

# **BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION FROM THE SUBALTERN CULTURAL MATRIX OF INDIA**

*An Exploration into the Epistemic Foundations*

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## **SITUATING THE PROBLEMATIC**

This paper intends to initiate a process by some loud thinking regarding the need and the possibility of interpreting the Bible from the indigenous subaltern (*Dalitbahujan*)<sup>1</sup> cultural matrix of India. This becomes a necessity at present, because of the popular perception, if not frustration, of some Christians coming from the Dalit, Tribal and Backward Class background regarding the present trends in the field of Biblical interpretation in India. These *Dalitbahujan* Christians do not belong to or subscribe to the Aryan-Sanskrit tradition, popularly known as *Brahminic* tradition. Theirs is *shramanic* tradition. They feel that much of the present Biblical interpretation done in India has utilized the analytical tools of interpretation borrowed from the Aryan-Sanskrit tradition and its

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<sup>1</sup> *Dalitbahujan* (oppressed masses) is a new political category gaining coinage in the recent times. It is the opposite of the *Brahmin-Bania* combine, comprising only of the so-called upper caste people, constituting just around 15% of India's population. Yet this minority group has been the ruling power of India for at least two millennia. Whereas the *Dalitbahujan*, comprising of the Dalits (15%), Tribals (8%), and the Backward Class (52%) constitute the majority (75%) of India's population. Yet they had been dominated and subordinated throughout much of India's known history.

philosophical framework.<sup>2</sup> A reading and interpretation of the Bible from the perspective of the *Dalitbahujan* will seriously question this approach.

The need for our loud thinking is further becoming more pressing because the present ruling powers and their communal outfits are out to impose a hegemonic *cultural monism* upon all Indians. In this context, there is a counter attempt from the *Dalitbahujans* to create a *cultural subalternism*<sup>3</sup> asserting their identity and political agenda, while at the same time exposing and critiquing the brahminic tradition of mega manipulation. The brahminic forces are now attempting to reconstruct a convenient history of India, showing that the Aryans were the original inhabitants of India and the creators of the ancient Indus valley civilization of Mhanja-daro and Harappa. The Aryans migration took place from India into Europe, rather than from Europe into India. While they are bending backwards to establish this fabulous fantasy as history, they are also observing a conspiratorial silence regarding the very existence and the unique intellectual and cultural orientations of the pre-Aryan indigenous people of India, especially the Dravidians.<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context our enquiry and loud thinking regarding Biblical interpretation *evolving* from the subaltern cultural matrix of

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<sup>2</sup> One cannot easily underestimate some of the recent attempts to present a well-integrated approach and methodology to theories of Indian interpretation. Cf. Anand Amaladass, *Indian Exegesis: Hindu Buddhist Hermeneutics*, Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2003. In this perceptive work the author has separately presented the Buddhist and the Hindu methods of interpretation. The Buddhist tradition has its roots to the indigenous Indic approaches, and the Hindu tradition has its roots in the *vedic* and *vedantic* approaches. Our enquiry is into the problematic why and how these approaches are different, and what socio-political implications their basic categories have.

<sup>3</sup> Prof. T.K. Oommen has recently used these categories of *cultural monism* and *cltural subalternism* in his Key Note Address "Citizenship Education in Indian Republic: Crisis and Contention," to the National Consultation on *Education as Mission* held in Ishvani Kendra, Pune, during 10-14 January, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> A cursory glance at some of the recently published History Text Books by NCERT will ascertain this dangerous fascist tendency. Cf. A. Marx's Tamil Work *Veruppai Vidaikkum Varalaatru Paadangal* (History Books that Sow the Seeds of Hatred), Chennai: Suya Mariaadhai Iyakkam, 2003.

India assumes greater relevance and importance. Hope this will initiate a debate among scholars and students.

## A DEEP DIVIDE

The anthropological and epistemological orientations of the interpreter are bound to affect Biblical interpretations. In India there can be two orientations, namely that of the Aryans whose thought patterns dominate today's intellectual scene, and that of the indigenous people who can be best represented by the Dravidians whose thought patterns are very much hidden and neglected. There is a deep divide between these two epistemological orientations.

