

## **Living Streams across the Parched Land**

### **Some Tenets of Dalit Spirituality**

A .Maria Arul Raja sj  
Arul Kadal, Jesuit Regional Theology Centre  
Chennai

#### **1.0 Dalit Situation and Self-assertion**

Even after fifty years of obtaining the political freedom for India from the hands of the ruling colonisers as a Republic Sovereign State, the Dalit situation in India could be portrayed as follows: "Self-regarding purity and righteousness ignoring others has been bane of our culture. It has created the gulf in our society between people even with regard to the basic needs and fundamental rights."<sup>1</sup> The sad state of affairs of the Dalits is portrayed thus by none lesser than Mr.K.R.Narayanan, the first citizen of this country, the President of India.<sup>2</sup> While further emphasising that the Dalit rights are part of the issues related to human rights, he rightly diagnoses the reasons for the stepped-up Dalit self-assertion in the following words:

It seems, in the social realm, some kind of counter-revolution is taking place in India. It is forgotten that these benefits have been provided not in the way of charity, but as human rights and as social justice to a section of society who constitute a big chunk of our population, and who actually contribute to our

---

1. Dalit Media Network, *Dalit President Speaks*, Chennai, 2000, 8. This remark is made in the Presidential address to the Nation by Mr.K.R.Narayanan during the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Republic Day of India.

2. Because he happens to be a Dalit perhaps, he could boldly come out with this statement.

agriculture, industry and services as landless labourers, factory and municipal workers. These are the signs that our privileged classes are getting tired of the affirmative action provided by constitutional provisions.<sup>3</sup>

The nine-member jury engaged in the National Public Hearing on several cases of atrocities against the Dalits insists that "the National Human Rights Commission and the international community should recognise that caste, as an institution itself, is a source of violation of human rights. Therefore, it must be treated on a par with the existence of racism and apartheid."<sup>4</sup>

The Dalits, on their part, are not prepared to remain as mute spectators in the face of their being dehumanised, denied and defaced. And hence there have been spirited campaigns against caste system and untouchability across the country. With their awakened consciousness, they assert that nothing short of total destruction of caste system will ensure the restoration of their humanity. In consonance with this spirit, the Charter of Dalit Human Rights, while envisioning the empowerment of Dalits, proclaims its mode of proceeding in the following manner:

Whereas Dalits in India have the capacity to transform our pains and struggles into power, our efforts are:

- \* to establish our lost Humanity, Dignity and Security
- \* to establish ourselves as daughters and sons of this soil, queens and Kings of this soil, rulers of this soil since this is our soil
- \* to assert ourselves as a people, claiming that it is our earth, an earth that is Dalit in character
- \* to assert our aspirations for self-governance with Dalit leadership to change power equations in economic, cultural and political positions.<sup>5</sup>

The pursuit of these aspirations entails certain sustained efforts on the part of the Dalits. And to our great surprise, these Dalit efforts

---

3. Dalit Media Network, *Dalit President Speaks*, Chennai, 2000, 12.

4. "Treat Caste on a Par with Racism," *The Hindu*, Chennai, April 20, 2000, 11.

5. "A Charter of Dalit Human Rights," *National Campaign Manifesto: Dalit Human Rights*, Secundrabad: National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 1999, 25.

emerge from their interior energies with a renewed vigour from their battered selves. It is, as it were, the living streams gushing forth across the parched land; the powerful rays of hope shining forth in the midst of frustration of being repeatedly dehumanised. This process of the emergence of interior energies, streams of life and rays of hope from the flesh-and-blood persons of Dalits while encountering their situations of dehumanisation is from their own inner depth or what we call in common parlance their spirituality. Some of the tenets of the Dalit spirituality are probed into from a Dalit perspective in this brief paper.

