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Dalit Christians and Their Struggle for Liberation

Ecclesiological Implications

Dr. S. Devaraj
St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirapalli

Even at the dawn of the new millenium, a significant historical moment replete with hopes and aspirations, gladness and newness, more than 500 million people, who call themselves dalits, are still in oblivion as they are forced to live at the very bottom of the Indian society. They are carrying with them the stigma of untouchability, the worst form of human degradation and social segregation. Incidents of callous atrocities against them are steadily increasing throughout the country. Chandramani Behera, a dalit boy of Bhanpur village in the state of Orissa, was beaten up mercilessly by a group of youth belonging to the upper caste for the simple reason that he addressed them as *bhaina* meaning elder brothers.[1] As in other villages in the country, here too there was a stringent imposition of certain dehumanizing customs and practices on the dalits. Even the highly educated and socially well-placed dalits are not immune against this oppressive structure. A judge at the Allahabad court, before taking charge of his office, purified his official chamber with the water from river Ganges, as his predecessor was a dalit.[2]

Not only in the Indian society at large, but also in the Christian communities, irrespective of denominations, the same unjust and inhuman structure has been perpetuated for many years. Conversion

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1 **The Times of India**, New Delhi, June 9, 1998.

2 **Dainik Hindusthan**, New Delhi, July 22, 1998.

to Christianity has not in any way changed the plight of the dalits. It has, on the contrary, added to their misery and humiliation. As in the larger society, they are discriminated against and even alienated in the Churches by their own fellow Christians who happen to occupy a higher place in the caste ladder. The dalits are always dalits whatever religion they embrace and whichever Christian denomination they belong to. It is quite surprising to note that they form the majority population in various Christian Churches. At present 75% of the Christians in India and around 60 % of all Catholics are dalits.

While critically analyzing the deplorable condition of the dalits in the light of the Gospel we are confronted with some serious and vital questions for our reflection: Is it still meaningful for Christians to profess their belief in the Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of all human persons? Can we still call our parishes, where equality and fraternity have become a rare reality, Christian communities? The cleavage between what is proclaimed in the liturgical services and what is practised outside, indicates clearly that the Christian faith has not yet been rooted in the churches. Therefore, the church, in order to become really the people of God as designed by Jesus, is obliged to break off her fetters of unjust structures and emerge as a community of the oppressed and the dehumanized for whom Jesus lived and sacrificed his whole life. In this article, an attempt is made to evolve a new vision of Church in the emerging context of the dalits' quest for dignity and fuller life.

1. Conversion of Dalits: A Social Protest

Looking back at the history of the Indian Church, it becomes obvious that the Church remained predominantly a Church of the upper castes at the early stage. The Syrian Christians, the early converts to the Christian faith, claimed superiority on the ground that they had descended from the high castes such as Brahmins, Nambudhiris and Nairs. Like the high caste Hindus, they, "would not touch or go near those of lower castes. In case they happened to do this, they would purify themselves by a bath."[3] In the sixteenth

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3 J. Podipara, **The Thomas Christians**, Bombay: St. Paul's Publications, 1970, 83; J.Aerthyil, **The Spiritual Heritage of the St. Thomas Christians**, Bangalore:

century the Portuguese missionaries were keen on winning souls for Christ from the high caste Hindus and preferably from Brahmins. In their missionary endeavour they adopted the filtration strategy on the assumption that once the Brahmins were converted to the Christian faith, others who remained at the lower strata of the society would automatically follow them. Two outstanding examples for this strategy were the concerted effort of the Portuguese in Goa to convert the Brahmins and the same followed by the Jesuit missionary Robert De Nobili in Madurai. In 1613 the Portuguese Viceroy, in his letter to the King, strongly recommended that only Brahmins be admitted to the priesthood and this discriminative practice was in force till the end of Portuguese monarchy in the early 20th century.[4] Robert de Nobili, who called himself a Christian *sanyasi* and a high caste Brahmin from Europe, declined to associate not only with the low caste Christians, but also with the missionaries working among them *(pandaraswamis)*, fearing that it would hamper his mission among the caste people. This strategy, though proved unsuccessful and ineffective in the course of history, brought more humiliation and disgrace to the dalits, as they were considered not even worthy to become the disciples of Jesus, who, on the contrary, dedicated his life for the emancipation of the poor and the downtrodden. It was very unfortunate that the missionaries, in spite of their hard work and single-minded dedication, chose to work within the caste system, having followed the policy of adaptation and viewed caste mainly as a social institution like any other system of stratification that prevailed in any society.

There were, at the same time, some dalit Christians in South India already in the 16th century. The very fact that Christianity was branded as *paranghi margam* by caste Hindus demonstrates that there should have been a small pocket of dalit Christians in Madurai and the neighborhood where the Portuguese missionaries launched their mission since 1595. The missionaries were referred to with a derogatory word *paraghis*, because of their free association with the untouchables and outcastes, in addition to other factors like eating

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Dharmaram Publications, 1982, 51-54; A. M. Mundadan, **Traditions of the St. Thomas Christians**, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1970; L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, **Anthropology of the Syrian Christians**, Ernakulam, 1928.

