

## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN DALITS AND BIBLE:

### Certain Indicators for Interpretation

Dr. A. Maria Arul Raja\*

#### 1. Religio-Cultural Resources For Liberation

Ramanathapuram of Tamilnadu state in south India has recently witnessed yet another event of the series of unabated atrocities against Dalits in October 1998. The phenomenon of increasing atrocities unleashed against the Dalits by the anti-Dalit caste groups is "attributable to the stratified caste structure having under strain because of the increasing assertiveness of the traditionally oppressed sections – the growing tendency of the political class to play upon the caste equations for partisan ends has inevitably resulted in the sharpening of the caste divide"<sup>1</sup>.

This is just one of the manifestations of experiences of subjugation that the Dalits undergo and the resultant revolt that they undertake. The need of the hour at this moment of Dalit's subjugation and revolt is to identify the religio-cultural energies and deploy them for the enhancement of Dalit subjecthood and corporate actualization of liberation from casteist oppression. One of such religio-cultural resources quite vibrant with the spirit of the Dalit struggle is the Bible.

Some attempts have been made in the recent days to create a conversation between the Dalit world and the biblical world while mutually interpreting both of them<sup>2</sup>. In the same line, this article

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\* Dr. Maria Arul Raja is rector of Arulkal, Chennai, India.

<sup>1</sup> "Caste Conflicts in Tamilnadu", Editorial, *The Hindu* (Chennai, October 7, 1998) 12; also Cf. S.Viswanathan, "Caste-based Mobilisation and Violence", *Frontline* (November 6, 1998), 36-39.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp: Biblical Studies in Perspective*, Madras: Gurukul, 1994; *Ibid.*, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul, 1996, pp.6-75; A.Maria Arul Raja, "Authority of Jesus: A Dalit Reading of Mk 11:27-33",

attempts to highlight some indicators for the Dalit interpretation of the Bible with the hope of serving the causes of Dalit liberation.

## 2. Widened Scope

Before discussing the possibility of placing the Bible as the dialogue partner with the Dalits, we need to understand its basic familiarity with the Dalits. Even a cursory glance at the following statistics<sup>3</sup> will highlight the tiny minority of the Dalits who are presumably familiar with the biblical world. Total Indian population is 846 million according to the 1991 census.

Dalits (excluding non-Hindu religions): 138 million

Dalits (including all non-Hindu religions): 150 million  
(conservative estimation)

Christians (all castes and denominations): 22 million

Dalit Christians: 15 million.

That is to say that among the total Indian population (846 million), the Dalit Christians (15 million) who are familiar with the biblical world is not even 2 percent. Quantitatively too, the Dalit cultural expressions have been made a muted reality.

In this backdrop of questionable familiarity of the Dalits with the Bible both quantitatively and qualitatively, how do we understand the role of interpretation of the Bible?

While interpreting the Bible in the light of Dalit experience of dehumanisation in view of liberation, one can confine oneself only to the 'tiny' world of Dalit Christians (just 15 million), or extend the possibility of such a venture in the wide scope of the whole lot of Dalits across the sub-continent (over 150 million). In these, we choose the second possibility of choosing the widened scope of the

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*Jeevadhara* XXV/145(1995), 123-138; *Ibid.*, "'Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Reflections", *Jeevadhara* XXV/151 (1996), 29-34; *Ibid.*, "Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible" ITS 33/3 (1996), 249-259; *Ibid.*, "Exorcism and Dalit Self-affirmation", *VJTR* 60 (1996), 843-851.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jose Kananaikel, *Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin*, Delhi: ISI, 1986, p.1.

Dalit interpretation of the Bible while incorporating the common Dalit experiences by way of transcending the religious barriers among the Dalits. In doing so, we need to identify the common ground for the dialogue between Bible and the Dalits from religious affiliations.

### 3. Common Ground Between Biblical World And Dalits

The biblical texts are perceived to be the written expressions of the impact made by the exodus-event upon the subjugated people in their struggle for freedom from oppression and by the Jesus-event seeking solidarity with outcast and confronting the ruling establishment<sup>4</sup>.

The struggles and the experiences of the present day Dalits find certain natural affinity towards the struggles and experiences of the marginalised written down as the faith expressions through the biblical discourses. This affinity should not lead us to conclude that the Dalits are going to reenact the biblical drama of liberation already written by some other people. "They are not forced to go by the trodden path, but to create the path as they go"<sup>5</sup>. And eventually the on-going struggle of Dalits will prompt them to produce their own discourses in oral or written form.

