

Dalit Theology: A Critical Survey of its Main Aspects

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Introduction

Dalit theology articulates the voice of the worst oppressed, least recognized, most humiliated masses of the Indian society. It unearths "the underside of the history"¹ and articulates the identity of those that have been buried in the foundations of human history. It tries to reshape the destabilized humanity of the no-persons of the society who has no say in any decision that affects them directly and indirectly. It identifies the God who suffers all the ignominies of these underprivileged classes. This God entwines himself with the struggles of these powerless dalits in every step they take to assert their social, political and cultural identity. He reveals himself as the God who is ready to dethrone people from power and send the caste people away empty² in order to ensure the basic dignity of the dehumanized dalits. Dalit theology³ cannot but image God as one who is a typical dalit of India, marginalized at every level of his existence. If this is the direction of the emerging DT, the whole purview of theological endeavor takes a new turn challenging the existing structures of the

1 Deane William Ferm, "Third-World Liberation Theology: Challenge to World Religions" in Dan Cohn-Scherbok, ed. *World Religions and Human Liberation*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1996, 6.

2 Luke 1: 52-53.

3 Hereafter will be noted as DT.

society and the Church. Such challenges are confronted with suspicion and antagonism. They are seen as a threat to the existing hierarchy of power that resembles the caste ridden hierarchical society. Let us make an attempt to understand DT from the right perspective by highlighting some of its key features. The study of special features of DT leads us to a right understanding of the Christ of the dalits. We would also try to see how a dalit Christology necessitates an ethical reconstruction of the society according to the demands of justice.

Situating Dalit Theology

Oppressive structures of caste dehumanize millions of the so called untouchables in our society. This unique experience of the dalits cannot be reduced to any particular category. It may come under the Marxian class identification of the proletariat, but the oppression in-built in the caste structure transcends the limits of class oppression. Dalit theologians specifically highlight this aspect⁴ that demands special attention in our attempt to situate DT.

The goal and purpose of theology is to challenge the oppressive structures of the society and initiate a process of social transformation. Dalits feel strongly the inability of our traditional theology to propose a liberative praxis that can ensure human dignity, freedom and equality. Rather they find it falling in line with the Brahminical tradition of India that colludes with the caste structure ideologically and theoretically. "This Brahminic tradition in the classical Indian Christian Theology needs to be challenged by Dalit Theology."⁵ This disentangling from the clutches of Brahminic tradition is seen as a must so that a theology of the dalits by the dalits for the dalits can emerge spontaneously.⁶ Its efforts to steer clear of the dominant trends

4 Saral K. Chatterji, "Why Dalit Theology" in James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalits*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, 180-182.

5 Arvind P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology" in Massey, *Indigenous People*, 219.

6 Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1997, 40. "It is questionable whether the division of every one into dalit and non-dalit and the vision of God, who is the God of all, as opting, not only preferentially, but exclusively, for the dalit is a useful approach, even if it is methodological." A. P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective" in Arvind P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, ND, 142. Nirmal clarifies the mode of non-dalits doing DT.

of every nature indicates their genuine search for a consciousness that will affirm and assert their lost identity.

As a theology that searches the ways and means of affirming the identity of the oppressed dalit groups, it stands unique in expressing itself as peoples' theology. Dalit consciousness⁷ stands as the core of this expression and this consciousness invokes a pivotal response from the oppressed people as well as from the theologians. Even their God consciousness is enveloped by the dalitness.⁸ A theology that emerges from such a God consciousness, has to spearhead the total liberation of the dalits. In this way we can understand DT as a theology of liberation uniquely expressing itself as a response to the oppressive caste structures and the chains of unwanted socio-cultural subjugation emerge there from.

Specific traits of Dalit Theology

As we have situated DT as people's theology it would be ideal to identify some of its characteristics. Though DT resembles some of the emerging third world theologies there are similarities as well as dissimilarities between these two. Our purpose here is to highlight some of the important features of DT so as to enhance the understanding of DT in the right perspective.

1) Pathos as the starting point

DT as a faith articulation of the lived experience of the Dalits starts from the pathos of the Dalits. "A Christian dalit theology is a story of the afflictions, the bondage, the harsh treatment, the toil and the tears of the dalits. A genuinely dalit theology will be characterized by the pathos, by suffering."⁹ The pathos of the dalits indicates their social existence that is reduced to an existence of "shame, inferiority complex, experience of discrimination, self hate, confused identity,

While the dalits experience directly the pathos of life others have only indirect knowledge. It is this aspect that limits the non-dalits to an empathetic and sympathetic knowing and doing of DT.