4 Walter Fernandes, **Caste and Conversion Movements in India**, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981, 12-13.

beef, drinking liquor etc.[5] History bears witness to the fact that one of the very first converts in Tiruchirapalli was Muthudaiyan, a pariah by birth and a *pandaraswami* by vocation. As the historian Joseph Thekkedath notes, "he had more than 2000 disciples and had been given special marks of honour by the *nayak* of Madurai."[6] He succeeded in bringing many of his former disciples to Christianity. The vast majority of the dalits, however, embraced Christianity only in the nineteenth century. This mass conversion took place in Punjab, Andhra, Tamil Nadu and in other parts of India. One notable factor is that the Protestant missionaries, unlike their Catholic counterparts, were engaged in a broader range of evangelical activities, which were not caste-specific or caste biased. They were able to attract, as a result, more dalits to their folds than the Catholics. According to John Webster, "By the outset of World War I approximately one million dalits had converted to Christianity and many were to follow in the 1920s and 1930s."[7]

An important point to be analyzed, at this juncture, is the actual motive operative behind the whole gamut of the mass conversion of the dalits. The accusation that the dalits received baptism and stepped into the church merely for the sake of material benefits is very old. Most of them are derisively described as rice Christians, that is persons who betrayed their traditional faith in favour of Christianity just for a plate of rice. None can deny that the missionaries exhibited the love of Jesus to those who were in dire need by offering them some humanitarian assistance especially during the eruption of natural calamities like famine and epidemics. For instance, during the gruesome famine that rocked the Madras Presidency from 1876 to 1879, a massive hunger relief programme was organized, orphaned children were taken care of and the sick provided with medical assistance by the missionaries on par with the Government relief operation.[8] It is true that a sizable number of dalits, having been attracted by the loving care and enduring services of the missionaries,

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5 B. Sobhanan, **A History of the Christian Missions in India**, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Historical Society, 1996, 27.

6 Joseph Thekkedath, **History of Christianity in India**, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1982, 219.

7 John C. B. Webster, **The Dalit Christians: A History**, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, 33.

8 Hugald Grafe, **History of Christianity in India**, Vol. IV, Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1990, 96.

became Christians. It is also equally true that the missionaries were much reluctant to baptize them at the time of famine. While a good portion of those baptized during the disaster either died or returned to Hinduism out of their own will once normalcy came back, most of those baptized before or after the event preserved and formed the nucleus of the new Christian communities.[9] Therefore, to arrive at a hasty and shallow conclusion, as is often done, that the dalits entered into the Christian flock being allured only by the material helps, clearly exposes the ignorance of the social factors and processes which were mainly responsible for their conversion in huge numbers in the nineteenth century.

Going deeper into the whole phenomenon of dalit conversion, it becomes evident that the underlying motivation was the search for improved social status, a greater sense of human dignity, self-respect, equality and for freedom from the clutches of the oppressive land owners. Already in the 16th century the Bhakti movement sprang up in Hinduism, which unequivocally affirmed the equality of all human persons before God, and single-mindedly protested against the caste discrimination and oppression. A significant feature of this movement was that it had also included people from among the dalits. Unfortunately the Brahmins and upper castes neutralized its social and liberative thrust, and consequently it lost its force and vigour in course of time and particularly in the nineteenth century.[10] When a movement that gave some hope of liberation to dalits within the ambient of Hindu religion died out, it was quite natural and legitimate for them to search for an alternative outside the system.

Furthermore, the *jajmani* system that was in practice in the Indian villages for so many centuries began to collapse with the introduction of private property system by the British rulers. The

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9 Walter Fernandes, **Caste and Conversion Movements in India**, 22; S. Manickam, **Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India: The Impact of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries on the Trichy-Thanjore Diocese with Special Reference to the Harijan Communities of the Mass Movement Area, 1820-1947**, South India Series No.33, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977, 60-62.

10 Seling Harrison, **India: The Most Dangerous Decade**, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960, 53; Walter Fernandes, "Bhakti and a Liberation Theology for India" in Paul Puthanangady (ed.), **Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation**, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1986, 88-108.

jajmani contributed largely to the maintenance of the economic inter-dependence and division of labour in the villages on the basis that the land was owned not by the individuals, but by one dominant caste group. In accordance with the longstanding custom and law, the land owning caste was obliged to give due share to all the labourers and ensure their livelihood, irrespective of caste, creed and other disparities. The dalits could find sufficient protection and security in this traditional economic system, in spite of its unjust and oppressive nature. Unfortunately the replacement of this system with the new law of landownership introduced by the colonizers added untold sufferings and miseries to the dalits, because the individual landlords became cruel taskmasters and treated them according to their whims and fancies. Having lost the security of job, means of livelihood and above all human dignity, the dalits were desperately looking for an outside agency, which would liberate them from the fetters of slavery.[11] At this critical moment, they found in Christianity one such liberative agency.