The major divide is due to the very foundations of **these two ways of thinking**. In his recent seminal Tamil book *Indhiak Kathai: Ekam, Anekam, Saadhiam*<sup>5</sup> Prof. Dr. Muthumohan of Madurai Kamarajar University has attempted to explore into this hypothesis. He convincingly argues that the separation between the thought pattern of the Dravidians and that of the Aryans is like the one between the heaven and earth, because the Aryan thinking is heaven (sky) based, while the Dravidian thinking is earth based. The following would be a rough translation of his Tamil text:

Remnants of the ancient Indus Valley civilization, going back to 5000 BCE, have come to us as the evidence for the oldest Indian culture. This appears to be very much a riverine civilization. River, soil, cultivation, etc., formed its basic fabric. The people of the Indus Valley seem to have developed an advanced agrarian culture. Celebration of earth, its fertility and harvest seems to have been predominant among them. Numerous seals excavated from the ancient cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa depict river, water, plant, trees, vines, creepers, bulls, unicorns, etc. Worship of mother goddess seems to have been quite common. All these reveal an intimate relationship of the people with the earth and its fertility. In ancient agrarian civilizations, earth's fertility was often associated with the reproductive ability

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<sup>5</sup> This title can be rendered in English as *The Story of India: Monism, Pluralism, Casteism*, Madurai: Bharathi Book House, 2003.

and maternity of women. Earth's fertility was symbolized by women's capacity for conception and child bearing. (Even their first conception of the divine was in the form of a Mother Goddess). Thus the Indus Valley civilization seems to have emerged from a people's intimate relationship with the concrete and empirical realities like the earth, river, water, women, fertility, childbearing, nursing, tending, growth, harvest, etc.

2000 years later, nomadic ethnic groups speaking Aryan languages entered the Indus Valley wandering through the mountain passes of the North Western Himalayas. They were pastoral people, constantly on the move searching for suitable grazing fields and water resources for their cattle. Hence, theirs was a wandering culture. As they had no need to stay in any particular location, they had no attachment to any part of the land. As wandering nomads they had to look toward the heavens for guidance, safety and security. From the position of the sun, the moon and the stars, they assessed the time, season, direction, etc. Hence the heavenly bodies became their worshipful Gods: Sun, Moon, Aswin, Maruthi, Ragu-Kethu, Lightening, Thunder, Vayu, Varuna, Indira, etc. These are associated with the skies and space. They had, almost, no gods or goddesses belonging to the earth and its various processes.

Thus, the abstract heavens above one's head became the major epistemic source of the Aryan culture. In contrast, the concrete earth below became the crucible of the noetic experiences and epistemic processes of the indigenous Dravidians. According to Prof. Muthu Mohan, this created a world of difference in terms of practical implications. We shall enumerate a few examples to illustrate this point.<sup>6</sup>

- The heaven based thinking tends to deny or devalue the empirical reality. They are taken to be mere illusions or *maya*,

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<sup>6</sup> The heaven based Aryan thinking had its initial expressions in the *Vedas*. It became a well-developed philosophical system in the later *Vedantic* tradition.

a great obstacle to grasp the real truth and attain enlightenment.

- It tends to create a world of dichotomies: Matter/spirit, body/soul, sacred/secular, purity/pollution, etc. In this, the material and the bodily dimensions are degraded as the source of evil, death and decay; but the 'spiritual' is glorified as the source of life, truth, knowledge and happiness.
- This tendency leads to divide and arrange every ordinary thing into a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority.<sup>7</sup> This epistemic system cannot see differences in a horizontal way simply as differences.

It divided first human beings into four *varnas* of graded inequality: *Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishias and Sudras*, having the *panchamas* as the outcastes. In this order the Brahmins reign supreme as super humans. The *Sudras* are made the exterior limit of the *savarnas*, making the *panchamas* to be cast out as *avarna*, as the exterior of the exterior in order to reaffirm the superiority of the *dwijas* (the twice-born) namely, the Brahmins, and those below them.

- i. This tendency to create a vertically divided hierarchy of human beings further expanded to hierarchicalize the different stages of life also: *brahmachariyam, grhastam, vanaprastam and sannyasam*, the last being the superior state, reserved for the twice-born only.
- ii. So also the human qualities were seen in a graded way: *satvam, rajasam and tamas*, the Brahmins appropriating the *satvic* (light) qualities by their very birth and condemning the *sudras* and *panchamas* to stay only with the *tamasic* (dark) qualities.
- iii. The paths or the *margas* of salvation were also divided into a neat hierarchy: *Gnana, Karma, Yoga and Bhakti*.