7 A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, "The Ideological Nature of the Emerging Dalit Consciousness" in Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 81-92.

8 A. P. Nirmal, *Christian Dalit Theology*, 220-222.

9 A. P. Nirmal, *Christian Dalit Theology*, 60.

helplessness and dependence, apathisation etc."¹⁰ Dalit theologians accuse traditional theology that this particular experience of the dalits has been totally sidelined in theological enterprises. This exclusion is another reason why traditional theology stands helpless to initiate and sustain efforts towards the liberation of the dalits.

Pathos includes the bitter, dehumanizing experience forced on every dalit in daily life. Once this evoked a sense of resignation that implied the acceptance of such treatments as God's will and as consequences of past *Karma*. Humiliating experiences of the dalits are not taken any more as God's design for their lives. They evoke today anger and resentment. The oppressive structure of the caste is identified as the sole source of such dehumanization. This invokes a desire to change the conditions of life.¹¹ God is expected to be a liberator who accompanies them in their efforts to throw of such unwanted, meaningless sufferings that engulf them everyday. If not for such pathos, the dalits may not have awakened to counteract the unjust atrocities perpetrated on them.

2) A Theology of Protest

Protest is a legitimate act when one faces unjust aggression. When the social structures perpetuate such aggressions in the name of social stability and order the very social set up has to be questioned. Dalits legitimately protest against the age-old practices that reduce them to no-persons in the name of customs and traditions. This voice of protest rightly falls back on the prophetic tradition that denounced unjust structures of the then societies. Job perceives a God who expects the innocent sufferer to protest against the suffering unnecessarily imposed upon him. His friends gave many reasons for his suffering and justified it. However, Yahweh as a just God expected him to protest strongly against such unwarranted suffering of an innocent.¹²

10 V. Devasahayam, "Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions" in V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1996, 278.

11 M. Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 4. When he presents the source of Minjung Theology, Han is identified as the starting point. "Han is the feeling of resentment, depression, repressed anger, helplessness, just indignation, etc. which is combined with a desire for better future." I think that the Han of Minjung theology and the Pathos of DT play the same role in liberating the people from oppressive forces.

12 J. Susaimanickam, "Protest: The Language of Prophecy" in Thomas Kadankavil, ed. *Little Traditions and National Culture*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000,

Dalits are inspired by the same spirit of God to protest against every structure that enslaves them.

“Every dalit should regard caste, which is built of follies and fatuities, as an irrational institution which obstructed human progress by inhibiting competition and confining the intellect within narrow bounds.... Any irrational institution, however legitimate it may be, has to be disobeyed and any religion that supports such irrationality has to be equally rejected stock and barrel.”¹³

If the Church tacitly approves discrimination and justifies caste structure then the dalits strongly feel that there is no legitimate authority in the Church and they do not have any obligation to obey. Ambedkar projected ‘agitation’ as the first act against discriminatory structures.¹⁴ He proved this in his moral praxis showing his own fellow dalits that only such protest would awaken the society as well as the oppressed masses to the humanities of one another. “As an ideology, protest becomes a weapon in the hands of the powerless. The moral content of the protest is to ascertain the moral worth, the individuality and dignity of the human.”¹⁵ Naturally DT enshrines this dimension at every level of its operation questioning not only the legitimacy of authorities but also the authenticity and genuineness of scripture and its interpretation.

3) A Theology of Identity

DT is in search of its own identity and that of the dalits. It is a dialectical process. When the lost identity of the oppressed dalits is redeemed DT can also claim its own identity. Both the processes are still in an initial stage. The obscured identity of the faceless dalit masses has to be salvaged by conscious and collective efforts by them. DT should play a vital role in identifying the obstacles against such

21-24; Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World: Foundations for a Christian Approach to Justice*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987, 79.

13 Antony Raj, “Disobedience: A Legitimate Act for Dalit Liberation” in A. P. Nirmal, *Common Dalit Ideology*, 49.

14 M. S. Gore, *Social Context of an Ideology*, Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993, 97.

15 Xavier Ilango, “Morality from a Dalit Perspective,” *Jeevadhara*, XXVIII: 168 (November, 1998) 433-434.

self-identification of the dalits. They are told repeatedly in the society that they have no self-identity except the one graciously offered by the caste people. They are forced to give up the self-identity even if some dare to affirm it.