### 4. Dalits in Orality and Bible in Literacy

It is to be noted that the Dalits do not belong to the retention class with scribal expertise preserving the traditions with written documentation, because they are largely kept illiterate down the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.Servio Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, New York: Orbis, 1981; and George M. Soares Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and Struggle", in John Vattamattam *et al.*(eds.) *Liberative Struggle in a Violent Society*, Hyderabad: Forum, 1991, pp.135-161.

<sup>5</sup> Felix Wilfred, "Postmodernism and Critical Theory: Their Implication for third World Societies", Paper presented at the National Seminar on "Postmodernism and Critical Theory" held at the Radhakrishnan Institute of Advanced Study in Philosophy, University of Madras, August 18-20, 1997, p.11.

centuries<sup>6</sup>. And also the practice of reading the written words loudly or silently by individual Dalits is quite minimal except among the educated the Dalits. In this context, the discourses of experiences of the struggles of the Dalits are primarily of the oral transmission. Though the Bible is presented to us in the form of written text today, it is to be noted that many of a folk form “orally treasured and transmitted have passed into the Bible and have become one with it”<sup>7</sup>. This aspect of the orality of the Bible has to be much emphasized while it is made to be the dialogue partner with the Dalit realm of communication, which is built on the oral mode of transmission. Thus the Bible could be of some service to the Dalits in their attempts to regain the human dignity only if it is presented to the Dalits as the pre-literate oral narrative in this age of post-literate oral (electronic) communication. That is to say, that the biblical texts are to be transmitted for the Dalits as if they are the orally transmitted stories when Dalits are bombarded with today’s ubiquitous ‘televangelisation’ through the consumerist advertisements and cinema-based thriller narratives.

One should not simply assume that the Dalit imagination is evoked automatically by the biblical symbolic world. We need to ascertain to what extent the impact of the biblical experiences is imprinted in the religiosity even of the Dalits who are Christians. The internalized religiosity from the culture of literacy and the innate but subjugated religiosity from the heritage of orality are at once present in the Dalit worldview<sup>8</sup>. But the “symbolic capital of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Manu Smriti*, 12: 4-5, “If a Shudra listens intensively to a recitation of the Veda, his ear shall be filled with molten tin or lac. If he recites the Vedic text, his tongue shall be cut off. If he remembers them, his body shall be spilt in twain”, as quoted in L.R. Balley, “India Needs a Cultural Revolution”, in Barbara R. Joshi (ed.), *Untouchable: Voices of Dalit Liberation Movement*, London: Zen, 1986, p.149.

<sup>7</sup> Felix Wilfred, *From Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity*, Madras: University of Madras, 1995, p.240.

<sup>8</sup> The dual identity at once of being Dalits and of being Christians is articulately highlighted by Sathinathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.68.

subaltern communities as manifested in their religion is not entirely controlled by the dominant communities”<sup>9</sup> with written scriptures. If the Bible is to be made an effective instrument of transformation for the Dalits, then this subjugated but latently active religiosity should be activated for a dialogue with the Bible.

### 5. Dalit Understanding and Meta-narrative

When a corpus of texts or worldviews is presented to be a comprehensive system of explanations with the claims of possessing a total vision of reality and universal validity, then it becomes the great narrative or meta-narrative. The meta-narratives are intimately related to the hegemony of rationality, very often dissecting the multi-faceted reality into bits and pieces. Any such attempts at making (reducing!) the biblical texts as a great grand meta-narrative would defeat the purpose of Bible’s servanthood for energising the Dalit struggle.

Being down-to-earth people rooted in the materiality of reality (land, sweat, food materials in the process production, carcass, leather of the dead animals), the Dalit modes of perception feel out of place with the logic of logocentric, idealistic or positivistic outlook, determinacy, belief as system, literacy-based communication or text-bound interpretation. And hence Dalit mind and heart intuitively deconstruct any meta-narratives including the Bible when it is presented so. The dalit way of understanding reality innately acknowledges its sense of fluidity, particularity, indeterminacy, partiality and contextuality. And so it does not believe in universal claims of having elicited the true message from the Bible for all times and for all peoples. In other words, the Dalit mind does not seek to control the Bible nor does it permit the Bible (presented as a meta-narrative – *grande histoire*) to control its own brand of interpretation. As the realm of Dalit discourse is of *petite histoire* so also the biblical materials are to be presented in this way.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

## **6. Dalit Religiosity And Biblical Religiosity**

Before taking stock of the biblical religiosity, the matrix of Dalit religiosity has to be rightly identified. By placing these two religiosities in synoptic comparison, we are helped further to enable the dialogue between the Dalits and the Bible in an effective way. Let us briefly indicate some general aspects of the Divine viewed from the eyes of the Dalits and the Bible.

