Sanskrit religion's could sufficiently establish the truth that they are quite distinct and different from each other. The Dalit religion is a religion based on higher principles and concepts. The liberation it needs today is a liberation from its caricaturing as "little" or barbaric or as a variant of Hinduism.

ii. Liberation from unclean occupation

The Dalits are considered to be unclean or untouchables not because of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty or back of political power, problems common even among caste groups but because of their continuous association with the unclean occupations like scavenging, night-soil carrying, disposing of dead animals manually and attending to the needs of the special and inauspicious occasions and such other activities. These occupations are specially assigned to them in the name of Dharma and Karma by all those who were in power in different periods of time. So to break the notion of untouchability attached to the Dalit, first the notion of caste-based occupation system in Hinduism has to be abandoned. Getting a few individuals educated from these communities, keeping the caste system intact, is not going to uproot the stigmatized identity of the entire Dalit Community. The Dalit can find their salvation only by dissociating themselves from the traditional occupations assigned to them by the four-fold *varnavyavastha* of Hinduism.

iii. *The right to be human*

The problem of the Dalit is usually considered to be a religious problem associated with caste system. But the best possible approach to the Dalit issue is to look at it from a common human stand-point and as a common human problem. There are an umpteen number of Dalit Organizations, each one high-lighting only one particular aspect of the issue. This makes it difficult to define their identity and to evolve a common programme of action for all the Dalits.

The Christian theology of emancipation, it seems, instead of bringing emancipation, gives more life to the caste consciousness of the Indian Dalits. By perpetuating and patronizing the caste consciousness through reservation benefits, the self-degrading consciousness of the Dalit will be further heightened. Therefore any discovery of the identity of the Dalits which is not true to their human worth would do more harm than good to them as a socially and economically backward community.

The religions of the land, including Christianity, have to go beyond the boundaries of their tents in tackling issues of the shattered Dalits. The Church in India especially will be doing great service to Indian Society and particularly to the Dalit Communities if she, at least, could make her theological stand clear in matters that affect their total human future. In a situation like this the religious agencies should be open enough to join hands and work in co-operation with secular humanizing forces which is what the present Indian situation demands. Religion apart, such an approach can become wholistic, and hence suitable to pluralistic Dalit India.³¹

The Indian elitistic establishment, instead of touching on the common human core, harp on the distinguishing features of identity so as to keep the caste-consciousness ever alive. If the problem of the Dalit is situated in the framework of the caste, it can only serve to the interests and design of the Indian upper castes. The real problem of

³¹*Indigenous people*, p. 269

Dalit is not caste, but the problem of their right to be human on their native Indian soil.

Being a Dalit is not merely being in a particular caste, but to be in a specific human condition. This condition is not something sacred to be preserved for ever. It only stands for everything that a person is and has, at that moment of his life. It unfolds the existential realities and eschatological expectations of the Community of the Dalit. The following text beautifully summaries the line of thought we are developing here:

As a category, expressive of a condition, it cannot be a permanent unchangeable category like in the case of some species. There is always the possibility for one to emancipate himself or herself from the Dalithized condition. For no one likes to be a permanent poor man. No one likes to be a permanent Dalit either.³²

The search for the identity of Dalit should not end up in listing out certain features of a condition of life as permanent features of a community or group of people. The Dalit-issue has to be tackled as a changeable human condition. The fundamental universal human rights affirm that every person has a right to life. Any feature, discovered as a mark of identity of a Dalit group, which come in the way of the human right of every individual in the world to live in dignity worthy of his or her humanity, has to be discarded as pernicious to that group. Hence the search for identity has to be balanced with judicious selection

iv. Disobedience

Disobedience is today conceived as a legitimate act for Dalit liberation³³ In history social reform has not come from the efforts of philanthropists, but from the organized self-assertion on the part of the sufferers themselves. Freedom is not given to any group as a gift but born of struggles. In order to be free man has to rebel. Biblical religion

³² *Ibid.*, p.270

³³ Fr. Arvind P. Nirmal (ed), *Towards a Common Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 1989). pp.39-51

is a record of a two-pronged protest, protest against attempts at devaluing the Reality, i.e. the reality of God and Man. The Old Testament represents a protest against reducing God to the level of a thing or ideal. The New Testament represents a protest against reducing God to the level of a thing or idol. The New Testament represents a protest against reducing man to the level of a commodity.