The decision of the dalits to opt for Christianity was indeed a bold venture in the face of stiff opposition and severe objection raised by the landlords. Any episode of conversion was viewed more as non-cooperation with the rest of the village community and a deliberate defiance of the traditional village authority.[12] As a consequence, the dalit Christians had to undergo unimaginable physical violence, economic deprivation and total alienation from the entire village. Rev. Philip of London Missionary Society vividly describes the plight of new Christians as follows:

> When Christianity treats a pariah as a human being with rights as well as duties, when it teaches him to read and write and encourages in him independence of character, it is thereby seriously interfering with the social conditions to which the caste man largely owes his present unchallenged supremacy. Consequently for a time the Christian pariah has to submit to more cruel hardships and greater indignities than ever before. When he is in trouble he can not get his heathen employer or the

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11 Duncan B.Forrester, **Caste and Christianity** London: Curzon Press, 1980, 74.

12 S. Manickam, "Origin and History of the Christian Dalits in Kerala and Tamil Nadu," **Religion and Society** 34 (1987), 16.

village trader to allow him the concessions allowed to every one else. If he applies for a loan of seed he receives a mockery answer: "You have left the religion of your forefathers and followed the Christian way. Go to your Padres (missionaries); you have no right to come to us." Many a poor pariah is beaten, many a false prosecution is filed in the court, many an ancient mortgage is pitilessly foreclosed, before a mass-movement can make a real progress.[13]

2. Dalit Christians: Twice Alienated Community

The dalit Christians, as stated above, took a bold step to embrace Christianity with the hope that as members of a new community they would be able to live in freedom, human dignity and justice. The conversion also created in them a new awareness and gave them a new identity. They were able to make a rediscovery of themselves. Slowly they nurtured an intense feeling of self-respect and self-reliance, which they had experienced never before. None can deny the various measures taken by the missionaries to tone up the economic and social life of the dalits. This is true, to a large extent, in the field of education.

But what is all the more undeniable is that the dalits are still kept as faceless outcaste group in the Christian communities. The paradox of their life is that they have been subjected to the very same oppressive and dehumanizing structure against which they protested once upon a time and from which they were determined to get liberated through change of religion. They continue to bear the same indelible imprint of low caste origin. A large number of rural dailt Christians in Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Karnataka are still engaged in caste-based traditional occupations and practices like drum beating, grave digging, cobbling, scavenging etc., which their forefathers were doing before their conversion.[14] Even in a predominantly Christian

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13 Rev. G. E. Philip, **The Outcastes' Hope**, London: United Council for Missionary Education, 1923, 41-42; J. W. Gladstone, **Protestant Christianity and Peoples' Movement in Kerala, 1850-1936**, Trivandrum: Seminary Publications, 1984, 77.

14 Cf. Godwin Shiri, "The Wide Prevalence of Traditional Occupations Among Christian Dalits -A Sign of Continued Oppression," **Religion and Society** 42 (1995), 25-37.

village, their living quarter is isolated, separated and distinct at the outskirts, bearing the derogatory identity *Cheri*. The middle and upper caste Christians have carefully and systematically segregated them from the main stream of community life and subjected them to discriminatory practices in all possible ways. Even to this day in some parishes the dalits have to sit separately in the church and receive communion only after the upper caste people have done so. It is forbidden for them to become altar servers or lectors at the liturgical services. Even now one could hear some lay persons and priests using terms in reference to dalits that are considered derogatory in the society. What is the most inhuman and crude of all discriminations is the separation of burial grounds, which is still prevalent in a few places in Tamil Nadu. For instance, at the heart of Tiruchirapalli town, there is a cemetery where the dalits are buried in a portion walled off with barbed wire from the high caste portion.

Despite the fact that the Christian dalits form a large segment, they are not given due share in the pastoral and institutional resources of the Church. Obvious as it is, the vast majority of those who occupy important positions and portfolios, both at the parish and the diocesan level, are from the upper castes. Seldom are the dalits involved in the decision making process of the Church or in the administration of it. As the upper caste people in collusion with the clergy and the religious take away the lion's share of job opportunities in the Church-run educational and other institutions, it happens quite often that even well-qualified and better talented dalit candidates are pushed to the periphery. It is alleged that in the name of safeguarding the standard, the dalits students are denied admission in some educational institutions. Even a cursory glance would confirm the fact that the representation of dalits in the Church hierarchy is far from proportionate. For instance, only 3.8 percent of the priests in Tamil Nadu are dalits. As a result, there are several parishes with a larger dalit Christian population, ministered by the upper caste priests. It is indeed disheartening to note that so far no serious effort has been made by the dioceses or religious congregations to foster vocations from among the dalits. In this connection, Fr. Anthony Raj, a Jesuit dalit priest and the first president of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, makes a pertinent and a thought provoking observation:

