

HERMENEUTICAL ENGAGEMENT OF DALIT LOCATION WITH BIBLICAL WORLD

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The intricacies involved in any hermeneutical engagement of Dalit location with the Biblical world are looked into in this brief essay. Such an attempt is sought to be made in order to probe into methodological complexity and fecundity found when the Dalit world dialogues with the Biblical texts.

Composite Location of Dalit Reader

The Dalit location which generates the Dalit pre-understanding is a 'hybrid set of Dalit locations'. Besides the intertextuality of the Dalit world, the specificity of Dalit pre-understanding is the blend of the victimhood and assertiveness of Dalit existence; of intra-subjective and inter-subjective aspects of Dalit life; of the explicit and implicit dimensions of the conflicting Dalit consciousness.

Even before Dalits were converted to Christianity, they had their own traditions, mythology, legends, proverbs, moral teachings, customs, festivals and folk religions. In spite of being reduced to be the victims and untouchables by the Casteist hierarchy of the Brahminic world-view of permanent pollution, they had their autonomy in religion-making and text-making. This autonomy has not vanished even after their conversion to Christianity and getting gradually familiarized with the Biblical world.

Through the effective eradication of untouchability as the immediate agenda, the Dalit vision looks forward to the promotion of life to the full extent in every creature. In this process Dalit struggle encounters plurality of oppression. Among the vast array of tyrannical powers the following could be spelt out: imposed pollution resulting in segregation and self-hatred, impoverishment caused by economic alienation, and practical disempowerment created by denial of space for self-governance. And thus with their wounded history and battered psyche, they are forced to grapple with their painful memories of humiliation, depression, self-pity, revengefulness, and internalized models of upliftment through social hierarchy in simulation with casteist oppressors. But one cannot forget that behind each of the articulate or inarticulate expression of the pain of the victimhood and the assertion of their subjecthood lays their agenda of building a community of equals with legitimate share of power and resources as dignified co-humans. And hence the privileging of the victim of the conflict situation of casteism is the essential category in Dalit hermeneutics.

Dalit Interpretative Orientation

By its foundational orientation, Dalit hermeneutics is free from 'excessive textualism, disparagement of both major and popular religions, and homogenization of the poor.'

In line with the Black sensibilities of not clinging on to the letters of the texts as non-negotiable sacrosanct, Dalits intuitively opt for the direction of deploying the Biblical stories 'in ways that would guarantee their relevance and poignancy.' And consequently, the Bible is not assumed to be the deposit of 'holy' word to be defended; nor is it dissected as isolated words and passages in interpretive ventures. In other words, the Dalit world creating its own texts and Biblical texts creating its world are in dialogue with each other. Complex philological intricacies may not occupy the primacy of place; rather the thread-line of stories and discourses will be the central characteristic of Dalit interpretation.

Dalit communities are kept in close proximity of the caste communities for exploitative purposes. But at the same time, they are kept apart as untouchables from the so-called mainstream at the periphery of the Indian society in each village as *colony* or *cheri*. This dichotomy of being wanted as well as being rejected by the power-wielding caste communities creates a situation of ambiguity

of incorporating the sensibilities at once of tenets of major religions and elements of subaltern religious praxis.

To speak about Dalit hermeneutics as an interpretative exercise is inadvertent denial of the identity-specific modes of interpretation of the meaning-giving stories for the empowerment of various Dalit communities such as Parayar, Pallar, Arunthathiar, Mala, Madiga, Bhanghi etc. across the sub-continent of India. Obviously multiplicity of Dalit pre-understandings initiates a vast array of Dalit interpretations with all their pluralistic variations. That is to say that each brand of Dalit interpretation in its own location has to have its contextual particularity. But all the same, at least for the academic purpose, in so far as the agenda of promotion of self-respect and human dignity, and of revolt against Brahminic hegemony are concerned, all Dalit interpretations could be brought under the umbrella of Dalit pre-understanding here.

While reflecting further on the Dalit interpretation of the Bible, we have to probe into how Dalits, as subjects of interpretation, seek to engage themselves with the Biblical texts in their own terms affected by their respective contexts.