To divide man into pure and impure, to mere sum of our society is certainly immoral and irrational. Any irrational institution, however legitimate it may be from the point of view of law and order in the society, has to be disobeyed and any religion that supports such irrationality has to be equally rejected stock and barrel. At the level of consciousness, every Dalit feels that he is not wanted in his country and in his religious institution. He is no citizen in his homeland.

The sense of being not wanted is a very serious problem. Religious institutions, however, turn out to be the supporters of status quo. The various social documents of the authorities of the Church in India show a preference to social order and peace over social justice. But for those at the bottom of our society who lack the basic necessities of life, justice is of more value than law and order and peace. Faced with these conflicting values, the only religious option has to be with the Dalit in order to usher in a just society.

Throughout history, man has continued to evolve and affirm his identity by acts of disobedience. The Dalits can find their Salvation only when they liberate themselves from the fear of putting up a challenge. The development of liberative ideas was dependent on great men's capacity for being disobedient- disobedient to authorities who try to muzzle new thoughts and to the authority of long-established opinions which declared change to be sheer nonsense.

6. Dalit Literature³⁴

Slaves will revolt only when they come to realize that they are slaves. To agitate and rebel, education and organization are needed. Education of the masses is achieved mostly through language and literature. The established ancient literature of India is essentially Hindu Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit reminds us of a culture and literature that supports, sanctions, perpetuates *varna* system. A true Indian is defined, in the circle of learned high caste Hindus, as one who accepts and learns Sanskrit language and its scriptures.

Indian literature is predominantly religious. These were written by rishis in Sanskrit. It was the language of the military conquerors who had been described as tall, fair, with prominent noses and fair complexion, belonging to a superior race. The language of the conquerors and the scriptures therein were regarded as superior. Instructions were given to the writers, poets who were largely Brahman rishis, how to write and what to write. According to *Natya Sastra* of Bharatmuni Gods, Kings, rishis and Brahmin priests should be heroes and the characters. As a revolt against the tyranny of the literary tradition, it is reported that Buddha had said that his teachings should be given to the people in their own languages - Prakriti and Pali

On 25th December 1927 Ambedkar burnt the Manusmriti at Chavadar tank at Mahad, Maharashtra as a Dalit protest against Sanskrit culture and untouchability. Dalit consciousness was awakened by the speech made by Ambedkar on this occasion and the literature which was inspired and produced by this consciousness, is called Dalit literature. Primarily due to the influence of Ambedkar Dalit Literature had blossomed in Marathi language more than any other language in India. Ordinary characters have displaced gods, kings, priests. Common people and common language were enthroned in their place.

³⁴ J.H. Anand 'Dalit Literature is the literature of Protest', in Bhagavan Das & James Massey (eds.), *Dalit-Solidarity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), pp.177-184

Dalit writer is a person committed to a cause. Writings of the Dalits are characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the caste-based divisive forces. They are angry young men and are aware that mere wishes and intentions are incapable of changing the hard reality. Literature has come into the hands of these Dalit writers as a tool for their salvation from discrimination, exploitation and injustice. Literature has always been used by writers as a weapon to fight against the established social order, norms, traditions hypocrisy, outmodel customers, as well as the political system.

7. Dalit Solidarity

Ambedkar in his speech made on 20th July 1942 at Nagpur proposed a way for liberation for the Dalit in the following words. "with justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle... The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual ... For our struggle is for our freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality which has been suppressed... My final word of advice to you is, educate, organise and agitate." ³⁵ Inspired by this call a number of Dalit organizations ³⁶ have come up to do various forms of services to the Dalit community.