Jesus affirmed the identity of the outcastes and the untouchables of his society by his constant association with them. His table fellowship with the dalits of his society earned him the worst name, 'a friend of sinners.'¹⁶ It is the deep solidarity of Jesus with the least of the society that redeemed the self-worth of the outcastes. Their identity as that are unworthy of God's Kingdom was erased and replaced with an identity that they are the first in God's Kingdom. Preferential option for the dalits in God's Kingdom obligates a similar solidarity from the Church toward the dalits. A total commitment to the cause of the dalits alone will retrieve their lost identity. Affirmation of their identity should not be frowned upon and viewed as a threat to the existing identities of others. Only in an atmosphere of equal identities the humanity of everybody would flourish. Through such affirmations alone the integral liberation of the society can be realized.

4) Counter Cultural

Cultural hegemony of one group obscures the cultural expression of many other groups. One group that is estranged by the cultural hegemony of the Brahmins is the dalits. Dalits cannot think of a meaningful participation in the mainstream culture. It is a story of powerlessness and dependency that participation in the socio-cultural process of the society is made highly complex and inaccessible.

Education as a process of building oneself into a full human person becomes meaningless to the dalit masses. Once it was denied them totally. When they are given education they are forced to internalize the values of the dominant castes. The dominant castes wish to instill a low self-image in them. The system of education conveniently serves the motive of the dominant castes. Thus a

16 George Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus," *Jeevadhara*, XXII: 128 (March, 1992) 151.

successful transfer of enslaving values are given to the young generation so as to perpetuate the caste culture.

Dalit gods and shrines are considered low by the caste Hindus. These gods share the same fate of the unwanted untouchables. Ritually impure people worship gods who are ritually impure. Unlike the gods and goddesses of the great tradition, dalit gods are shrined under trees and huts. Even in the festivals of the great tradition feudal relationship between the caste people and the dalits are symbolically and ritually replicated.¹⁷ Even the converted Christian dalits strongly experience the many-folded alienation in the Church and society. Religion as a tool of oppression is proved right here.¹⁸

Many cases of atrocities against the dalits are not properly dealt with in the courts. Either such cases drag in the court for a long time or the offenders fix the judgements through false witnesses. The reason behind such a legal apathy is the contradiction enshrined in the law and its practice. In principle every citizen of India is equal before the law and is entitled to enjoy all the privileges of the society. In practice when the dalits try to affirm their social and cultural rights atrocities and ostracizing are the only rewards given to them

Cultural alienation through the aforementioned spheres of social life makes them powerless and reduces them to the level of useless animals. They are convinced that it is not in their power to change the social reality. This is the success of Brahmanism to have effectively conditioned the consciousness of the dalits to take their lower status in society as something natural and normal.¹⁹

As the dalits do not find cultural space to express their cultural identity within the Brahmanic cultural world, they have started exploring new ways to reveal their aspirations and ambitions. Such cultural expressions openly counter the oppressive forms of the dominant culture. An outright rejection of the values of the dominant

17 A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, "Dalit Theology: A Movement of Counter-Culture" in Massey, *Indigenous People*, 255.

18 Stan Lourdasamy, *Religion as a Social Protest*, Calcutta: Multi Book Agency, 1993, 28.

19 A. M. A. Ayrookuzhiel, "Dalit Theology", 257.

culture cannot be imagined immediately. However, efforts to reject the culture of the caste people are evident in the cultural life of the dalits. Theology plays the role of consolidating such counter-cultural elements that will affirm and assert the liberative tone in their lives.