> We do understand that vocation is from God, but it boggles our mind why He should choose His priests from the non-dalits

> only. Are we not justified in asking the following the question: Is God also casteist? Does he also practise untouchability?[15]

To add insult to injury, the dalit Christians, apart from the above mentioned unjust and discriminatory practice of the church, are discriminated against by the government, which does not grant them even the few privileges and rights enjoyed by their counterparts belonging to Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist religions. The Presidential order, promulgated on 10th August 1950, categorically stated that no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism would be deemed to be a member of the schedule caste.[16] The leaders and politicians of other religions such as Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity were quick to notice the Hindu religious bias in the functioning of Indian democracy and voiced their claim for the same privileges. Consequently, the order was amended twice, first in 1956 to include the Sikhs and again in 1990 the Buddhists. Unfortunately the dalit converts to Christianity, in spite of their repeated agitations and dharnas, are still deprived of the constitutional safeguards provided to the other schedule castes. The reason put forward for the denial is that Christianity does not admit a caste system and therefore a person ceases to be an untouchable by virtue of his conversion. But the reality is just the contrary, as indicated above.

From our analysis, it becomes clear that the dalits have become disenchanted with the caste-ridden Christian communities and, at the same time, are discriminated by an unfriendly government, which does not grant them even the few privileges enjoyed by their counterparts in other religions. The most pitiable plight of Christian dalits is that they are twice alienated, twice marginalised and twice made outcaste. K. Wilson, one of such alienated, articulates his sad and shattering experience as follows:

> As a child of a village Christian family, as a son of a suffering rural pastor, as a student of a Theological Seminary, as a preacher, a pastor and a professor of theology, I have been a

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15 Antony Raj, "The Dalit Christian Reality in Tamilnadu," **Jeevadhara** 22 (1992), 102.

16 For details on the Presidential order and the case filed in the Supreme Court challenging the order, M. R. Arul Raja, **Jesus, the Dalit**, Hyderabad: Volunteer Centre, 1996, 17-26.

victim of this twice-alienated predicament myself. As an Indian who experienced the oppressive and feudal nature of traditional Hindu social system and a Christian who experienced the demoralizing and enslaving nature of traditional Christian spiritual vision, I found no other alternative left open to me but to take a leap to a humanistic cultural past which transcends dehumanizing religious systems. This is where I stand.[17]

3. Struggle of Dalit Christians for Dignity and Equality

History bears out that any society kept under bondage by political forces or social traditions or even by religious sanctions would courageously and powerfully arise one day against those forces of oppression in order to breath the air of freedom and human dignity. Even a casual look into the events that take place around us is sufficient to make us realize that the liberative struggles for new life have become an every day phenomenon in the society. Now the conflict between the macro and the micro is so intensified and widespread that the latter refuses to be dominated any more. This can be noticed in almost all areas of social life and is all the more conspicuous among dalits, who are awakened, more than ever before, to fight for a fuller human life. They are aware of the fact that unless they take into their hands their life and destiny through concrete involvement and concerted action, they cannot arrive at the destiny of total liberation.[18] The spurt of new consciousness has instilled in them indomitable courage to get themselves organized into various movements, seeking liberation from economic, social, political, cultural and religious bondages. They are progressively learning to identify the forces and various power structures that have legitimatized their oppression and call them into question. They are determined to win back their right to live in dignity as human beings by revolting against all the dehumanizing forces that have kept them under captivity. Today there are numerous small and large movements of dalits all over the country, which, in spite of highlighting different issues around different ideologies, share a

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17 K. Wilson, **The Twice Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians**, Hyderabad: Booklinks Corporation, 1982, 1.

18 Felix Wilfred, **From the Dusty Soil**, Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 1995, 118.

common quest - the quest for equality, self-dignity and eradication of untouchability.[19]

The new ferment of thought and consciousness seeping among the dalits has also awakened the Christian dalits to get themselves organized and press for their legitimate and rightful place in the Church and in the society at large. Nevertheless, their protest against unequal treatment, especially within the Christian communities is not entirely a new phenomenon. Going through the annals of the Church in Tamil Nadu, it becomes obvious that in the past, the dalit Christians belonging to a particular village or town staged unorganized and spontaneous protests on several occasions. For instance, already in 1869, some dalits bravely fought against untouchability at Utthamanur in the diocese of Kumbakonam.[20] In 1925, the dalit Christians of Tiruchirapalli, sent a memorandum to the Bishop Alexius Maria Henry Lepierier, Vicar Apostolic for India, describing how they were segregated as untouchables in the house of God and demanding the restoration of justice and equality in accordance with the Christian faith.[21] However, what has been budding forth in recent times is their determination to protest in an organized manner, namely as movements, against any form of dehumanization. Indifference, insensitivity and callousness on the part of the upper caste groups as well as of the Church leaders triggered off movements for the self-assertion of the dalits.