### **6.1. Purity and the Divine**

“The consciousness built around Dalit-bahujan Goddess/God images is rooted in production processes ... it is also important that these images find their centre in human existence and in the relations between productive forces and nature”<sup>10</sup>. In a Dalit worldview, the Divine is perceived to be accessible to the Dalits at any moment of the day or night, of joy or sorrow, of community celebration or individual prayer. Meditation with the Divine in the forms of the institution of priesthood or of prescription of the purity-pollution regulations related to persons (holy priest vs. inauspicious widow), language (godly Sanskrit vs. common parlance), food (vegetarianism vs. non-vegetarianism), clothing (specific attire for prayer vs. soiled dhoti for work), order in the worship or gifts for the deity, is not the primary obsession in the Dalit religious discourse.

In this background, if the biblical God is portrayed primarily as the agent promoting the deuteronomic or priestly slant of purity orientations, then, such a God may not be palatable to the taste of Dalit religiosity. Because the Divine is never distant from the Dalits, they do not seem to have the need for incarnation of self-emptying as understood in the biblical tradition.

### **6.2. Gender and Temperament of the Divine**

In Dalit consciousness divinity is primarily experienced through the symbol of the goddesses.

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<sup>10</sup> Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Calcutta: Samya, 1996, p.91.

The characterization that they are virgins appears to de-sexualize them in a particularly anti-patriarchal way, which may even be interpreted as a critique of Hinduism. But more so, their asexuality keeps them outside the dynamics of the Hindu male gods. Dalit goddesses do not become objects of male gods' sexual pursuits or subjects that endeavour to manipulate and control the passions of these gods. The personal sexuality of the Dalit goddesses is not part of their myths and religious narratives<sup>11</sup>.

This brings us to the awareness that the images of biblical God and the Dalit Goddess are freed from any association with spouse/s. The common ground of the dialogue between the Dalits and the Bible seems to be here the sovereignty of the Divine in both cases with no tendency to fall in line with the questionable designs of manipulation or co-option worked out by other gods or spouse/s. That is why perhaps both the Dalit and biblical religiosities are to a great extent an-iconic in orientation, in the midst of rich symbolism in rituals and celebrations.

The area of divergence is the gender of the Divine. The active male figure (fatherly God) is predominant in the biblical world in contrast with the Dalit world (motherly Spirit of Shakti). But the blend of affection with assertion, tenderness with ferocity and sustaining embrace with protective confrontation are common to both.

### 6.3 Born out of Death

Dalit goddesses/gods, in general, are the mortals-turned-deities who were supposed to have been killed (*kolayil uthitha deivangal*) in the very act of protecting the village from danger or of refusing to obey the inhuman cultural prescriptions of the ruling elite. Participating in human miseries, encountering the evil forces, man-made or otherwise, paying the price for accompanying and protecting the afflicted through genuine solidarity and ultimately sacrificing the

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<sup>11</sup> Clarke, p.72.



very life for the sake of the suffering, many are the major elements attributed to the majority of the local Dalit deities.

The biblical Father-God is said to be accompanying the human communities with genuine concern with the afflicted through the humanising activities and blood-shed of Jesus whose solidarity with the oppressed and encounter with the oppressors keep on recreating the Spirit of new life of liberation. The new life of the Divine solidarity, sprouting out of the blood-shed resulting from the very act of affirming the humanity of the Dalits, is the privileged interpretative ground in the dialogue between Dalits and the Bible.

#### 6.4. Language of Inclusion

The Dalits are the alienated sons/daughters of the soil upon their own land of their foreparents down the centuries<sup>12</sup>. The deities enshrined in the substratum of the Dalit consciousness "do not function as means to subdue a section of society; they are not designed to exploit a section within the community; they function to create a common cultural ethic, one that energises the masses so that they can engage in productive activity"<sup>13</sup>. Aggression, conquest, domination and colonial occupation do not seem to be the mainline characteristic of the ethos of the Dalits, nor are they the *a priori* categories of the Dalit cultural realm. Even the whole spectrum of historical decline of Dalit autonomy and assertiveness in the socio-cultural realm could be attributed to this factor that the Dalits by nature are not inclined to be a warring people to lord it over the 'other'<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. James Massey, *Roots: A Concise History of the Dalits*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1991; John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, pp.1-32.

<sup>13</sup> Ialiah (see note 2 above), p.91.