Jesus initiated a counter-cultural process. He challenged the culturally enslaving structures of his society. He ignored the laws of the Sabbath when the healing of God's daughter or son was at stake (Mt. 12:13). Love and fellowship took precedence over laws of purification (Mt. 15:1-6). The needs of the oppressed poor demand immediate attention than the temple of God (Mk. 11: 15-17). The outcaste, the Samaritan, becomes the model of God's love by his self-giving love toward the suffering one (Lk. 10: 29-36). The authentic love of a harlot becomes the good news of the Kingdom than the law-centered pretensions of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 26: 6-13). Thus Jesus introduces a new culture where the outcastes of the society have the first place. He affirmed and confirmed the cultural expressions of the dalits of his day by giving them a religious sanction.²⁰

Dalit culture expresses itself in literature, folk-arts, little traditions, ect. In all such expressions a strong sense of defiance, and the rejection of the dominant culture is quite explicit. Only such rejection recreates the cultural identity of the dalits and they follow the cultural praxis of Jesus who rejected every element of dominant culture. A counter-cultural process takes a proper shape only through a political commitment of the dalits.²¹ Only through such a political praxis the liberative forces of the counter-culture can take root in society.

20 M. Amaladoss, "Culture and the Economy," *Jeevadhara*, XXX: 175 (January, 1999) 67. M. Amaladoss proposes a counter-culture in the context of Globalization. "We need a Humanism in which the human is the master of the machine. Happiness will then be measured by the quality of life than by the quantity of things possessed. People will find their identity in self-gift rather than selfishness. The humans will find a new depth of meaning to life, not as isolated individuals, but as members of a community. Love will replace competition as the law of life." These are some of the values that will fit well into the value frame-work of the counter-culture of the dalits.

21 William Madtha, "Dalit Theology: Voice of the Oppressed" in *Massey, Indigenous People*, 290.

5) *Dalits as Subjects*

In any praxis of liberation the people should become the subjects and the goal of such process. A distortion occurs when the subjects become objects. Already in the oppressive caste structure the dalits have been victimized and the victimization mainly occurs in the subjugation of dalits into objects of caste people's needs. A subversion of realities should take place by empowering the oppressed dalits to be masters of their own destiny. God expects them to take the course of their lives in their hands. For,

"God has given the keys of the Kingdom in their hands. As subjects of a new creation, they bring new hope into the world, new courage into history and new harvests into the human community. They call the shots that their needs take priority over the wants of the rich; that their freedom takes priority over the liberty of the powerful; that their participation in the system takes priority over the preservation of an order which excludes them."²²

DT as a theology of liberation in its own perspective should have the dalits as the subjects of theologizing. Their interests, political, cultural and social agenda take center stage in such theologizing. As they struggle to birth their own freedom, others can play the role of midwives. DT as well as their liberation must be genuinely a product of the dalits and others have a moral responsibility to accompany them in strong solidarity.

Dalit Christology

Reinterpreting the symbol of Christ to the dalits of India has special significance.²³ The crucified Jesus becomes the genuine model

22 P.:Arockiadoss, "Dalit Theology: Problem and Response," *The Living Word*, 105: 1 (January-March, 1999) 43.

23 Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) 182. He proposes the following concerns as important for Indian Christian Theology. "On the one hand, there is an ongoing interpretive retelling of the Christian story, i.e. the good news of God's decisive act in Jesus who is affirmed to be the Christ. On the other hand, there is a dynamic and creative remembering of the historical situation of the Indian people as they testify to the traces of this Christic presence operant among them.

for the dalits who are shrouded by the mysteries of suffering. Their identification with this suffering God leads them to a spirit of commitment to their own cause. Experiencing the liberative suffering of this God empowers them with courage and confidence to confront the destructive structure of the caste.²⁴

Samuel Rayan interprets the incarnation in every respect sharing the same fate of the oppressed dalits. In his birth he was outside the gates of the town. His association was most of the time with the untouchables of his society. "Rejected and thrown out of the vineyard and out of the town, Jesus finds himself outside the wall where untouchables are forced to live. He finds himself among the external groups, those pushed out of society and excluded from its wealth and culture which, however, they have worked to create."²⁵ John's Gospel highlights the word of God becoming flesh and this has significance for DT. Flesh implies weakness, fragility and transitoriness. It is also a symbol of sensitivity. God promised to give us a heart of flesh in the place of heart of stone. "Jesus has a heart of flesh. He is flesh, sensitivity, and loving compassion, carrying in his corporate personality all flesh, all who are weak and vulnerable, the powerless multitude of the wretched of the earth."²⁶ Jesus' breaking of the rules of the sabbath in order to make humans whole brought about threats to his very life. He was accused of being possessed by the unclean spirit. The scribes insulted Jesus as he was not trained by any proper master. The same insults heaped on the dalits were heaped on Him. Above all, Jesus shares the godforsaken experience of all the oppressed of the earth. His own people rejected him. He felt strongly that the God he had loved and served throughout his life, had abandoned Him. His cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" typically represents the experience of every dalit. This particular experience of Jesus invites us to rely and stand by this God who raised the outcaste Jesus from the dead.²⁷

24 William Madtha, "Dalit Theology," 285.

25 Samuel Rayan, "Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult" in Felix Wilfred, ed. *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, Trichy: Carmel Publications, 1996, 138.