Dalit World and Biblical Text

Being kept illiterate for centuries by the dominant Brahminic world-view, their first encounter with Christianity the religion of the Book-would have faced the difficulty of orality encountering literacy. Even for the succeeding generations of Dalit Christians, the textual world is predominantly of the order of orality. That is why, perhaps, the written texts of the Bible have not become active ideological and rhetorical field of the collective consciousness of the Dalits in India.

Individualistic and a-political brand of spiritual readings emphasizing on dramatic miracles, sometimes with or without monetary transactions do not lead to Dalit hermeneutics. On the other hand, communitarian readings with person-oriented concerns tempered with political agenda of collective self-empowerment with due human dignity are the privileged Dalit interpretations. But as a people deprived of their due share of powers and privileges, Dalits are under the grip of their legitimate wrath against caste hierarchy. And consequently their expressions and interactions with others would be constantly charged with intense emotional contents, especially in terms of depression or

disappointment. And these are the entry points and fertile grounds for the active forms of fundamentalist and individualistic trends of seeking solace from other-worldly spiritual shops deploying Biblical texts.

Dalit Religiosity and Biblical Religiosity

When Dalit religiosity encounters another world of Biblical religiosity, the process of fusion of horizons is expected to be multi-pronged. "As is the case with most symbols, the Bible as language world is complex: it can 'mean' different things to different situations." And accordingly, the hermeneutical engagement of Dalit sensibilities with the Biblical world has to take into account the distinctive elements of the Dalit world. The following section makes a preliminary attempt at tracing the unique Dalit sensibilities while handling the Biblical textual world.

The native Dalit religiosity revolves around the down-to-earth deities. They could be broadly classified under the categories of (1) Mother Goddesses, (2) Memory Stones for the Martyred leaders, and (3) Memory of the Dead among the Kinsfolk. These items are closely looked into in the following sections as (a) Image of God, (b) Memory of the Murdered and the Dead

(a) Image of God

By and large Dalits are the *anawim* of the agrarian culture whereas the Tribal people of the Bible are of the nomadic culture. Dalit experience of divinity could be characterized as the agrarian pluralism of deities from the anthropological roots. These deities emerge from the humans as a continuum. But on the other hand, the Biblical experience of God could be construed as the nomadic monotheism from high heavens. When immanent here-and-now is the hall-mark of Dalit deities, the transcendental otherness is the overriding trait of Biblical God. The agricultural symbolism (the Earth-related world) marks Dalit worship; whereas the desert symbolism (the Heaven-related world) marks Biblical worship.

In the Dalit world, the mother goddesses play a vital and indispensable role in their battered human consciousness. But on the other hand, the feminine face of God cannot be directly traced from the Biblical literature. But this aspect is brought forth by, somewhat in a round about way, elaborating on the experience of *hesed* (compassionate affirmation) and the motherly sensitivity of the fatherly Yahweh. And hence they find a regrettable lacuna

while entering the Biblical world with the image of a dominant male God. The absence of fertility in the Biblical God does not positively vibrate with Dalit religious sensibilities. The Biblical condemnation against the symbols of fertility from the Cannanite soil creates a deep lacuna in their attraction towards the thundering male voice of God.

Yahweh as the deity of a large family (*kula dheivam*) or of an ethnic group of people (*namma saami*) evokes positive response from Dalits. They are at home with the Biblical image of the Protector-God (*kaaval deivam*) and Powerful God with expression of wrath (the Lord of Hosts). The God of mobility (ark of Covenant) is more dear to them than the God of stability (Temple at Jerusalem as God's feet). While the former represents the on-going solidarity of God as Emmanuel (God-with-us), the latter shows God as alienated from their close quarters by way of being domesticated by the royal ideology.

The unconditionality of God's love extended to all - both to the just as well as the unjust - is not part of Dalit experience or expectation. Similarly, the Pauline soteriology of justification through faith is not palatable to Dalit sense of legitimate wrath against the caste forces perpetuating their misery in the name of divinely ordered permanent pollution.

(b) Memory of the Murdered Martyrs & the Dead

Many of the Dalits who had been murdered while protecting the village or for defying imposed casteist norms have been eventually deified (*kolayil udita deivangal*). They are represented through the symbols of formless stones, sandy mounds, tree or metal spear or statues. Such symbols are made of easily available materials mud, limestone, mortar, cement etc. By and large, these statues holding the rustic weapons are portrayed with the energetic postures and brisk expressions of wrath. Tranquil postures in deep contemplation or slumber are not part of the mainstream deities of Dalits.

