

# 'Can We Now Bypass That Truth?'<sup>1</sup> – Interrogating the Methodology of Dalit Theology<sup>2</sup>

**J. Jayakiran Sebastian**

*Dr J. Jayakiran Sebastian is Professor in the Department of Theology and Ethics at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India, and is currently H. George Anderson Professor of Mission and Cultures at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, PA, USA*

## **Abstract**

Dalit studies are making a come back. This is also reflected in the field of Indian Christian theology where Dalit theology has emerged as a separate discipline and not simply as a branch of theology. Dominant forms of discourse have the disconcerting habit of raising questions like 'relevance' and 'viability' which forces people to enter into the 'bypass mode'. Questions raising issues like 'reality' and 'representation', often lead to internecine conflicts that help no one but the dominant discourses. Although much has been achieved, including major interventions in the field of Biblical studies and hermeneutics and the rediscovery of Dalit literature, there is much that still needs to be done in the field of Dalit theology.

## **Back from the Bypass**

Dalit studies, once relegated to squiggles on the margins and faint traces on the fringes of academia, has now emerged as one of the most productive and creative correctives to dominant ways of interpreting history, understanding economics, probing sociology, studying culture, investigating globalization, exposing racism, unlocking accepted anthropological 'truths' and indeed reconfiguring the whole gamut of social sciences.

The field of Christian theology has not lagged far behind, thanks to the pioneering efforts of people like Arvind P. Nirmal, who in a range of evocative and iconoclastic writings firmly placed Dalit theology and Dalit hermeneutics not as another 'branch' in the study of theology, but as a discipline, which while developing its own methods of inquiry, massively impacted the whole theological enterprise and the life of the church.<sup>3</sup> No longer could Dalit issues be confined to the bypasses and byways of dominant ways of progressing on the theological highway, but either grudgingly or enthusiastically, such issues and themes have become part of the exploratory process, without which the whole process is doomed to irrelevance, or worse, insignificance.

To give just two from a range of possible recent examples – Jeffrey Cox investigates the interlink between Christianity and imperialism in Punjab in a major work<sup>4</sup> that carefully reconstructs the role of the Indians themselves in trying to build up 'an Indian Church for the Indian People', takes seriously the indigenous initiatives, and looks for motives not just in the 'official' records, but also in the songs written and sung by new converts. This work is also important in that it

looks at another neglected group and investigates female agency in the mission work. Cox writes:

The itinerant villager Ditt initiated the surprising and initially unwelcome mass conversions to Christianity in central Punjab. In the 1880s and 1890s, unmarried European and Indian women missionaries turned the missionary movement into a predominantly female cause, and Indian women doctors raised issues of racial prejudice in the mission. After the turn of the century the Indian national movement reminded missionaries of what they had always claimed to believe, that the 'illusion of permanence' of British rule reflected in Kipling was theologically unacceptable.<sup>5</sup>

Cox notes the importance of the contributions of John Webster and James Massey, several decades after independence to come to terms with, interpret, and interrogate the history of 'Dalit Christians'.<sup>6</sup>

The recent analysis by Sharmila Rege on Dalit women's 'testimonios' posits significant methodological comments that cannot be brushed aside. She points out that

[a] dalit feminist standpoint acknowledges the significance of the experience of oppression and resistance among dalit women acquiring a perspective against an unjust order but it does not celebrate oppressive traditions merely because they are practiced by the oppressed. By directing attention to the cultural and material dimensions of the interface between gender and caste, the focus of a dalit feminist standpoint is squarely placed on social relations, which convert difference into oppression.... 'Translating' dalit women's historical experience, in writing caste/writing gender, underscores the inseparability of caste and gender identities and the material and symbolic gains of complicity for upper caste women and undifferentiated community for dalit men.<sup>7</sup>

Locating herself as a 'non-dalit woman', Rege asks what such a project meant for her and for feminism as such, and writes that this

meant addressing my own ignorance about their histories, struggles, preferred social relations and utopias. It means challenging the normative epistemological status of unmarked feminism, recognizing its social situation to be a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge.... Adopting a dalit feminist standpoint means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning, the 'voice' that we had as unmarked feminists.<sup>8</sup>

This observation is not something that is peculiar to the project that Rege undertook, but directly addresses the wider issue of the construction of ways of knowing, ways of interpreting, and ways of behaving that are a part of the ways of being.

Dalit studies are now firmly established as an important and indispensable aspect of all attempts to understand and analyse the complexities of Indian society. For far too long, there seemed to be an almost embarrassed silence when it came to fleshing out the harsh experiences of Dalit communities in independent India. Should one speak of an 'embarrassed silence' or of a 'conspiracy of silence' when it comes such matters? The resurgence of Dalit pride and the increasing recognition of the vital role played by Dalit communities in the political land-

scape of India have resulted in the flourishing of studies dealing with the variety and range of the Dalit experience. To the growing literature interrogating various aspects of the Dalit experience and the Dalit realities in India must be added two more books.