26 Samuel Rayan, "Outside the Gate," 140-141.

27 Samuel Rayan, "Outside the Gate," 142.

The 'dalitness' of Jesus is presented as the key to understand His divine humanity. To substantiate this theological perspective Nirmal traces back the ancestry of Jesus which includes women of low moral repute. The 'son of Man' sayings imply a person who encountered rejection, mockery, contempt and death (Mk. 8:31; 9:12; 10:45). "He underwent these dalit experiences as the prototype of all dalits."²⁸ The Nazareth manifesto of the Lukan gospel is a clear programming announced in favor of the dalits forecasting their liberation that is already set in motion in the person of Jesus. Cleansing of the temple by Jesus (Mk. 11:15-19) has a special significance for DT. Though different interpretations are given to the same event, Jesus restoring the court of the Gentiles to their peaceful worship is seen as the best interpretation from a dalit perspective.²⁹

Sathianathan explores the symbolic meaning of the drum and relates its presence to the incarnate presence of Christ. The dalits were forced to be away from the sacred word and the drum served the purpose of communicating the mediating presence of the Divine. Drum represents the collective dalit experience of the community. Through its soundings and physical presence it transgress the boundaries artificially created by the caste people and assures them that God is with them. Thus the drum is understood to mediate the Christic presence to the dalits and "assures them that there was and is no time in which they were or are without the presence of the immanent God."³⁰ Drum symbolizes the resistance of the dalits against the colonizing forces of the caste communities. It can also be termed as emancipatory resistance. Through such resistance they forward a perfect no to the identity carved by the caste people and declare their own identity. When the ritual presence of the drum is necessitated in festivals of the caste people then the role of emancipatory reconciliation is also activated by the same symbol.

28 A. P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 66-67.

29 A. P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 68. "All the buying and selling and money exchanging took place in the part of the temple precincts which were reserved for the Gentile worship. It was the Gentile court. The Gentiles had no access to the inner precincts where the Jewish worship proper was conducted. The bazaar that was held in the Gentile court thus effectively prevented them from conducting their worship in a peaceful quiet manner." It is this court that Jesus cleansed.

30 Sathianathan, *Dalits and Christianity*, 187-188.

Again Christic presence concretizes emancipatory resistance and reconciliation in the lives of the dalits.³¹ In this proposal we understand the symbolic reinterpretation of Christic presence activating the dalits to appropriate their own collective liberative experiences to serve theological as well as practical purposes.

Soares-Prabhu brings in the table fellowship of Jesus as a prominent social symbol to sanction social acceptance to the dalits of His day. Through his table fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners Jesus reaches out to the lost sheep of Israel (Mt 15:24). He went in search of those who were sick (Mk 2:16). This table fellowship was very strongly condemned by the tradition bound scribes as a deviant behavior. It was not merely a pastoral concern of Jesus that he gave them equal place in the table. "It is the expression of a radically new (and therefore thoroughly disturbing) theological vision, rooted in a new experience of God, and calling for a new kind of society."³² The desire of Jesus is to overcome such inequalities based on purity and to establish a community based purely on God's fatherhood.

Jesus as a dalit becomes an acceptable deity for the dalits. As a king or as a powerful God of the caste people, he is alienated from the religious psyche of the ordinary dalit. By identifying him as a dalit who shares the dalitness of all the untouchables, he has come very close to them. The incarnation has become relevant to the dalits only at this level. Christology should articulate names and titles that are relevant and meaningful to the religious worldview of ordinary people such as the dalits. Such relevant renderings alone will give them a place within the theological endeavor.