The story of the death of Jesus as the result of his defiant opposition to the legalistic norms of the religious and political system makes an easy entry into the Dalit minds and hearts as the protecting god (*kaaval deivam*) in deep solidarity with their struggle against caste repression. The symbol of crucifix more or less gives

them effective impetus on a par with the spiritual energies drawn from the memory stones in the remote villages.

The respect paid to the dead is quite profound in the Dalit world. The food consumed or the materials used by the dead ones are specially offered to the dead ones on their graveyard. Interestingly each of the event of remembering the dead is marked with the collective meal in memory of them. Memory and meal are the inseparables from the Dalit world. The aspect of collectively shared meal is the hallmark of the practices of animal sacrifice. And hence the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and the Eucharistic meal as his body broken and his blood spilled as a ransom of many are quite much evocative in the Dalit spiritual realm. The tribal (paschal) meal in memory of the great escape of the wandering Arameans fleeing from the military power of the colonialists is well cherished by Dalits. The communitarian (Eucharistic) meal in memory of the dead who was killed as the martyr for having had the fellowship meal with the dirty ones is also in tune with the Dalit sensibility. The Pauline admonition to the Corinthian community to make the Eucharistic meal in continuity with the essential element of incorporating the weak, both in the map of economy and the level of consciousness- in community-building.

Dalit Texture and Biblical World of Language

As the people attuned to down-to-earth spirituality of material concreteness of here and now, Dalits are at home with the anthropomorphism of God and the material concreteness of the Yahwistic tradition (J). Moreover, this tradition is rather closely vibrant with divine-human continuum of the Dalit experience of God. Monotheistic import of the Biblical world and especially of the Elohist tradition (E) is not the essential component of Dalit spiritual world. At the same time, Dalit world is not against the One and the Only Righteous God to arbitrate immediate justice to the *anawim* thrown to the periphery. There is a sense of repulsion with regard to stipulations related to purity and pollution of the Deuteronomic tradition (D). There is an element of Dalit aversion towards elaborate liturgical prescriptions of the Priestly tradition (P). Long narratives with minute details and stories with dramatic turns of events attract the Dalit listener/reader more effectively than the prolonged discourses with monotonous formulaic enumeration of codes or sayings.

The motif of promise-and-fulfillment of the Bible strikes a concordant note with their perennial act of hopeful expectation of a promising future. When the biblical stories portray the fulfillment of the humanly impossible things in the far or near future by God's direct or indirect intervention, the hope-generating mechanism within the Dalit psyche and their collective consciousness is revived with new enthusiasm. The fulfillment quotations, nostalgic reminiscences of the past victory or the painful memory of the defeat create a sense of solidarity with the generations of the biblical world in their hope-filled aspirations.

As a people deprived of land ownership, Dalits actively vibrate with the themes and narratives related to the acquisition of land and becoming a nation. The figurative language of prophetic poets and the parabolic and anecdotal modes of communication by Jesus forcefully rivet their attention.

As far as the Dalit expectations are concerned, the theory of retribution holds good i.e., the innocent will be rewarded and the sinful will be punished. As in the case of Job, Dalit experiences too raise questions on the suffering of the innocent. But in contrast with the Joban treatment of the suffering which breaks the theory of retribution, Dalits, by and large, still hold on to the punishment of the unjust and reward for the just, and that too with an immediate effect.

Both the texture of Dalit consciousness and the Biblical texts are interested only with raw historical facts behind the text; they are not obsessed with objectivity while entering into dialogue with each other.

Sacrificial Meal

In Dalit world animal sacrifice to their gods is counted to be religiously significant. In the sacrificial context, "the blood itself is a symbol of fertility and multiplication that the people anticipate and cherish in their life. The sacrificial blood mediates the people with their deities. It is a covenant and a performed agreement between the people and the deities. By performing a sacrifice, the people compel the deities to pledge welfare for them."