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<sup>7</sup>One need not wonder if these tendencies and approaches are also prevalent in the Institutional Church, and repressive Governments. It will only indicate how such structures are alienated from the earth, its life giving sources, and productive manual labour. Mother earth is a primordial sacrament of God's presence and providence. Alienation from the earth can only create distorted human beings.

- iv. So also the five elements are divided in a hierarchy: fire, space, air, water and lastly earth.

The list can go on endlessly. They are not just differences, placed side by side, in a horizontal way. But they are graded one below the other in a vertical fashion, as in a ladder. This tendency paves the way for the ideology of *exclusivism* to protect and promote the power and privilege of the unjustly constructed superior human beings. This ideology of exclusivism is supported by the notion of ritual purity and pollution, permanently ascribed to things, persons and actions. This idea of ascribed ritual pollution has its existence only in the mind. Hence such an idea of imaginary pollution does not find coinage among the earth-bound indigenous people. For them pollution is physical or moral; neither ritual nor permanent.

- These notions of hierarchy and purity-pollution have only helped the perpetrators to create an enclosed and exclusivist segment of society with special power and privileges. In this hierarchical arrangement of mundane reality with faulty power relations, *Vedanta* propounds another theory called *ekantavada* affirming that there is only one ultimate reality, and that is *Brahman*. (For all practical purposes, this One reality is concretized by the privileged *savarna* population). It alone is real and everything else is *maya*, an illusion.
- This is also established in a negative way, denying reality to everything else in a progressive way by the apophatic formula: *neti, neti*, not this, not that. Whereas the indigenous thinking will accept the reality of every finite thing with an affirmative formula: *iti, iti*; this is, that is<sup>8</sup>. This does not mean that everything is taken to be absolute. It affirms that the Ultimate can be encountered and experienced only through the medium of the finite reality, this and that. There is no other privileged route to reach the Ultimate by-passing the mediation of the material-human-historical reality. Hence, every thing, person and group is to be taken seriously and with respect.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf, Muthu Mohan, *Ibid*, pp. 11-12.

- This *vedantic* tendency of *ekantavada* (monism) is rejected by the *anekantavada* (pluralism) of Jainism, representing the indigenous thinking. It does not see reality in a monistic mode. It accepts reality to be plural and multiple. Buddhism seems to go further and affirm the inter-relatedness of all beings, going beyond monism and desparate pluralism. These two orientations represent the thinking of the ordinary people whose thought process is rooted on the earth. The very constitution of the earth is perceived to be pluralistic: five elements, five kinds of landscape, *Ainthinai* in Tamil tradition: *Kurinji*(hill-track), *Mullai* (foot-hill meadows), *Marutham* (fertile river side), *Neythal* (Littoral or sea coast) and *Palai*(distortion of the former ones). Inanimate things found on the face of the earth are all pluralistic. So also are the animals, birds, insects, etc. Their classifications are made only in a horizontal way. Vertical classification is alien to the earth-bound indigenous people.
  
- To perpetuate the *ekantavada*, the Aryan-Brahmin traditions stress that the One reality, Brahman, is eternal and unchanging. This has too many socio-political implications. The structures created in favour of the ruling powers are clothed with the halo of unchangeability. But the earth based people experience in their daily existence innumerable changes and transformations. For them reality is not static but always in a state of flux. Being is always becoming. Hence, change and transformations, decay and dissolutions are part of their experiential grammar. No historical reality, social structure or political power can be outside the process of change.
  
- The Aryan approach, uncomfortable with pluralism and change, naturally tends to be categorical and dogmatic. It takes a very narrow and rigid disjunctive logic of either/or. It has to be either this or that. It cannot be anything else. This tendency does not tolerate democratic discussion or dissent. Authority of tradition and its agents is final. But the indigenous approach accepts not only the possibilities, but

also the very reality of difference. Jainism speaks about *ciadvada*<sup>9</sup>: reality can be this way, or that way or both. It accepts a conjunctive logic of 'both this and that'. Both Buddhism and Jainism accept that each aspect or entity has a particular meaning and use. So everything has a reason and a purpose, and therefore a right, for its existence.