## **2.0 Well-springs from Within**

In coping with the reality of human suffering, people of various cultures down the ages have been seeking solutions to their existential problems from the realm of religiosity, besides those from other aspects of life. In such in-depth spiritual searches, they seemed to have found the elements of hope to be actively operative in the midst of their vulnerabilities of despair and defeatism experienced by them to this day. "This hope, nurtured through culture and religious traditions, is embedded in the ethos, aesthetics, narratives and proverbs inspiring daily lives of the marginal identities, despised groups, and other peoples."<sup>6</sup>

Against this broad anthropological backdrop, one can understand that the religious and cultural symbolic world-view of Dalits as a meaning system arising from the depth of their collective experience constitutes a precious resource in their struggle for liberation.<sup>7</sup> The Charter of Dalit Human Rights has rightly taken cognisance of the interior power of hope from within the Dalits and has articulated the same as follows:

Whereas no power on this earth has the power to destroy Dalit power from the face of Mother Earth; that the power of Dalit resilience, the power of Dalit culture simply cannot be wiped out, the spirit of this Charter expresses our dreams and

---

6. F.Wilfred, "The Margins: The Site of God's Visitation- A Meditation," *Third Millennium* 2 (1999) 112.

7. Cf. Clarke, "Subaltern Culture," 295-315; also cf. A.M.A.Raja, "Harmony in the midst of Anarchy: The Anatomy of the Spirit of Dalit Liberation," *VJTR* 63 (1999) 416- 428.

aspirations for the future, emanating from a strong spirituality of hope and strength.<sup>8</sup>

Such realistic dreams and aspirations are concretely realised in terms of reinterpreting the religio-cultural resources. The Dalits, while grappling with the problem of their suffering, intuitively reinterpret their own religio-cultural resources which are to a great extent of the oral order. And this could be the most fertile site for engendering the required impetus for encountering the problem of the Dalit suffering. In addition to this, a dialogue between the Dalit suffering and those religio-cultural resources, written or oral but vibrant with the aspect of human suffering, will further sharpen their search for meaning to sustain their struggle. Such enlivening resources could be identified from other cultures and religions. With an active solidarity with the Dalits, the 'organic intellectuals', to use the well-known category of Antonio Gramsci,<sup>9</sup> could evolve a conducive atmosphere to enable the Dalits to interpret those religio-cultural resources by themselves. Such 'organic intellectuals' already evangelised by the Dalits<sup>10</sup> through their solidarity with them, could be of some service in further sharpening the critical consciousness inherent in the Dalits to grapple with their unique suffering caused by the practice of untouchability and caste hierarchy and energetically constructing creative alternatives by themselves to gain their human dignity.

### **3.0 Dalit Symbolic World**

With regard to the expression of self-identity and self-assertion of the Dalits, one cannot expect uniformity. Because "Dalit culture is an acquired and constructed system of collective self-representation, communicated by means of multivalent symbols held together in a loosely organised pattern, which have expressive, directive, resistive

---

8. "A Charter of Dalit Human Rights," 25.

9. The 'organic intellectuals' are different from the 'traditional intellectuals' in not superimposing their own mind-sets, in comprehending the subaltern realities. Because of their active solidarity with the struggles of the subalterns, the former are said to have incorporated the agenda of their 'common sense' for the practical transformation into their intellectual pursuits. Cf. A.Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. ed. & trans. Q. Hoare & G.Nowell-Smith; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) 23, 323-343.

10. Cf. J.L.Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology," *Journal of Theology of South Africa* 52 (1985) 23-28.

and affective functions for a human community".<sup>11</sup> And hence at the symbolic level, there is a wide spectrum of Dalit responses to their oppression with the process of Sanskritisation<sup>12</sup> on one extreme, and of an outright de-Hinduisation<sup>13</sup> on the other.