It must be pointed out that many dalit Christians are active members of liberation movements at local, regional and national levels, through which they protest against and represent their demands for removal of discrimination and equal treatment along with other Christians. These movements are deeply concerned with the issues like discriminatory practices in the parish communities, denial of state aid and other privileges, reconversion of Christian

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19 Ghanshyam Shah, "Dalit Movements and Search for Identity," **Social Action** 40 (1990), 317-335; Prahald Gangaram Jogdand , **Dalit Movement in Maharashtra,** New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1991; E. Zelliot, **From Untouchbale to Dalit,** Delhi: Manohar, 1992.

20 For a list of protests organized by the dalit Christians in the diocese of Kumbakonam L. Stanislaus, **The Liberative Mission of the Church among the Dalit Christians,** Delhi: ISPCK, 1999, 115-116.

21 John Thattumkal, **Caste and Catholic Church in India,** Rome: Pontifical Lateren University, 1983, 223-224.

dalits to Hinduism, adequate dalit representation in decision making bodies in the Church structures, education and reservation of jobs in the Christian institutions etc. In recent years they have become more and more restive and radicalized, even though an open defiance of the Church leaders is limited to certain parishes, dioceses and denominations. For instance, the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, formed in 1987 and active in Tamil Nadu, has organized protest marches, public meetings, relay fasting, black flag demonstrations, courting arrests and even confronting individual bishops and demonstrating before Tamil Nadu Bishops' Conference.[22] Antony Raj explains the dalits' struggle as follows:

> The origin of the Dalit Christians Liberation Movement (DCLM) in Tamil Nadu is surely not the product of any liberation theology or of any leftist ideology but is purely a product of the local churches which has betrayed the hope of the poor. We dalits are disenchanted with the church authorities and their attitudes towards us... We have decided to organize ourselves and agitate against the injustice perpetrated against us within the church. DCLM is our organization. The organizing themes are: Tamil church is dalit church and dalits are dignified.[23]

4. Struggle of the Dalit Christians: Ecclesiological Implications

In the light of the situation we have presented above and the questions arising from it let us now attempt to draw a few implications for the Indian church.

4.1 A Powerful Sign of our Time

The new awakening spreading fast among the dalit Christians to fight for a better and fuller human life is a significant breakthrough in the history of the Indian church. Once they were so depressed and diffident that they felt ashamed to reveal their identity as touchables and so kept themselves aloof from the main stream of the social and ecclesiastical life. But today many of them have begun to take pride in their dalit identity - as oppressed people in struggle for liberation.

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22 Antony Raj, **Children of Lesser God**, Madurai: DCLM, 1992, 26-31.

23 Antony Raj, "The Dalit Christian Reality in Tamil Nadu," 106.

The deplorable plight of the Christian dalits and their struggle for a new life should no longer be sidelined or ignored by the Church, as it is one of the most powerful signs of the time, through which God reveals his will and invites her to make an option for them and thereby to emerge as a Church of the poor and oppressed. Jesus carefully observed the stark realities of poverty, oppression and misery of the marginalized and discerned not only the presence of God in their innermost longings and expectations, but also his mission to be carried out as desired by the Father (Mt 16:1-3; Lk 12: 54-57).[24] A Church that is faithful to the call of Jesus and the stirrings of the Spirit will be able to discern, in dalits liberation movements and groups, the transforming power of God and the blossoming of His Kingdom in this world. So failing to listen to the voice of the dalits full of anguish and pain or ignoring their struggles for liberation means that the Indian Church has thoroughly failed to respond to the call of God who makes Himself present and utters His words through agony and misery of the poor.

Scrutinizing the signs of the time and taking an option for the dalit Christians assumes greater importance today in the light of the fact that a sizable number of them have gone back to Hinduism as they felt neglected and even betrayed by the Church leaders and fellow Christians.[25] Quite a few of them have embraced Islam as a mark of protest against the discriminatory practices still perpetuated in the Christian communities.[26] Some educated youth, disgusted with the indifferent and callous attitude of the clergy and religious, have joined the Marxist and Naxalite movements with a view to building up a casteless and classless society. Some have joined the various Christian sects, where they could find at least some spiritual satisfaction and freedom from psychological constraints. Even some have formed their own little denominations.[27] All these factors summon the Church, as the community of Jesus' disciples, to take

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24 Albert Nolan, **God in the South Africa**, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988, 16-17; Gustavo Gutierrez, "New Evangelization: A Theological Reflection on the Latin American Church - Santo Domingo," **Sedos Bulletin** 24 (1992), 182-188.