- Because of the dogmatic and dictatorial orientation born of monism and *ekantavada*, the *Brahmin-bania* approach usually tends to be very intolerant of differences and dissents. Its innate tendency is to go for draconian laws and brutal punishments as the effective ways of suppressing dissent and disobedience. This is evident from Manu's harsh legislations against those who break the tenets of the *varna* dharma. The same also explains the present black legislations like POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) by the Hindutva forces. But, the pluralistic orientation of the earth based indigenous people is democratic by nature. Discussion and consensus are part of their cultural ethos. Hence tolerance and non-violence is built into its vision of society. The notion of *ahimsa* is the gift of Buddhism and Jainism, not of the brahminic Hinduism. The present day *sangh parivars* have a distaste for *ahimsa* because they think that it has made the Hindu community weak and cowardly.
- Therefore, the sky-based thinking is not very conducive for human sensitivities and ethical norms. It tends to be self-centred and individualistic. It does not look at the other as brother or sister, but only as a source of competition and potential threat. Hence values like justice, equality, freedom, fellowship, forgiveness, etc., are scorned in this approach, as cause of weakness. Oppression, exploitation, slavery, etc., are readily practiced, depending on the pragmatic pressures. But the earth-based culture would rather exhibit a propensity for justice and peace.
- As a result, the earth based epistemic orientation provides sufficient space for prophetic persons and their activities. But

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 16-17.

the heaven-based system tends to breed and perpetuate unjust and oppressive structures, using repressive methods. Hence, to be prophetic, or to accept prophets, will be next to impossibility for this approach.

These are some of the differences and their socio-political implications between the indigenous Indic traditions (*shramanic*) and the Aryan-Brahmin traditions (*brahmanic*). Their difference is not merely a matter of degree. It seems to be a matter of essence. It is bound to be so because the matrixes from which they emerge are totally opposite: the earth and the sky, though they also seem to meet somewhere at the horizon.

Like the earth, the earth-based culture is very concrete and pluralistic. It affirms and values matter, body, emotions, etc. It does not create a dichotomy between two poles of the same reality, but goes for a holistic integration. It considers everything and everybody pure and holy in creation and birth. Birth, growth, change, production, pro-creation, etc., are experientially accepted as natural and emphasized as inevitable. This approach does not see anything as eternally changeless, except perhaps change itself. Human labour is considered sacred and necessary. Human knowledge, wisdom, skill, technology, etc., can grow and mature only through human labour, because manual labour alone can bring in close contact with earth and nature. Physical labour is, hence, necessary to humanize humanity and make it truly holy and spiritual.<sup>10</sup>

## TWO WAYS OF LEARNING AND GROWING UP

Kancha Ilaiah, in his much debated book *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* gives a graphic expression to his historical experience of

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<sup>10</sup> These earthy characteristics are presented here mostly in a positive light. This does not mean that these people were or are absolutely good, and their culture totally humanizing. For the sake of argument the characteristic dimension is highlighted. These orientations are also found in the Bible. The Israelites were once nomadic people. Later they got settled in the 'Promised' land. Much of their original value orientation matured during their life there. God led them through their earth based existence to go after a counter culture and a prophetic thrust.

the above orientations.<sup>11</sup> According to him, learning and upbringing of the *dalitbahujan* children takes place in the midst of real life situations and various productive engagements. They grow in knowledge, wisdom, skill and technologies appropriate to the traditional occupations of their respective families.

"I and my Kurumaa friends ... were trained in sheep-breeding, which is a specific occupation of the Kurumaas and Gollas alone. At the same time, my Gouda friends were drawn into toddy-tapping and Kappu friends into plough driving. Each one of us was supposed to pick up the language (and skill) of our particular caste. .. I was taught the different names of the sheep...I learnt about the diseases the sheep were afflicted with, how a delivery should be 'midwifed', how young ones should be handled, which was the best grass for rearing the sheep. Goats... were to be fed with tree leaves (goats do not eat grass). We learnt what herbal medicine should be applied... If the diseases were nerve-based ones, we learnt how to touch the sheep with a hot iron at the relevant place. One of the most difficult and expert tasks was shearing the wool from the sheep's body..." (p. 3).