Of late, as against the tendencies among a majority of educated Dalits to hide their identity for fear of being excluded from others, a good number of them boldly proclaim their identity with a sense of pride in public fora. In the contemporary scenario, the great personality of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar seems to have captured the collective Dalit imagination as their liberative symbol. And further, the native cultural expressions of Dalits like *Parayattam* (dance with drums), which has been associated only with funeral processions and hence dismissed as inauspicious by the elite in the casteist society, is now acclaimed by the Dalits, in the recent times, as their unique heritage to enthuse every nerve of their selves in celebrating life especially during their gatherings or festivals with a sense of reverberating jubilation. This is how the Dalits tend to handle their own symbolic world with the spirit of an upsurge of self-assertion as against the elitist expectation of the oppressed to get settled down with uncritical assimilation of the oppressive casteist values to the advantage of the oppressors. The Dalit modes of defiance of these elitist expectations are discussed in the following three sections: (1) autonomy of religiosity (2) Multi-faceted spiritual search (3) Practical utility in approaching the Divine.

### **3.1 Autonomy of Dalit Religiosity**

From the point of view of social marginalisation by the politico-cultural elite, the obtaining prejudice is that the Dalits "are

---

11. S. Clarke, "Subaltern Culture as Resource for People's Liberation: A Critical Inquiry into Dalit Culture Theory," *National Council of Churches Review* 119 (1999) 306; also cf. A.M.A.Raja, "Some Glimpses into Dalit Religiosity," *The Rally* (June 1999) 39-41.

12. Sanskritisation is "the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, 'twice born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community." M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Bombay : Orient Longman, 1972, 6.

13. Cf. K.Ilaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Calcutta: Samya, 1996.

very bad theologians and their religious knowledge remains very superficial."<sup>14</sup> This is a tragic conclusion of those who attempt to interpret Dalit religious experiences and expressions through the eyes of the categories of religious world of the ruling elite dominating the cultural realm. Dalits may not, do not and need not always explain their faith experiences in and through the idioms of the professional or full-time theologians of those religions greatly or partially obsessed with organising their creed, code or cult in a semblance of total order. Very often these theologians assume the role of an all-pervading and all-determining cultural custodians for themselves.

The myth of the uncritical internalisation of the elite religious tenets posited on Dalits has to be wiped out with the awareness of their 'conflict consciousness or contradictory consciousness': "one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and critically absorbed."<sup>15</sup> That is to say, even while appearing at the surface level, to be passively undergoing the experience of oppression, the Dalits undertake an active role to reject and revolt against it; even while pretending to uncritically imitate the religious praxis of the oppressors, their minds are bent on actively evolving their own brand of religiosity to break the backbone of the oppressive religious ideologies imposed on them.

---

14. R. Deliege, *The World of the 'Untouchables': Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 253.

15. For its survival, any subaltern group of great mass during normal times may be submissive and subordinate by explicitly adopting the very world-view imposed by or borrowed from the dominant group; but occasionally in flashes, the same group, as an organic totality, might act upon its own original 'common sense' implicit in the substratum of its collective consciousness in order to be engaged in the practical transformation of thwarting the oppressive world-view of the dominant. For a perceptive analysis on the 'contradictory consciousness' cf. A.Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. & trans. Q.Hoare & G.Nowell-Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, 333, 323-420, esp. 323-343; cf. P.Chatterjee, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness," in R.Guha, *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 169-174; cf. S.M.Parish, *Hierarchy and its Discontents: Culture and the Politics of Consciousness in Caste Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 198-224.

Such Dalit expressions of protest against the imposed caste consciousness could be observed in their life spectrum with wide ranges from mild forms of opposition upto wild forms of subversion. Dalit experience of the transcendent cannot be seen to be rooted in the sophisticated theological understanding or articulation of those claiming to have birth-right in oppressing others. Nor is it vibrant with the elitist metaphysical nature of theological probe into the transcendent. Dalit religiosity is directly rooted in their own experience of vulnerabilities. Whatever be the nature of the divine- be it a monotheistic God or a pantheon of gods and goddesses, the Dalits respond only to that brand of the divine which seeks to transform their vulnerabilities into empowerment as humans with the rest of the humans, upon the materialist site.