25 M. E. Prabhakar, "Caste in Andhra Churches," **Religion and Society** 34 (1987), 50.

26 Andrew Wingate, "A Study of Conversion from Christianity to Islam in Two Tamil Villages," **Religion and Society** 4 (1981), 3-36.

27 A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, "Christian Dalits in Revolt," **Jeevadhara** 23 (1993), 271; Stephen Fuchs, **Godmen on the Warpath: A Study of Messianic Movement in India**, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharilal Publishers, 1992, 236-238.

serious and sincere efforts to scrutinize the aspirations, yearnings of the dalits, to discover the cry of Jesus in their pain and anguish and to make an option for them without further delay or postponement. The need of the hour is to perceive the Church and the society through the eyes of the dalits and to covert ourselves to their cause. They cannot wait any more. To them we cannot answer tomorrow.

4. 2. Periphery Becomes the Centre

The option for the dalits cannot but lead the Indian Church to become a Church of the poor and the marginalised. The majority of the Christians, as indicated earlier, are dalits, among whom a large majority is poor, illiterate and engaged in menial occupations. It implies that the Church should migrate to the periphery and share the powerlessness of the poor so that they could be empowered and brought to the centre in accordance with the salivific plan of God.[28] Empowerment means that they must be enabled to increase their self-reliance, to assert their right to make choices and to challenge and to eliminate their exploitation or subordination. The whole of Biblical revelation bears witness to the fact that God is someone who finds Himself always on the side of those who are on the margins.[29] The option for the poor is an option of God himself. Yahweh heard the agonizing cries of the slaves in Egypt and assailed the oppressors 'with raised hands and outstretched arm' (Dt 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 26:8; Ex 6:6; Ps 136:12). The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus was interwoven with the world of the poor and the downtrodden: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20) was his good news. His table fellowship with the poor, sinner and publicans (Lk 5:30-31) and his parables such as that of the Good Samaritan (Lk 5:30-31), the Rich and Lazarus (16: 19-31) etc., demonstrate his preferential option for them. Therefore, the choice placed before the Indian Church is, "to opt to be on the side of God and the manifestations of the divine power among the poor, or to be on the side of the mighty of the world - the upper caste, classes etc - and enjoy the privileges and influence deriving thereof".[30] It is certain that the power of the Kingdom of God could be tangibly experienced

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28 Jon Sobrino, **The True Church and the Poor**, London: SCM Press, 1984, 98.

29 Felix Wilfred, "The Margins: the Site of God's Visitation" **Third Millennium** 2 (1999), 110-117.

30 Felix Wilfred, **Sunset in the East**, Madras: Chair in Christianity, University of Madras, 1991, 113.

today only to the extent that the Church makes an option for dalits, participates in their struggles and brings them to the mainstream of ecclesiastical life.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to observe that constructing the Church from below has quickly gained popularity since Vatican II. So much so the bishops of Asia, already in 1974, declared that, "the primary focus of our task of evangelization, at this time in our history, is building up of a truly local Church".[31] The local Church was described by them as, 'Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and incultured'. It is a community of disciples which comes into existence as a fruit of their response to the call of God and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit heard and followed in a particular socio-cultural situation with all its challenges.[32] So the relevance and the credibility of any local Church in India consist primarily in carrying on the liberative task of Jesus; to be in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, to champion a new social order and to participate in their struggles for liberation so that freedom, justice and equality becomes accessible to all the people.

Considering the fact that a large majority of the Christians are dalits and their dominant characteristic is poverty and powerlessness, the local Church, in response to the call of God, is obliged to shed its oppressive and subjugating character and put on an oppressed character, namely dalit character. What is expected today is the gradual permeation of the dalit consciouness through the life, mission and structure of every local Church and, as a resut, a new local Church - a dalit Church, Church fully committed to and identified with dalits, - should come into being. In other words, the local Church has to undergo a baptism of immersion into the dalit reality, made up as it is of misery and oppression, to emerge as the Church of the oppressed with a new set of values and attitudes - able to see and act from the perspective of the dalits. We can say, therefore, that a local Church in which the dalits are kept in oblivion or still relegated to the periphery

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31 "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," (Statement of the Fifth Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference) in **For all the Peoples of Asia**, Manila: IMC Publications, 1984, 29.

32 "Theses on Local Church," **FABC Papers** (No 60), 18; Felix Wilfred, **Emergent Church in a New India**, Tiruchirapalli: St. Paul's Seminary, 1988, 157.

cannot be called a Church in which Jesus, the champion of the poor, is present, though it may bear the name 'Church'.

It is to be borne in mind, at the same time, that the emergence of a dalit Church does not suggest a sectarian Church, a Church exclusively for the dalits. Such a community cannot truly be a Church of Christ. It actually means, on the contray, "a Church for all people of God, but with a definite preference for the dalits and other similar marginalized groups of human society."[33] It means a Church in union with the God of the poor and solidarity with all those who are victmized by the social, cultural and religious system of oppression.