"The Maadiga boys who were younger than me were *jeetas* (farm servants).... Their childhood was much tougher than ours. But in certain areas they were far more skilled and intelligent. They knew how to skin dead cattle, convert the skin into soft and smooth leather, and transform the leather into farm instruments and shoes. Their skill in playing the *dappu* was far beyond that of anyone of us..." (p. 10).

But this is not the case with the children of the Brahmins and the Banias. "The Brahmin *wadaas* and families (were) alienated from the kind of socio-economic environment in which a real hero or heroine can be constructed. Their social settings are the reading of *slokaas* or mantras with proficiency. The greatest achievement is learning the whole of the

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<sup>11</sup>Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Calcutta: Samaya, 1996.

*Ramayana* or the *Mahabharatha* or the *Bhagavad Gita* by heart..."(p. 17).

"The Kurumaas not only know about their sheep, goats, trees, plants, and so on; they also know the names of every instrument used in wool-making and blanket-weaving. A Gauda knows the names of a whole range of instruments, skills and activities that are required for toddy-tapping. The specialization (these) acquire...is more sophisticated than that possessed by a Brahmin who (knows only to) utter the several names of his Gods while reciting the mantra. What is ironical is that the recitation of the several names of one God or many Gods is construed as wisdom, whereas knowing the language of production and the names of the productive tools (and possessing the necessary skills) is not recognized as knowledge. The Brahmins have defined knowledge in their own image (and for their own advantage)" (p. 6).

Kancha Ilaiah also points out how the spirituality of the subaltern people is in harmony with the rhythm of life. Empty rituals and cults are alien to them. Before the rising of the sun they had to get up to go to the cattle shed of their masters, milk the cows, feed the heifers, wash the shed, etc. Meanwhile they would be thinking (contemplating) about their children at home who would be hungry and rush to the house, prepare some rice porridge, feed the children, and then rush back to the master's field for the day's work. "Their work never starts with a morning prayer or a cold water bath. The *surya-vandanam* (morning prayer) that the Hindu does, never finds a place in their day's timetable."

"A Hindu – a Brahmin, Bania or Kshatriya – on the other hand, gets up to take a cold water bath and then still clad in wet clothes picks up his book – the *Gita* – and begins to relate to God. He or she asks for the day's food, the day's *gyana* (knowledge) and the day's *sheela* (character)" (p. 23). They look towards heaven for all the difficult tasks, whereas the Dalits soil their hands in the dust and slush of the earth, toil and moil the whole day for the same. The Brahmins consider the manual labour inferior and polluting, while considering their mantras and rituals pure and holy. In situations of crisis the Brahmins would instinctually turn towards some rituals like *yagna*. But the *dalitbahujans* would put their heart and soul into concerted efforts, individual and collective labour, to solve the problem structurally, not ritually. The God of the *dalitbahujans* is not a God who helps miraculously without human

effort and involvement. Their understanding of God's Grace does not dispense with or minimize the value of human agency and initiatives.

This long description is not a discursion or a distraction from our main topic. It is to show how the different matrixes of life affect the real life agenda and aspirations, thinking and acting, and consciousness itself. Hence, it is needless to repeat that the methodologies of interpretation emerging from these two different matrixes would certainly affect the meanings and insights arrived at. A methodology of interpretation of the Bible emerging from the experience and perspective of the earth-bound subaltern *bahujans* will yield results which will be very much different from the results arrived using the sky-based *vedic-vedantic*, Aryan-Brahmin methods.

## CURRENT PRACTICES

Some of the recent studies into the religion and spirituality of the Dalits and other subaltern people confirm the above insight.<sup>12</sup>

- In the religious celebrations of the *dalitbahujans* empty rituals and abstract dogmas usually do not find a prominent place. Their religious universe is filled with concrete and physically tangible things and symbols. Materiality and carnality, social and community concerns are essential aspects of their spirituality.
- Their celebrations are full of colours, songs and dance, drums and other music instruments, food and drink. Abstraction, silence, closing the eyes in deep meditation, etc., are absent in their religions. They use human body and its members as the medium of their worship and religious experience. They are not concerned about abstract ontological metaphysics. Their