Dalits are at home with the Biblical world of sacrifice of animal blood. The functions of sacrificial blood are multifarious as contracting covenant, atonement, expiation, reconciliation between parties involved etc. Both in the world of Dalits and the Bible, the

body of the sacrificial victim divested of its blood are shared as a communitarian meal. Though burnt offerings were accepted by the Israelites as well as elite Brahminic prescriptions (*yajna* in which animals, cereals, ghee etc. are sacrificed in fire), they are rejected by Dalits as the unproductive desecration and unpardonable wastage.

Culture of Prophecy

Prophetic oracles construed as the enunciation of God's will through the medium of possessed humans is a celebrated aspect of Dalit religio-cultural world. Such oracles (*kuri sollurathu* or *saamiaattam*) are actively found for authoritatively addressing the situation of personal deprivation or societal need.

Prophetic defiance of the imposed order of the rulers is the endearing theme attuned to the Dalit culture of disobedience to caste hierarchical norms. When the elite, be it from within or outside of the Jewish world, is admonished by the prophets for the excesses committed against the disempowered, the Dalit self-assertion is reinvigorated. When oracles of consolations are addressed they regain their composure in order to encounter the inimical world with confidence and courage.

Self-emptying Servanthood

The people whom we encounter in the stories of the Biblical texts were unorganized tribal labourers who were repeatedly displaced and dispersed. They were wandering through the winding path of unpredictable future and their stories punctuated with travails as well as triumphs. The memories of being pathetically uprooted as refugees both in their own land received as a gift as well as in other foreign lands were also charged with reminiscences of being gathered as tribal communities of sovereignty and interdependence. As disempowered homeless wanderers trying to create a legitimate space for themselves in the contexts of Exodus, Exile and recurring colonial regimes, their collective memory projected the image of the Suffering Servant. And later through the same lens the Saviour figure of crucified Christ was seen through with the additional dimensions of self-emptying. This *kenosis* resulting in the humiliating murder of Jesus was the consequence of his voluntary participation in the lives of the stigmatized and hence marginalized people of his time.

This story-line creates in the minds and hearts of Dalits a sense of spontaneous identification with the Suffering Servant - the persons of the exiled people as well as the person of Jesus. This sense of solidarity with the Suffering Servant raises the Dalit zeal for exaltation from the current state of humiliation, the exile and the crucifixion- often with unbridled passion for immediate results. Discourses merely on servanthood with no reference to the possibility of exaltation are eyed with suspicion by the Dalit reader of the Bible. Discourses on mere humility and obedience with no awareness of the conflict situations are taken by Dalits only as ruthless humour.

Apocalyptic Worldview

Dalit religiosity has to be traced to their folk religious practices. "Their religions are naturalistic, spontaneously materialistic and they are non-institutionalised....They are the symbolic treasure houses of the sufferings and joys of those people. They are the wailing walls of the people as well as the gorilla-war pits of the people. They are the local utopias of the people.

When Dalits encounter the apocalyptic narratives of the Bible, an enriched process of osmosis takes place between them and the Biblical subalterns. Because the ventilating output for the victims will be in the religio-symbolic realm, the only way-out for the hapless disempowered by the multiple forms of repression by the ruling elite is through the apocalyptic irruption. Abounding in rich symbolism, the wounded psyche of the victims seek to subvert or reject the existing order imposed on them while continuing to project and dream an alternative order in its place. The mega colonial or caste powers would be opposed by the powerless even within the limited political space. In other words, the apocalyptic visions are the weapons of the weak against the dominant forces. This apocalyptic arena is the fertile place for identifying the implicit consciousness with their sharp focus on their genuine concerns of the Biblical subalterns rather than their explicit consciousness which may project certain ambiguity or confusion. One can be sure that the implicit consciousness both of the Dalits and the Biblical subalterns encounter each other in a deeply privileged way with no masks in the apocalyptic realm.

Conclusion

Genuine Dalit interpretation of the Bible may romanticize neither the Dalits nor the Bible. The anti-life elements found both in the Dalits and the Bible will not be entertained by Dalit hermeneutics. Its interpretative agenda has to seriously grapple with the ground reality of the Dalit world, texture, religious location, expectations or world-views. If Biblical narratives impose themselves on the Dalit sensibilities as the privileged texts claiming absolute power with unquestionable authority, then they cease to be a liberative tool in their hands.