Seeing Jesus as a role model for the dalits is another vital point for DT. Jesus through his life and mission provides enough scope for the dalits to identify themselves with him. When he was condemned as the friend of the outcastes, proposing their liberation as the foremost priority in God's Kingdom and finally committing himself to the death on the cross, he projects the typical dalit experience. What kind of emulation this model of Jesus demands from the dalits? Is it mere carrying of the crosses imposed on them by the caste structure

31 Sathianathan, *Dalits and Christianity*, 191-193.

32 Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus," 144.

and following him meekly or something more than that? The ideal model would be to question the crosses that are heaped upon them. Generations had humbly underwent the dehumanizing experiences of the cross in the form of untouchability and ostracization. The cross of Jesus becomes meaningful only in the collective revolt that emerges from the crucified dalits on the cross of unjust caste structure. Their resurrection is assured already in the cross only when they consolidate their concerted efforts on the way to their self-liberation.

The leadership of Jesus is another area that needs immediate attention in DT. Dalits have a fragmented nature because they are already fragmented by social, cultural, psychological and many other factors. This fragmentation spontaneously emerges as they come together to form a movement for their liberation. Jesus espouses a people's movement that attracted many towards him. People who shared the same fate of social, political and economic marginalization could easily be the part of his movement. Focussing on the oppressed condition of all his followers, Jesus could easily address their needs and life situations. His promises of an imminent presence of God's Kingdom could evoke unanimous response at least from one sector of the society. Jesus can be a model for dalit leadership. The absence in dalit leaders of the leadership qualities that are propounded by Jesus challenges them to rethink of their style of functioning among the oppressed dalits. Jesus is certainly a point of reference when they are in moments of crisis in guiding the people to right decision and right action. Dalit awakening is already set in motion. Converting this to a collective political praxis with the right leadership is the urgent need of the day. If Jesus had awakened the people for a political praxis, the same should be possible for the dalit leaders. Their failure to do so proves that their leadership is devoid of genuine and authentic commitment.

Ethical Obligation

Social discrimination engendering inequality by birth results in the denial of justice and basic rights. Dalit problem is basically a moral problem. It is moral because it affects the very basis of human existence. The foundations of meaningful human existence are disregarded with the ease of throwing away the waste. Justice and rights are discounted as if dalits do not deserve them. Consistent denial of such basic human values has solidified social structures that have become breeding ground of further injustices and inequalities.

DT has to take this moral dimension of the problem seriously so that the complexity of dalit oppression can be pointedly dealt with and solved.

Arockiasamy proposes a moral commitment to the cause of the oppressed dalits as a possible solution. In his proposal he implies an approach of critical historicity. From this perspective a commitment to the least of men turns to be a historical imperative of an absolute character. This absoluteness of moral imperatives can be understood as objective absolutes in history in so far as they are committed to the realization of the dignity of the least. A failure to do so will end making our moral discernment subjective and relative in character. Historical critical approach is holistic and comprehensive. Moral imperatives are discerned in the different dimensions of social behavior - personal, inter-personal, socio-economic, political, cultural. Critical historicity covers a gamut of human relationships that have a say in religio-cultural, socio-economic and political expressions. It is this critical discernment of moral imperatives that avoids a spiritualized and non-historical application of the same.³³

To clarify the role of a particular perspective in moral theologising, he interprets the moral virtue of *ahimsa* from the perspective of the dalits. Normal understanding of this virtue is a renunciation of brute force. The power enjoyed by a caste Hindu is normal. From the perspective of the dalits, the power exerted by the caste man is already violence. It is violence because it dehumanizes them. When the powerless is empowered, it may look like a threat to the caste man and violence against him. In the right sense the empowerment of the powerless is not morally reprehensible. A historical critical approach to the practice of moral virtue totally transforms the moral content, interpretation and understanding.³⁴

Another way to solve this problem would be to propose ways and means of reconstructing social structures. Such reconstruction demands a specific approach to justice. Justice is that which promotes

33 S. Arockiasamy, "Critical Historicity in the Contextualisation of Morals," *Vidyajyoti*, XLIII: 7 (August 1984) 350-351.