### ***3.2 Multi-faceted Spiritual Search***

Dalit spiritual search with its multi-faceted expressions is at once surrounded by the aura of the following twin motifs: "particularity and universality; locatedness and boundlessness; fixity and fluidity; determinedness and openness; resistance and assimilation."<sup>16</sup> The converging point of all these multi-faceted spiritual expressions- particularity of geographical region, locatedness of the deities, fluidity in handling various creeds, codes and cults- is the search for salvation whose current objective should enable them 'to cease to be a deplored Dalit and to become a beloved co-human with others'.

Though the practice of veneration to their own deities are rooted in a particular region or community on the one hand, and they are not barred from within from the worship of other deities even of other regions or the gods of other religions. That is to say that in the realm of their religious world and spiritual praxis, the rigour of dogma takes the backseat. And consequently, fundamentalism is alien to their innate substratum of their spirituality. Obsession with conquest of the symbolic world of others and expansionism into the territory of other cultural worlds, either through the exercise of brute force or subtle co-option, is not even the covert agenda of the Dalits. Exclusion of other religious experiences through the process of dogmatisation is foreign to the world of Dalit spirituality.

---

16. S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 101.

Any symbol - be it a deity, cult, ritual or scripture, holy man or woman - that appears to offer them a semblance of their liberation from socio-cultural slavery, is unhesitatingly incorporated into the Dalit religious universe with a welcoming spirit. That is why, numerous Dalits have become dignified converts in some religions. In some cases, their marginalisation to the menial status is reiterated even after their conversion to a new religions. In some other cases, the Dalit symbols have been co-opted into the oppressive religious universe, reducing them merely to be the mute spectators in the spiritual world.

### ***3.3 Practical Utility in Approaching the Divine***

Many orthodox traditions of some religions with well-organised ecclesiastical networks and some sections of the academia upholding the greatness of the so-called 'Great Traditions' construe the Dalit to be highly pragmatic.<sup>17</sup> This understanding has always been due to certain condescending attitude of looking down upon the Dalit religiosity as immature. But when it is seen from the point of view of the intra-Dalit perspective, especially against the backdrop of the frequent experience of deprivations that the Dalits are subjected to, then we get a different picture.

Dalit religious fervour expresses itself specially under the precise conditions of practicality. They do not communicate with their gods or goddesses simply with no agenda. Experiences of vulnerabilities in terms of sickness, possession by evil spirits, death of the dear ones, famine, lack of rain or the occasion of the annual festival will be the moments of their intense search for the favours from the transcendental forces. The sense of being grateful to the gratuitous gifts from the divine is very often not found among the Dalits.

Why is there the prevalence of this sense of practical utility in their relationship with the divine? All along in their life, nothing is gained by the Dalits gratuitously. The little money offered to them as the remuneration is too negligible in comparison with the enormous energy spent on their arduous labour. Whereas the leisurely class of people enjoy all the benefits with minimum exertion without much

---

17. J. Freeman, *Scarcity and Opportunity in an Indian Village*, Menlo Park: Cummings, 1977, 25.

physical labour, for a vast majority of Dalits, to win even their daily bread even the last drop of energies are extracted from the famished structures of their undernourished bodies. It is, as it were, hard physical labour associated with suffering is the necessary intermediary for everything that the Dalits receive from others. These socio-economic transactions of receiving the negligible gain at the expense of their only treasure - the labour squeezed out of their bodies - are the basis upon which they build their relationship with the divine. If the divine offers some favours to them, they are restless until they reciprocate something in return. That is why, perhaps, their transactions with the divine also fall under the rule of reciprocity.

The offer to the divine could be made either before or after receiving the favours. Very often what the Dalit offers as reciprocation is associated with their own bodies. Shaving of one's head, offering a small amount of money in a shrine, sacrificing a cock, offering meals for a few beggars if their scarce economic sources permit, are some of the modes of expressing their gratitude.

But during the moments of crisis, they may not hesitate to employ even the most complicated cultic practices borrowed both from the elite or subaltern cultic practices or discourses.