4. 3. Need for Radical Changes

When the periphery becomes the centre, it is inevitable for the Indian church to undertake some crucial tasks to effect radical changes, as indicated below:

Breaking the Sting of Casteism

Caste is a man-made evil. The very same evil which is responsible for the oppression and marginalisation of dalit Christians is still deep-rooted in Christian communities and its dehumanizing elements are operative with same severity and asperity as in any other community in India. As indicated earlier, in the past the missionaries simply accepted caste as a social system against which they did not want to fight. Moreover, they yielded to the pressure of the powerful upper caste groups, whenever they threatened to leave the Church if the segregation in the liturgical services and social life were to be abolished. They turned a deaf ear to the loud cry of the dalits for justice and equality. Even now the Church leaders are very much afraid to take a clear-cut stand on the issue of caste discrimination. They are unduly preoccupied with safeguarding the interests of different caste groups, even if they are detrimental to the very Christian faith. Should this attitude and praxis continue in the Church, which proclaims the Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of human persons?

Now the *kairos* has arrived for the Indian Church to shake off the yoke of oppression cast upon the dalits by the scourge of casteism. She is called upon to courageously engage herself in fighting against

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33 James Massey, **Downtrodden**, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997, 74.

the caste-spirit, whatever threats and pressures might mount up from the so-called upper caste groups. Bold steps have to be taken to eradicate the discriminatory practices like segregation in the church, separation according to caste in cemeteries, excluding dalits from village feast celebrations etc. Therefore, the mission of the Church consists in denouncing all the oppressive elements and establishing the Christ-spirit, she has received as her foundation, in the parish communities. Then she could boldly and credibly proclaim from the housetop: "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus". (Gal 3:28). For this, the Indian Church is in need of constant conversion of heart, as demanded by Jesus. It means that all the members should give up their oppressive mindset and sinful attitudes they have inherited knowingly or unknowingly, and renew every day their commitment to the Kingdom of God, which Jesus announced to the poor and the oppressed. If the commitment to the Kingdom of God is tantamount to commitment to dalits, we can say that only an option for the dalits will liberate them from their caste consciousness.

Participation in the Decision-Making Bodies

Another area in which radical change is called for urgently is the various decision-making bodies of the Church, which are predominantly controlled by the upper caste people and clergy. The Christian dalits, in spite of being a large segment, are seldom involved in the decision making process or in the administration of the financial and institutional resources of the Church. Even now it is not so easy for them to become members of parish pastoral council or parish finance committee in most of the parishes in Tamil Nadu. The envisioned dalit Church will remain only a sweet dream or a utopia as long as this praxis of domination is allowed to continue in our parishes and dioceses. The dalit liberation movements are fighting exactly for this right of participation, without which the Church cannot be called a community of all believers.

It should be noted, at this juncture, that the Church is basically a community. It means that her members are neither scattered individuals nor groups with vested interests, but a communion of persons - a fellowship.[34] Unlike in other societies, there is in the

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34 J. Zizioulas, **Being as Communion**, London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1985; J.Moltmann, **Church in the Power of the Spirit**, London: SCM Press, 1974.

Church a basic equality of all members, both in dignity and in responsibility, by virtue of baptism.[35] This sacramental foundation which binds them together as one family also confers on them the right to share in the power exercised in the Church for the sake of building up of the Kingdom of God. But the reality is just the contrary, as stated above. If some caste groups take the upper hand and monopolize the participatory structures, how can they be instruments of coordinating all the activities of the parish community or diocese and contribute to the creation of the very being of the Church as communion? In those parishes and dioceses, where the dalit Christians are deprived of the basic right to exercise the power they have received from the Holy Spirit, there, it is certain, the Church of Christ is not truly rooted. There the profession of faith and celebration of sacraments would remain merely at the level of fulfilling some formalities or carrying out some age-old traditions. Needless to say, those communities are very far off from the reality of the Kingdom of God. Hence empowering the powerless dalit Christians by bringing them into the administrative bodies of the Church and thereby making the Church truly a community of believers is an important mission to be carried out with indomitable courage and strong will.

Reservation within

As is well known, one of the principal demands put forward by the leaders of the Chrsitian dalit movements to the bishops and clergy is the reservation for dalits in the Church-run eduactional and other institutions, considerring their miserable condition as well as the percentage of their population. It is quite natural that this demand has evoked fits of anger and fury from the upper caste Christians who have been enjoying for so many years maximum benefits and full partonage of the institutions. But the time has arrived for the dalits to establish their legitimate rights in the Church. This assertion of the right of reservation should be perceived as a clear-cut affrmation of church's option for the poor and the marginalized. It is a concrete way by which justice is exercised to the people who are on the periphery.[36] Even the language of Jesus was a language of reservation (Lk 6:20).

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35 **Lumen Gentium** 32.