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Tamil article by P. Arockiadoss, "Arul Adayala Kondaattangalum Dalit Viduthalayum: Chila Pinpula Vichaaranaigal," (Sacramental Celebrations and Dalit Liberation: Enquiry into the Background) in *Marai Aruvi*, July-September 2003, pp. 42-62; Gnana Patrick "Adi Thattu Makkal Samayangal," (Religions of Subaltern People) in *Marai Aruvi*, Oct-Dec 2003, pp. 29-47. For a more detailed treatment, read G. Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency: A Case Study of Ayya Vali – A Subaltern Religious Phenomenon in South Tiruvitankur*, Chennai: University of Madras, 2003.

metaphysical concerns are existential and historical, in the form of hidden motives and forces nourishing and protecting life, giving growth to a just and joyful community relationship. The agenda of liberation is part and parcel of their metaphysics. Their Metaphysics does not search into what or how Being is in essentialistic terms, but how it ought to be in existential terms.

- They do not celebrate any festival or any ritual simply to glorify or to appease a god or goddess. On the occasion of celebrating their life and labour, production of plentiful harvest, their community relationship and reconciliation, they also celebrate the feasts of their deities, because they are also partners in their sweat and toil, joys and struggles, and so part of their community.
- Such an orientation is not worried about an eternity beyond this life and history, or preoccupied with concerns of entering into an abstract heaven that negates or devalues the present realities and its struggles.
- The subaltern people are not interested in institutionalizing anything as permanently sacred and holy. Even the location of their deities, their shapes and forms, their celebrative rituals, including the office of their priests are not given any halo or status of an institutionalized permanency. Their organization and celebrations are very much charismatic, responding to the current needs and necessities of the people.
- Hence, pluralism is part of their religio-cultural make up. They do not dogmatically exclude anything or anybody. Anything that is in consonance with their liberative agenda is readily welcomed and included.
- Therefore, they do not perceive the borders and boundaries as barriers of separation and seclusion; but only as inviting frontiers offering new possibilities and opportunities for growth and fulfillment. Hence, crossing the border is not a frightful thing for them creating unnecessary guilt feelings. They are at home at the borders entering into new areas and

returning with new experiences and wisdom. Being inter-human, inter-religious, inter-cultural, etc., are quite easy and natural to them, as swimming in water is easy and natural to the fish.<sup>13</sup>

- Hence, it is almost impossible for them to be sold out to literalism, fundamentalism or communalism.

## **SUBALTERN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

The underlying assumption of this article is that the above philosophical and theological underpinnings of the subaltern orientation will lead to a different kind of Biblical interpretation, with different areas of focus and degree of emphasis. A few but brief illustrations from my recent grass-roots experiences will be in place here.

When some Christian academia and the Vatican dicasteries are spending reams of paper and barrels of ink to establish the dogma of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in an ontological way, with hardly any useful socio-political implication, the Dalits arrive at the same truth from their own historical experiences, with serious implications for the Church's socio-political praxis.

For them, none of the previously known God-figures and religious teachers or founders had preached or practiced the preferential option of God for the poor and the oppressed, as thoroughly as Jesus. Only Jesus had categorically declared that he had been anointed by the Spirit of God to announce the good news

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. P.T. Mathew, "The Notion of Boundary: A Challenge to Indian Ecclesiology," in *Dreams and Visions: New Horizons for an Indian Church: Essays in Honour of Professor Kurien Kunnumparam, S.J.*, Eds, Rosario Rocha and Kuruvilla Pandikattu, Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeet, 2002, pp. 141-160. In this article the author refers to fact how the Catholic Christians of the maritime community of Mukkuvar along the Kerala-Tamilnadu coast have remained faithful Christians while easily integrating elements of Indic religious traditions like Buddhism, Jainism, Tantrism, popular Hinduism and other indigenous strands. They chose various elements from various traditions on the basis of their capacity to assist and empower people in situations of crisis and anxieties. For hard empirical data on this issue, read P.T. Mathew's Ph. D. Thesis, *We Dare the Waters: The World and the Worldview of the Mukkuvar*, Chennai: University of Madras, 2001. Read also J.M. Heredero, *The Dead Rescue the Living: Spirit Possession in A Gujarati Christian Community*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2001.

of liberation to the poor and the marginalized, to the sinners and the outcast(e). Only he attempted seriously to translate this good news into a historical reality. He alone went after the lost and the least, the despised and the dispossessed. He alone made it the agenda of his life to live among the poor and the oppressed, having no place of his own to lay down his head. He alone tried to shift the socio-political, religio-cultural centre of society from the location of the rich and the powerful, to the peripheries where the excluded and the outcast were forced to live. By opting to live in the peripheries, Jesus revealed the centre of God's reign.