#### **4.0 Dalit Religious Praxis**

While probing into some of the tenets of Dalit spirituality, it will be helpful to dwell upon some of the modes of their religious praxis manifested through their spontaneous behaviour while encountering the symbols related to the divine. And here we intend to focus on the following items: (1) behaviour in the presence of the divine, (2) approach to female deities, (3) behaviour with intermediaries.

##### **4.1 Behaviour in the Presence of the Divine**

In contrast with the common Dalit behaviour of maintaining the semblance of humble distance and discreetness in the presence of the high caste powerholders, their behaviour in the presence of the deities is not one of maintaining humble distance or discreetness. Almost there is an air of taken-for-granted behaviour found among the Dalits when encountering the divine, strikingly in contrast with the most composed behaviour of the seasoned devotees among the elite in the sacrosanct. There is a sense of familiarity and simplicity in the Dalit acts of worship. Their articulate supplications are mostly centred

around their daily needs of life and of protection from inimical forces. Their down-to-earth prayers are simple enough to sound very naive to the ears which are accustomed to specialised esoteric types of *mantras* chanted in classical languages.

Exterior aspects of religious behaviour like touching the idol or kissing a statue or doing the sacramental activities around the idols may not be such a complicated affair as often found in the meticulous prescriptions and orderly manners of elitist worships. Practices such as the use of water, flowers, leaves, ghee, circumambulation of fire or icons, chanting of prescribed *mantras*, singing of *bhajans* and silent contemplation may not be the standard elements readily found in the Dalits whose spontaneous communication with the divine is often plainly unadorned with a few words of articulation of their helplessness. Sometimes an energetic dance in total abandon to the tune of the drums in front of a make-shift sacred place of worship and some times a prolonged intense silence during long hours of hard manual labour are part of their in-depth moments shared with the divine. The atmosphere of noise and disorder may not be frowned upon by the Dalits even while intensely communicating with their deities. In fact, their spontaneous worship and prayers will add to the disorderly noise already existing around the icon (*Sami*) temporarily located or permanently installed in the spot fixed for common worship normally of a very small area with no roofs but just marked by four stone-pillars planted on the earth. Even to the extent to which the Dalits are protected by their tiny huts capped by thatched roofs supported by muddy walls, their gods and goddesses are not protected. These open air Dalit deities get scorched by the hot sun and get drenched by the rains. Thus in the experience of vulnerability, both the Dalits and their deities share the misfortune together creating a sense of solidarity and mutual consolation to each other. With this psychological closeness, their physical proximity to the deities or the sacred objects or shrines, may not radically change their normal behaviour into putting on a pharisaic mask. In other words, the line of separation between the sacred and secular is practically negligible in the world of Dalit religiosity.

Their collective identity in the given community context will be normally traced to a guardian god or goddess (*Kaval Deivam/Devathai*) through various versions of mythical discourses, orally preserved

without any fixed canon. This identity in relation to the guardian deity is the bond of union among them that more powerfully and effectively functions from within than other types of cohesion envisaged by other religious or political forces from outside.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4.2 Approach to Female Deities**

Dalits have a special veneration and devotion to the female deities.<sup>19</sup> Some deities are more benevolent and affectionate towards the sufferers; and some other deities are depicted as more irascible and wrathful towards the evil doers. By and large, these goddesses will be single, unmarried to their male counter-parts. Even if there is a process of cooption of Dalit symbols by the elite or adaptation of the elite symbols by the Dalits, the autonomy of the goddesses worshipped by Dalits is well-maintained. "Interestingly, in the case of both *Ellaiyamman* and *Mariyamman*, even though one component of their constitutive nature is rooted in being the spouse of a Brahmin *rishi*, once they come into being as deities they claim independence from their past relationships."<sup>20</sup> These mythical figures have all along been associated with blood-shed for having toed the line of disobeying the oppressive caste norms imposed upon women or of protecting the villages from the onslaught of the evil forces of death and diseases. This throws light on the resistive dimensions of Dalit spirituality with its unique agenda of obtaining emancipation from caste oppression

Protection of an individual or a community from the destructive, possessive and conquering gaze of the enemies or from the onslaught of the deadly diseases or epidemics created by the demonic forces or from the evil eye of kith and kin jealous of those experiencing certain conditions favourable to a decent living will be the primary agenda for Dalit prayer. Their asking for some favours with a sense of belonging from those female deities with motherly warmth is just the most natural and primordial experience of protecting love and warm embrace in the life of every human child.