Only through organized educational programme solidarity of the Dalits could be achieved to effectively handle the problems related to the issues such as untouchability, caste system, education of lower castes and outcasts, failure of government programmes and promises, reservation in legislature and public service anti-reservation agitations, the ideal of casteless society, atrocities committed against the Dalits in rural areas, exploitation and oppression of women, emergence and future of Dalit Literature, vision and future programme of action. Solidarity is obtained where men unitedly face their common problems to the point of getting agitated, after having been duly educated on the

³⁵ Quoted from: Bhagawan Das & James Massey, *Dalit Solidarity*. p.VII

³⁶ *Dalit Organizations: A Directory: Programme for Scheduled Castes* (New Delhi: India Social Institute, 1994)

issues. Man exists in solidarity with the rest of God's "creatures" both living and non-living. "It is in the people of the land as they become inheritors of the earth, that the true expression of the integrity of God's creation becomes a reality."³⁷ Only in and through the just participation of the people of the land in the management of the earth community that the re-inhabitation, renewal and sustainability of the entire community is made possible.

The Dalit solidarity is not meant to divide the society into Dalits and non-dalits, nor to separate the migrant from the people of the land, but to have just and equal participation of all sections of the people in the benefit and burden in our common task. Its aim is certainly a classless society where each one is counted for his human worth.

8. Dalit Theology

Theology, as we know is the ordering of a system of ideas based upon beliefs about the revelation of universal and eternal truths of God. This theological talk is a human task filtered through human experience which is limited by social realities. In India theology has been for too long the preserve of the elite, an academic activity and an intellectual activity the elite did for the elite with little or no direct contact with realities experienced by people. Arvind P. Nirmal makes the following observation about the tradition of Indian Christian theology.

Broadly speaking, Indian Christian theology in the past has tried to work out its theological systems in terms of either Advaita Vedanta or Vishishta Advaita. Most of the contributions to Indian Christian theology in the past came from caste converts to Christianity. The result has been that Indian Christian theology has perpetuated within itself what I prefer to call the "Brahminic" tradition. This tradition has further perpetuated intuition - interiority oriented approach to the theological task in India. One

³⁷ Bhagavan Das , *op. cit.* p..xvi

wonders whether this kind of Indian Christian theology will ever have a mass appeal.³⁸

Brahma Bandhava Upadhyaya, a Brahmin convert to Christianity attempted a synthesis of Sankara's advaita vedanta and Christian theology stressing the *jnana marga* (way of knowledge). Bp. Appasamy, following the way of devotion (*bhakti marga*), tried to synthesize Ramanuja's Vishishta advaita with Christian spirituality. In Chenchiah we find an attempt to synthesize Christian theology with Sri.Aurobindo's 'Integral yoga.'

This situation did not change till the seventies. It was in the seventies that Indian theologians began to take the questions of socio-economic justice more seriously. The most serious social problem was the stigma of untouchability suffered by the Dalits. In clear terms Manu declares about this stigma: "But a *sudra*, whether bought or unbought, he may compel to do servile work; for he was created by the self-existent to be the slave of a Brahmin. A sudra, though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude, since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it" (*Manusmrti*, VIII, 413-414).

Today Christian dalit theology has to emerge through efforts to reinterpret God's liberating presence in a society that consistently denies them their humanity, socially ostracises them, economically exploits them, and culturally subjugates them. Theology is political language. It has to articulate what people think of God in their political situation. To build up a new society critical reflection and committed action with the Dalits is needed. The Dalits have to be empowered through these process to liberate themselves from various forms of slavery to which they are subjected.

An integral part of Dalit power is in Dalit-Consciousness. It consciousness. It consists in becoming aware that Dalit humanity is constituted by their dalitness. It means that the Dalit people should not

³⁸ Arvind P Nirmal "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology" in *A Reader in Dalit Theologi*, Arvind Nirmal, (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College), p.54

feel any more ashamed of being dalit. In an article on this subject M.E.Prabhakar expresses this idea succinctly:

Getting rid of their inferiority complex and slave mentality is an integral part of dalit-consciousness. Dalit is dignified. The affirmation of selfhood, personhood is a powerful act that constitutes a farewell to innocence. It makes the dalits realize that their position in life is not simply to suffer their lot but to take responsibility for themselves.³⁹

The awareness of the dalitness of their condition itself has to be turned into a liberative force making them involved in social change as effective agents.

9. Dalit and Morals

Roberto de Nobili, as a missionary theologian in India had incipiently tried to inculturate moral theology in terms of *dharma*. But he did not show critical awareness of the caste discrimination deriving from the social role of *Varnadharmā* of Hinduism. Today, however, the inculturation of moral theology should reckon with the discriminated poor dalits.