Jesus alone dared to include the excluded, and to declare that they would be the privileged possessors of God's Reign. By this, Jesus alone prophetically rocked the boat of the *status quo*, and challenged the power and authority of its guardians. He alone laid down his life in a humiliating death on the cross as the willing price for his historical option to be in solidarity with the poor and the powerless. The oppressed and their friends find an empowering certainty from the sacrificial death of Jesus that the humanizing values of love, justice, freedom, equality, etc., are so absolute that one can readily stake one's life for them. Nay, more! They also learn that death is not the ultimate end for them. The resurrection of Jesus has nourished and strengthened their hope that God will ultimately vindicate the struggles of the poor for life and dignity, justice and freedom, etc. Only Jesus has shown beyond doubt that God will be eternally just and faithful to his/her victimized children, and will exercise the divine power and authority for their liberation, and the creation of the new world where justice and peace will reign.

Hence, there is no difficulty for the Dalits and other subaltern people to accept Jesus as their unique Saviour and the unique Mediator. They also are aware that such an understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus not only challenges their personal life, but also presents new ethical imperatives to the Church to embrace a radical conversion of mind and heart, and accordingly redefine the understanding of her Mission and reorient her Ministries.

I will include one more brief illustration before concluding this paper. It is about the Johannine narrative of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1-11). Read from the perspective of the faith struggle of the Johannine community to accept Jesus as the Son of God, this narrative was interpreted in such a way that it inspired the right

Christological faith: "Jesus did this at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2:11). Then there were also attempts to discover the Pneumatological significance in this passage. A later community that was engaged in establishing the legitimacy of the sacraments, saw in this narrative the support for the authenticity of Baptism and Eucharist. A much later Church saw in this event the mediatory power of Mary. Thus the same passage was open to a Christological, Pneumatological, Ecclesiological, and Mariological interpretations. But the excluded and humiliated Dalits Christians of today tend to discover in the same passage a Dalitological significance of Jesus, Mary, the Church, the Sacraments, etc.

On a Sunday during the Eucharist, this Gospel passage was read to a village Dalit Christian community. When asked to reflect about the meaning of the passage, an old lady began to speak in her simple Tamil: "Yesu Samy shows here, how much he loves and respects those who are like us, Dalits." Being taken aback, the priest asked her to explain. She spontaneously continued: "In all the marriages of the village, we Dalits would be made to do all sorts of dirty work without any rest. Then, when all upper caste people had eaten full and bursting, and left the place, then the left-over food would be served to us, that too, outside the banquet hall. The rice will be scrapped from the bottom of the utensils, smoked and charred. The *sambaar* will be fully diluted with plenty of water. There will not be any trace of the meat, vegetables, sweets, fruits, etc. After all our hard work, we will be treated just like beggars. But Yesu Samy and Mary Maathaa have been waiting for the time when the outcaste people like us would be called to eat, in order to perform his first *pudumai* (miracle). Our *Aandavar* and *Maathaa* made us sit in a *Pandhi* (banquet row) inside the marriage hall itself. They spread before each one of us a full and fresh banana leaf, and served the food so lovingly. The *virundhu* (banquet) was so tasty, our people felt so happy and grateful to Jesus and Maatha. That was the best and the tastiest *kalyana saappadu* (wedding meal) any body has ever eaten. But the rich and the high caste people were not lucky to taste it." Then the rest of the reflection was centred on the Dalitological imperatives the whole Church and every Christian has to fulfill. The old Dalit lady's interpretation from the victimized world of her people yielded an empowering and liberating insight. There was no trace of academic erudition or

dogmatic rigidity. There were no literalist and fundamentalist strains. There was no communalizing agenda or hate campaign in it. There was only the experiential exuberance of the captivating message of the Gospel. A new life-giving meaning of God's word emerged, when the world of the text and the world of the Dalits existentially interacted and dialogued with each other.