36 Felix Wilfred, "Human Rights and Mandal Movement," **Jeevadhara** 21 (1991), 63-78.

Giving utmost care to and making reservation for the last ones is the policy of the Kingdom of God.

More often than not we hear from the dalits that the Christian institutions are still inaccessible to them on account of their poverty and low social status and so they knock at the door of the government-run schools and colleges. Abject poverty prevents them from attending schools and learning, at least to read and to write. Under this circumstance, the proliferation of English medium schools under the umbrella of the Church cannot but project an anti-poor and particulalry anti-dalit image of Christianity. Keeping the dalits still outside the scope of the Church institutions cannot be justified on any ground. It would seriously undermine any claim on the part of the Church to be at the service of the poor or to have made a preferential option for the dalits. Therefore, the preferencial option for the dalits should be the guiding principle to be strictly followed in all our institutioins. In this connection, we can observe that elementary education, special care for school drop-outs, non-formal education, concentration on rural areas etc., should be the top priority of the Church that is committed to the cause of the dalits.

Inculturation

The endevaour to build up a dalit Church leads us also to reconsider the current approach to inculturation. Since Vatican II, attempts have been made to evolve an inculturated theology, liturgy, spirituality etc., adopting symbols and signs, concepts and systems mostly from the Brahminical tradition, which is still considered by some priests and religious to be a point of reference for any form of inculturation. But the Church should not allow itself to be dominated by the culture of the socially, economically and politically dominant group or groups. It should be noted that any from of surrender to the Hindu Sanskrit tradition would be tantamount to the betrayal of the dalit Christians and their struggle for liberation. The dalits embraced Christianty precisely to get liberated from the hegemony of Brahmins who were ulitmately influencing the upper caste groups to turn aginst them. So it is imperative that the whole process of inculturation must be diametrically shifted to the culture of the weak and the

marginalized.[37] In other words, it must emanate from the struggles and experiences of the dalits, their religiosity, language, myths, world of meanings and symbols.

The dalits have already started rediscovering their history and their little traditions. A powerful theology of dalits has been emerging from the context of their untold sufferings and humiliations at the hands of upper caste groups, their intense struggles against casteism and their profound aspirations for justice, dignity and equality both in the Church and society.[38] A new liturgy as well as a new spirituality expressive of their sufferings, aspirations and hopes is to be developed in the future.

Ecumenism as Liberation of Dalits

Christian unity is a very significant concern of all the Churches. Efforts are being made since Vatican II to foster inter-relationships among the various Churches through dialogue, theological discussions, prayer meetings, common worship etc. But the ecumenical practice, instead of limiting itself to the intellectual and spirtual areas, must acquire a social thrust taking note of the struggle of the dalits for liberation. Considering the fact that the dalits are the majority in almost all the Churches, it is proper and just that all assume the dalit character and imbibe the dalit spirit. The liberation of the dalits should become their topmost agenda. The Churches, far from remaining aloof and entertaining a sectarian spirit, are called upon to strive to fulfill the agenda of the social and religious victims in collaboration with one another. Option for the dalits is an umbrella under which all Churches can be united in India, brushing aside the divisions they have inherited from the West.

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37 Cf. Lancy Lobo, "Towards an Inculturation in the Non-Sankskrit Tradition," **Vidyajyoti** 49 (1985), 16-28; A. M. Varaprasadam, "Inculturation: The Crucial Challenges in the Indian Situation," in Aru A. Roest Crollius (ed.) **Building the Church in Pluralistic Asia**, Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1986, 41-62; Felix Wilfred, "Inculturation as a Hermeneutical Question," **Vidyajyoti** 52 (1988), 422-436.

38 M. E. Prabahar (ed.) **Towards a Dalit Theology**, Delhi: ISPCK, 1989; James Massey, **Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate**, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994;. Xavier Irudayaraj, **Emerging Dalit Theology**, Madras: Jesuit Theological Secretariat, 1990; Anthonyraj Thumma, **Dalit Liberation Theoloy**, Delhi:ISPCK, 2000.

5. Conclusion

From what is stated above, it becomes obvious that the struggle of the dalit Christians for a new life of dignity and equality has already begun and is moving on dynamically and hopefully towards the realization of its goal. They have launched this liberating mission, inspired by the liberative praxis of Jesus who identified himself with the least and the last of the society. A Church that is truly led by the Spirit of Jesus cannot entertain an attitude of indifference or opposition to the aspirations and hopes of the dalits, any sign of which will severely undermine the credibility of the Church in India. Hence, no one can remain idle without making a definite choice in response to God's call and getting fully involved in the cause of the dalits. By discovering the liberative presence of God in the struggle of dalits, identifying herself with them and opting for their cause, the Church becomes their voice and makes their struggle her own. The solidarity with the dalits and option for their cause invite the Church to become a Church of the dalits - a Church of the poor and the marginalized. This is the urgent mission of the Indian Church. Involvement with indomitable courage is the grace we need today.