In the past moral theologians tended to focus their attention on moral texts and largely ignored context of their origin and formulations. A liberative contextualization of morals in a world divided into the powerless and powerful, the Dalits and the high caste must go beyond the mere explanation of the historicity of context. Similarly the tradition of the ethics of autonomy is not adequate for the contextualization of morals for the liberation of the dalits. S.Arokiasamy offers following critique of the ethics of autonomy:

In the ethics of autonomy, the subjectivity of the person is understood in terms of the rational individual in his or her human acts. The stress on the individual moral autonomy without

³⁹Arvind P Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College), p.48

attention to the historical reality and relationality of persons and communities results in an articulation of moral demands based on abstract subjectivity divorced from its context. Such abstraction becomes convenient to the bourgeois middle-class and high caste ethos and turn out to be an ally of economic, social and political liberalism.

The ethics of autonomy is insensitive to the powerless, the broken and the exploited (Dalits). Its characteristics are then self-sufficiency, elitism, idealist thinking, and conspicuous absence of solidarity of peoples. Solidarity in the caste-ridden society of India is a preferential commitment to the powerless. "The commitment to the dignity and liberation of every human person (*sarvodaya*=liberation of all) is mediated by the critical option for the dignity and liberation of the last, the least and the powerless (*antyodaya* = liberation of the least).⁴⁰

The class-caste position of a moral agent influences and conditions his cultural, socio-economic and political dimensions of moral behavior. For example, every person has a right to meet his basic needs of shelter, food and clothing. A rich landlord's perception of these needs will be wants going beyond basic needs. Here we see how our class-caste situation influences our moral perceptions and choices. This relativism in morals reveals how socio-economic and political structures and cultural symbols come to embody individual and collective egoism of people and nations. With the same criterion, we have to examine the whole structure of morality in every culture and community.

A preferential option for the poor moves to a universal solidarity through a concrete commitment to the poor here and now. The way to universal solidarity lies in and through a particular preference. When this principle is applied to moral concepts or virtues such as *ahimsa* (non-violence), *asteya* [non- stealing] and *satya* (truth), these will have different meanings for the powerless (dalit) and the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.298

powerful. *Ahimsa* would mean for the powerful man renouncing the brute force and it would mean for the powerless, rejecting the violence experienced in their lives and being empowered to become subjects of their own freedom justice and dignity.⁴¹ The powerful person considers the empowering of the poor as violence. To be historically authentic and effective *ahimsa* must be critically contextualized, only if this is done, could we speak coherently of *ahimsa* and *dharma* for every human person.

The moral duties (dharma) for the dalit may work out to be oppressive as it is interpreted and understood by the powerful and therefore, through a proper contextualization of the morals the powerless (the dalits) have to find their liberation from the moral duties the eternal religion (*sanatanadharmā*) has imposed on them.

10. Conclusion

The question where should the Dalits turn for salvation cannot be answered in any single, straight forward way. The answer depends on the nature of salvation one seeks an eternal salvation of the soul, or a temporal or earthly liberation of man from all that enslaves him. In the latter sense we can identify a number of factors, such as caste, untouchability, poverty, duties, prescribed by the upper caste Hinduism, unclean occupations, village system of living. Sanskritization etc. from which the Dalits are to be liberated. As a means for attaining this goal the solidarity of the Dalits is envisaged. It is to be consolidated by rebellion, challenge and disobedience supported by the Dalit literature of protest.

Some of the prominent Dalit movements have adopted Charvaka's materialism as the first point in their philosophical manifesto. The second point is the Buddhist Sangha philosophy. A third point is the humanism of the activists in the movement for social rejuvenation. The third point could be a common platform for all

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, P.306

those who go along with the cause of the Dalit. In his final speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, Ambedkar said: "We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life.... with out equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equally without liberty would kill individual initiative... there is complete absence of two things in Indian society (equality and fraternity). ...We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will below up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up."⁴²

The Dalits seek a kingdom of man where equality and fraternity are recognized in freedom.

⁴²V.R.Krishna Iyer, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit's Future* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1990) ,pp.32 -33