---

18. "It is not through fellowship with the Catholic community that the Paraiyars have found their identity, but rather through the cult of the guardian of the village." Deliege, *Untouchables: Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu*, 1997, 253.

19. Cf. S. Fuchs, *The Children of Hari: A Study of the Nimar Balahis in the Central Provinces of India*, Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1950, 253.

20. S. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 103.

### **4.3 Behaviour with Intermediaries**

In general, there is an undercurrent of antipathy among the Dalits to those claiming to be the intermediaries between them and the transcendental powers of gods/ goddesses. The more the intermediary is physically away from them, the more their antipathy towards them grows. For instance, a Brahmin priest or a Christian pastor or a Muslim clergy man presiding over an official worship in a well-structured worship conducted within the premises of the holy places buildings of the worshipping centres may be an object of indifference or even derogatory remarks of the Dalits.

But on the otherhand, those intermediaries who are less powerful in the social map often with low income - the local *pujaris*, catechists, astrologers, seers, those experts claiming to cast spells or to exorcise evil spirits or to heal with rural medicines, those becoming the transcendental voice through divinatory trances every now and then - are frequently accessible to them in their day to day lives - in the streetcorners, community wells, marketplaces and even arrackshops. The smoothness of the rapport between these accessible intermediaries and the Dalits will be often peppered with interesting bargains sometimes sounding like a minor tussle or simulated combat between two parties of equals. At times the prolonged conversations between these two parties might end up with even loud exchanges of mutual abuses.

To a great extent, in the universe of Dalit spirituality, an explicit contempt will be more articulate to those intermediaries more accessible to them; and latent contempt will be to those intermediaries less accessible. That does not mean that the absence of explicitness of their articulate contempt canonises the powerful intermediaries and take to task the powerless intermediaries.

### **5.0 Conclusion**

To choose a different alternative in the midst of the spirit of conformism with the prevalent thought-patterns of the elite ruling the socio-cultural realm is normally called as heresy. Very often the Dalits intuitively choose their own brand of religious practices which may or may not fall in line with the various religious tenets of the oppressive forces.

For instance, the religious quest of Dr. Ambedkar, who led a massive religious conversion movement in the twentieth century in India could be probed into for grappling with criteria with which the Dalits choose their own liberative brand of spirituality and religious praxis.

The traditional interpretation of the reality of human suffering in Buddhism blamed the sufferers themselves for their own thirst. But sensitised by the Dalit spirituality Ambedkar realised that such blames upon the sufferers are not in tune with the interior spiritual movements of the Dalits who are already the victims of sufferings caused by the cruelty of the caste-minded others. Any religious teaching that indulges in the self-blame of those suffering due to imposed social disorder cannot find a reception in the minds of the Dalits.

It is at this juncture, the criteria of rationality, social benefit and certainty of humanising the humiliated Dalits prevailed upon Dr. Ambedkar even to the extent of reworking the canon of the Buddhist scriptures and myths. And in the Ambedkaran brand of Buddhism what is emphasised is not the metaphysical hair-splitting of the theory of *Karma* but the down-to-earth ethical option in sensitivity towards the suffering humanity of the Dalits.

If such creative alternatives are attempted by responsible organic intellectuals sensitised by the details of the sensibilities of Dalit spirituality briefly delineated above, then they will be able to enable the Dalits to attain their salvation of becoming co-humans with the whole of the humanity.