34 S. Arockiasamy, "Sarvodaya through Antyodaya: Liberation of the Dalits in the Contextualisation of Morals" in Massey, *Indigenous People*, 305-306.

just distribution that is justifiable because of its utility.³⁵ Its utility makes its rightful claims. Claims of justice can be overlooked in some circumstances where there is a demand of greater good. In this approach to justice, claims of justice transcend the individual arena and common good is perceived as the greater good, overall. Such utilitarian approach to justice has its merits of not limiting the claims of justice to the individual but to the greater good of the society at large.³⁶ In the context caste structure we find an unjust consolidation of maximum opportunities and goods by the minimum in a society. The utilitarian principle of justice is basically disapproved by the caste society. At the same time, some modern approaches to justice sideline the utilitarian approach³⁷ because it does not offer any special protection for the poor and the oppressed. If utilitarianism does not promise ethical safeguards to the least advantaged (dalits) by way of opportunities and benefits then it can be considered as minimum level of justice that can be made possible to the least advantaged of the society.

John Rawls' conception of justice goes this way. "All social primary goods - liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect - are to be distributed equally unless an equal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored."³⁸ He is ready to concede inequalities of wealth and authority in a society, only when such inequalities result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of the society. In such a proposal of just distribution the presumption is that the differences between the advantaged and the disadvantaged must be minimal. The option for the least advantaged of the society becomes the moral standard which can be a real source of eliminating social inequalities and discriminations. This would also imply offering freedom, equality

35 David Miller, *Social Justice*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, 32. "It tells us to perform whichever action among the options available will produce the greatest sum of happiness for all."

36 Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World*, 156.

37 Miller, *Social Justice*, 39.

38 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971, 303.

and rationality. However, Rawls' proposal of equal distribution even to the least advantaged of the society is not fully applicable to the dalit situation. It does not integrate the past injustices into its account of just distribution. The denial of so many human rights necessitates an enfranchisement of such rights that would ensure the proper justice and space for human growth in an unjust social structure.

Reinhold Niebuhr's theory of justice considers equality as the highest standard of Justice. According to him we cannot achieve perfect justice. Perfect justice is a state of brotherhood where there we find no conflict of interests. The sinful nature of the world does not permit perfect love as well as perfect justice. What we can aim at is a relative justice, as history indicates, which involves the calculation of competing interests, the specification of duties and rights, and balancing of life forces.³⁹ Niebuhr's ethical stance is dualistic because he insists on the necessity of both the norms of love and justice and considers both insufficient.⁴⁰ However, he conceives equality as the regulative principle of justice that critically adjudicates every principle of justice. Equal justice is the most possible social good.⁴¹ It can be the best approximation of brotherhood. Such an equal justice in itself will thrive as a kind of option for the poor. "A social conflict which aims at greater equality has a moral justification which must be denied to efforts which aim at the perpetuation of privilege... The oppressed have a higher moral right to challenge their oppressors than those who have to maintain their rule by force."⁴² Therefore the establishment of justice in history "requires not merely rules and principles but the balancing of competing forces, the taming and ordering of human vitalities."⁴³ Since great disproportion of power

39 D. B. Robertson, ed. *Love and Justice: Selection from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976, 49.

40 Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, 86.

41 Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, New York: Seabury, 1979, 80.

42 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York: Scribner, 1960, 234.

43 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 207.

leads to injustice, justice needs a proper ordering and a balancing of power. "The struggle for justice is a struggle to increase the power of the victims of injustice."⁴⁴

Niebuhr's proposal of equality as the highest standard of justice merits special attention in our search of justice for the dalits. It is equality alone that can demythologise their enslavement and declare them as free citizens. Equality as a human right, equality as human dignity, equality as self-effacement, equality as freedom for humanization, equality as a licence to be brothers of every other citizen of the country, can be the wide spectrum of the meaning that should be asserted in our demands for justice.

Ambedkar who fought to bring equality to the dalits of this country demands justice in a different way. His demand for justice embraces the salient features of the aforesaid theories of justice and affirms the right kind of justice needed for the dalits. "Fraternity and liberty are really derivative notions. The basic and fundamental conceptions are equality and respect for human personality."⁴⁵ "In short justice is simply another name for liberty, equality and fraternity."⁴⁶ It is quite clear that he uses equality as justice as well as a wider concept that includes liberty and fraternity. He demands equality as a practical and indispensable value for a successful socio-political life. Only by making its citizens as equals, a nation can get the maximum from them. Ambedkar's use of the term equality demands an integral approach to justice.

Ambedkar has a liberative approach to justice. This perspective concentrates on autonomy and the empowerment of the dalits. This should enable the dalits with participatory ability in deciding and defining matters concerning their own life issues by themselves rather than by others. Freedom is valorised here. When freedom and

44 John C. Bennet, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics" in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956) 60.