<sup>14</sup> The apparent culture of silence of the Dalits should not be understood that the Dalits are incapable of expressing the righteous wrath in the face of injustice. Even within the minimum space allotted to them by the oppressive casteist hierarchical society, Dalits have their own brand of organized or unorganized assertions ranging from mild protests up to violent retaliation. In other words, the Dalit world, by and large, does not believe in the political game of domination



When biblical narratives with the language of 'election', the 'land', the 'Zion', the 'people', the 'aliens', the 'conquest' or the 'holy war' are encountering the Dalit imagination in the given context, they have to be processed through the crucible of the hermeneutics of suspicion of the suffering Dalits<sup>15</sup>. The basis for such a Dalit suspicion is to be traced in the Dalit religiosity, which is not built upon the language of exclusion.

In this backdrop of Dalit location, the contextualized Dalit reading of the Bible "means putting the language of election, the land, and the people, as well as that of holy war (?), in a given context on behalf of the poor, the disenfranchised, and the socially marginalised"<sup>16</sup>. And obviously among the biblical stories, those of 'the wandering crowds seeking a land' will be more drawing the attention of the Dalit imagination rather than those of 'the settled people conquering other nations'. Consequently the biblical matrix of the preferential option for the alienated as against the court theologies perpetuating the royal consciousness operative through aggression or even colonialism will be highlighted in the background of Dalit struggle for egalitarianism<sup>17</sup>.

## 7. Performance as Transformation

Dalit consciousness, no doubt, is inseparably committed to transformation from caste slavery to equality. It is an on-going process. If Bible enters their way as an instrument of enhancing the

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through aggression. Rather they are unwillingly dragged into the realm of the spiral of violence initiated by the anti-Dalit forces.

<sup>15</sup> While reflecting on the epistemological privilege of the victimised Dalits, the following statement is worth noting: "The *dukkha* of the victims has a great cathartic role in de-ideologizing, even more than any theoretical enterprise which postmodernism or critical theory might offer". Felix wilfred, "Postmodernism", p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Leif E. Vaage, "Text, Context, Conquest, Quest: The Bible and Social Struggle in Latin America", SBL Seminar Papers, (1991), p.365.

<sup>17</sup> A. Maria Arul Raja, "Assertion of the Periphery: Some Biblical Paradigms", *Jeevadhara XXVII/157* (1997), 25-35.

Dalit identity in their struggle towards liberation, their primary objective will not be in terms of locating the creative sensibilities of the ancient authors of the written texts of the Bible. In other words, the Dalitness chooses to stand between the text (here the Bible, as the record of divine revelation and/or the work of art) and the addressee (Dalits), rather than between the addresser (biblical authors) and the text (Bible)<sup>18</sup>.

And even while Dalit consciousness is enabled to interact with the syntactic cohesion and semantic coherence of the biblical narratives, its attention is rivetted on the pragmatic impulse from the text. This pragmatic impulse is already coloured by the concrete questions of life and death emerging from the given Dalit context. The meaning thus produced obviously is not a close-ended content (referential axis), but an open-ended event (performative axis). The performative nature of the Dalit pre-understanding in conversation with the performative axis of the biblical texts will create this open-ended meaning as an on-going event addressing the needs of the transformation.

## 8. Conclusion

Our concern is to serve the causes of Dalit struggle to attain their liberation. All the religio-cultural resources are to be harnessed for this purpose. The major thread-line of the biblical texts seems to actively vibrate with the pain and anguish of the struggling Dalits and hence a spontaneous dialogue is expected to take place between Dalit world and the biblical world. The scope of the dialogue is widened by way of incorporating the whole lot of Dalits with all religious affinities.

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<sup>18</sup> The orientation of Dalit consciousness seems to vibrate more with the trends of Postmodernism. "Postmodernism seems to stress the relationship between the creative sensibility and the work of art, between addresser and message, post-modernism that between message and addressee", by G. Hoffman, A. Hornung and R. Kunow, quoted by Lhab Hassan, *Postmodern in turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbia: Ohio University Press, 1987, p.74.

The platform of orality is perceived to be a special ground upon which a mutual interpretation of Dalits and the Bible is effectively taking place. If Bible is presented as a meta-narrative with the presumption of proposing all-comprehensive universal solutions, it may not be palatable to the Dalit imagination. The biblical texts are to be enabled to unveil themselves upon the ground reality of the Dalit religiosity with its unique experience of the Divine. In this process some convergent and divergent elements of Dalit religiosity and biblical religiosity are briefly indicated.

And finally it is emphasised that the performative agenda and the ethos both of the Dalit world and biblical world are to be perceptively looked into and allowed to dialogue with each other for an effective transformation towards integral Dalit liberation.