## CONCLUSION

Our reflection has shown that all our interpretative methods emerge from different socio-political matrixes, each with its own economic and political agenda. Therefore, before interpreting a sacred text, the context of the interpreter and the self-interest the context creates, need to be identified. In the name of Indian interpretation we cannot simply make use of the interpretative methods evolved from the Aryan-Brahmin matrix, for the simple reason that its self-interests are diametrically opposed to the self-interests of the Dalits and other oppressed people. In stead, we need to explore the other indigenous orientations evolving from the cultural matrix of the Dravidians and others. The earth-bound Dravidian thinking is different from the heaven-looking Aryan thinking. Both have different relational agenda.

Dr. Lourdunathan, a noted Dalit organic intellectual, says that our globalized and brahminized Indian society works on a "*Philosophy of Constructivism*."<sup>14</sup> According to this philosophy, persons (usually the powerful and the privileged ones) construct a social reality for their advantage, and then enforce this constructed reality to mould all the persons and structures of that society. Dr. Ambedkar had put it differently: The Brahmins idealize the actual which they had created in order to support and strengthen their self-interest, and then try to actualize this fabricated ideal as the governing norm of the whole society. The Brahminic Scriptures and interpretations are deliberately constructed idealizing the actual conditions, which are in fact unjust and unequal. They then

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. S. Lourdunathan, "Education for Dalit Empowerment and Liberation: Ambedkar Perspective," a discussion paper presented for the South India Seminar on *Education for Empowerment of Dalits: Perspectives and Priorities*, Organized by Centre for Dalit Studies (Theology) in Bangalore during 13-14 December, 2003.

try to implement them for all, by according them unquestionable religious sanctions. The imposition of the Brahminic ideals cannot be liberative in any way, for the Dalits and other oppressed people. It cannot be a good news even for the upper caste people, in the long run.

Usually the Brahminic scriptures and their interpretations engender the assertion of the powerful, while moving the Dalits and other powerless people to resign to their fate, and renounce their socio-political entitlements. Preaching the ideal of *nishkamyakarma* to the already battered Dalits is the case in point.<sup>15</sup> Hence, there is a need to look for alternative ways of interpreting the scriptures to empower the Dalits. Instead of resigning and renouncing, they should be empowered to confront, to combat and thus to resist and to overthrow all such power-constructions. They should be empowered to assert their co-humanity with others, both in possessing the world as God's stewards, and guiding the progress of human destiny. Ambedkar had tried to do this by an interpretative deconstruction of the Hindu Scriptures from the perspective of the Dalits, and a reconstruction of the indigenous Buddhist traditions in their favour. The Indian Christians have to do it for the Bible by evolving interpretative keys that have emerged from the socio-cultural matrix of the indigenous people, the Dalits and the tribals, and their common ancestors, the Dravidians.

As long as Theology was understood only as *faith seeking understanding* we can be satisfied with biblical interpretations leading to the right knowledge regarding the nature of invisible God, immortal human soul and the unseen heaven, as well as the intricate ways of attaining heaven through various esoteric cults and rituals. The elite Indian tradition may glorify it as *brahmajignasa* or *brahmavidya*. But a paradigm shift has taken place in these days, because of our contextual theologies. A larger definition of theology is now needed that goes beyond acquiring some elating intellectual clarity. Accordingly, theology is

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. "Essays on the Bhagavat Gita: Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution: Krishna and His Gita" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, ed., Vasant Moon, Bombay: Govt. of Maharashtra, 1987, Vol 3, pp. 357-380.

understood now as *faith seeking life, love, justice, human rights and dignity, ecological wholeness, etc.* Theology does not merely gives us elevating understanding of God, heaven, etc. It inspires and motivates the believer to a faith commitment of joining God in creating the new human society that assures fuller life to all, especially the victims of history.

In the context of this newer understanding of the nature and purpose of theology, we need new ways of interpreting the Bible. These newer ways should emerge from the religio-cultural matrix of the victims. In the Indian context it would mean that we give more emphasis to the earth-based ways of thinking that belongs to the children of the soil, rather than the sky-based thinking of the Aryans.

The Bible is basically a book of the oppressed tribes, with earth-based cultural ethos. Surely much of their values and thought patterns have emerged from their dynamic contact with mother earth, though they were also once wandering nomads. Hence, interpreting the Bible from their earth-based thinking would not be difficult. But that would be the future task of Indian Biblical scholars.

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