45 B. R. Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism" in Vasant Moon, comp. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Bombay: Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1987, 66.

46 B. R. Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism," 25.

participation in decision making is denied, the deprived themselves, can claim it. The appropriate means of asserting their claim are part of it in so far as they do not deny similar claims of others. They have the right to organize and mobilize as long as the established order refuses to reorganize relations of deprivation and denials.

Ambedkar presents such an autonomous act of participatory solidarity of the deprived as the only way to achieve their liberation. The consolidation of power and autonomy in life decisions and a move towards alternative social structures explain the liberative thrust of justice. That means particular claims on justice and equality are not sufficient. A structural assurance for human development for the oppressed must be achieved. The main concern of justice is to ensure an integral growth for the Dalits. Through a total transformation of the present structures, a society of love and brotherhood must be created. This approach transcends the particular aspects of justice and thus can be identified as an integral approach to justice.

An integral approach to justice is the ethical imperative that challenges the Church today. It obliges the community to build itself as a just community. The Church as a community of believers has the obligation to play a leading role in transforming the structures of injustice into just structures. This should be a joint venture involving the dalits and non-dalits. As Azaria perceives:

- “(i) The non-dalits put their full trust in the abilities of the Dalits and stop giving them paternalistic treatment;
- (ii) They should have full empathy and identify with the dalit struggle;
- (iii) They should be ready to commit ‘caste-suicide’ which means wholly reject the system they belong to and fully enter into the struggle of the dalits in order to work with them, not for them;
- (iv) The dalits need to seek the cooperation of non-dalits to liberate themselves.”⁴⁷

47 As cited by L. Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church*, 306.

This would imply a moral commitment to empower and respect the dalits as the moral agents of their own liberation. It should put an end to the era of paternalistic mission both in theory and practice. An empathetic identification with the struggles of the dalits is not an easy task for most of the non-dalits. They prefer a dominant role in the process or to be indifferent. The need of the hour is to accompany them empathetically in their struggle so as to empower them in every respect. A self-annihilation will take place when a caste-man declares himself to be caste-less. This could be the first and foremost step of the non-dalits to create a sense of confidence in the minds of the dalits. To show their authentic solidarity, it is a must that non-dalits become the members of a caste-less but a human community. The dalits must create a meaningful rapport with the co-dalits and with the non-dalits. Thus the liberation of the dalits should be the collective praxis of the whole community. This would also mean that dalit liberation becomes part of the integral liberation of the whole human community. Constructing just structures is not the moral responsibility of a few but it is the moral commitment of all.

Conclusion

As globalization spreads its wings on every act of the individual and the community, the power of determination is robbed off from many. If this becomes the story of the powerful, what would be the condition of the powerless and faceless masses of Dalits? They are the worst affected group everywhere. What should be the role of theology in this context when their lives are about to be totally annihilated from this earth? In this connection what Jon Sobrino says about the future of theology applies to DT as well:

“But such as our world is going, and such as God has been manifested in Jesus, we think that substantially the perspectives of the victims must continue to be valid - although would that it were to become quickly anachronistic - and in any case giving the primacy to reality in order to transform it. This in no way militates against the equal necessity of “being ever prepared to give reason for our hope” in Gutierrez’s words, “as to tell the poor that God loves them” - the explanatory dimension of theology.

But we think that theology must, especially, render that hope productive for the construction in our world of the reign of God: in Ellacuria's words, "taking the crucified people down from the cross," - the transforming dimension of theology."⁴⁸

The transforming dimension of DT has to be stressed. The future of DT lies in its capacity to hasten the process of Dalit liberation. In order to serve this prime purpose it has to integrate the pathetic and protest stories of the Dalits as the main source of theologising. Integrating these stories should help DT to open new avenues in its search for multidimensional liberation. DT should not cater any more to the needs of the powerful caste structures. To bring down the crucified dalits from the cross, it has to propose deconstruction of structures in the ecclesiastical and civil communities. Reconstruction of social structures on the right principles of justice has to be initiated. The Church should be ready to shed its pretensions on dalit issues and construct caste-less model communities. This would be easily realizable, if dalit liberation becomes the moral obligation of every member of the Church.

48 Jon Sobrino, "Theology from amidst the Victims" in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg and Thomas Kucharz, eds. *The Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) 174-175.