A major book edited by S.M. Michael<sup>9</sup> contains a number of very important essays and articles investigating various issues in depth. Thus, we have articles looking back at how Indian society, in coming to terms with stratification, worked out a theory of untouchability (Shrirama). John C.B. Webster carefully responds to the question regarding 'Who is a Dalit' in a nuanced essay, which reflects his years of research and writing on this topic. Historical realities are fleshed out in essays dealing with the interaction and critique of Brahmin power by Phule (Mahesh Gavaskar) and an analysis of Ambedkar's understanding of religion and the role played by Buddhism in the Dalit movement (Timothy Fitzgerald). The expectations of the Dalits and their legitimate demands are specified in an essay regarding how society can be re-ordered in India, in terms of a Dalit vision (S.M. Michael) and the contribution and interrogation of mainstream sociology by the Dalit movement (Gopal Guru). The importance of a revamp of present sociological discourse in India is also indicated (S. Selvan). There are fascinating and stimulating studies in delineating the realities of marginalized communities in various contexts – the Adivasis in South Gujarat and the attempts of Hinduisation (Arjun Patel); Mahar women in Ahmednagar district (Traude Pillai-Vetschera); a comparative study of Black American and Dalit liberation (K.P. Singh); an examination of the phenomenon of demon possession in Catholic communities (Robert Deliege); and an examination of the widespread reality of *Asprashyeeakaran* (Dalitisation) (Shyam Lal). The collection also includes major articles on various aspects of Dalit realities within the framework of the Indian economic realities, including an analysis of Ambedkar to economic policy and its impact on the Dalits (Gail Omvedt); how the new economic policy forces the Dalits to bear the brunt of liberalisation (B.L. Mungekar); an analysis of the development paradigm in relation to Dalit employment (S.P. Punalekar); and how employment functions as a vehicle of social mobility (Richard Pais).

The reason why I have given this overview of the contents of the book is to show the broad array of the issues under consideration. This also serves to specify the magnitude of the task of addressing and problematizing centuries of deliberate injustice and sanctioned marginalization of the Dalit communities in India. The sub-title of the book, 'Vision and Values', indicates that despite all that the Dalit communities have had to experience, and in spite of the travails they had to undergo, and notwithstanding the tragedies that have become part of their lived reality, nevertheless there remains an optimism that change is possible and that far from allowing the oppressive forces to silence Dalit aspirations and hopes, such oppression has only steeled the resolve of the Dalit communities to proactively agitate, protest and work toward the realization of the vision of a truly free and democratic nation, where values are upheld and not paid lip-service to.

This collection raises several issues that demand urgent attention and response and I can only point to some of these. In the Introduction, Michael has done a commendable job of highlighting the background on which the essays are built and also offers a historical overview of the ideology of the terminological considerations. Terminology is constantly in a process of being interrogated and refined and one must continue to be aware of this. Interrogating terminology prevents words and concepts, as well as real people with real emotions, from being frozen

in time and space, and constantly alerts us to the power of the politics of representation.

One must also take into consideration the fact that so-called foundational texts and their interpretation have a power and reach far beyond that envisaged or even anticipated. One must recognize this and be prepared to perceive how meanings have been generated and values reinforced. This of course raises the question of the role of Sanskrit and the Sanskrit texts as being primary agents in reinforcing the ideology of Dalit enslavement. One cannot wish these texts away. The texts are there to be read and re-read. It is when one understands the processes that created a context where enslavement was legitimised that the movement towards liberation is possible.

The emergence of Ambedkar as an icon of Dalit suffering and hope has led to a spurt in interest in his immense and wide-ranging contribution not only to the Dalit cause, but also to his role in the emergence of the Indian nation-state. The immensity and the magnitude of his achievements still have much to offer the committed researcher. Aspects of such contributions, which are indicated in various places in the essays, offer extremely valuable analysis and also point to directions in which Ambedkaran studies could profitably go. Provocative theses have also been advanced – most notably by Gail Omvedt – who speculates that Ambedkar would have welcomed aspects of globalization if it would help in the process of Dalit emancipation and would promote the process of moving towards equality. Such ways of thinking cannot be dismissed out of hand, but need to be investigated, using Ambedkaran categories of understanding the mechanism of state intervention in promoting social and economic justice.

The book edited by H. Kotani,<sup>10</sup> Professor of History at the Tokyo Metropolitan University, is an outstanding and splendid example of cross-cultural historical investigation, where those coming from a particular location and from a specific situation – in this case, specialists in South Asian studies at various universities in Japan, offer an invigorating and fertile analysis of historical and contextual studies of Dalit life.

Here again, I would like to give a rapid indication of the assortment of essays collected and the topics covered: In the section on 'Untouchability in History' there are essays on tracing the reality of social discrimination from ancient India to the medieval period, indicating how the ruling classes benefited from the transfer of discriminatory discourse to actual social practice (Gen'ichi Tamazaki); an analysis of references to the untouchables in Tamil inscriptions and historical sources in Tamil Nadu, exploring neglected yet indispensable sources (Noboru Karashima); a comprehensive survey of the social and economic decline of the Chamar community in Rajasthan from the middle of the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth centuries (Masanori Sato); and a survey of the Ati Sudra castes in the Medieval Deccan, clearly pointing out the deep ambivalence that lay at the heart of their interaction with other castes and amongst themselves (Hiroyuki Kotani). Kotani also offers a fine overview of the legal status of the depressed castes under the British colonial rule to start the next section, which deals with the theme of the position and positioning of the depressed castes during the colonial period. The nomenclature is faithful to the period represented and the period is enlivened through the description of the economic change in a south Indian village and its impact on the untouchables in a context when there was a great water scarcity (Tsukasa Mizushima); in addition there is the description of conflict and controversy among the Mahars in Bombay Presidency over

hereditary patrimony (Hiroyuki Kotani again). The concluding section on the liberation movements has five essays: an introductory overview and analysis of movements among the depressed castes seeking liberation (Masao Naito); a case study, rich in statistical data, of the Tiyya community in British Malabar, showing the connections and inter-connections with other social and ideological movements of that time (Toshie Awaya); the rhetoric of anti-untouchability and the anti-untouchability movements in the Maharashtra of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, including studies of a wide spectrum of influential leaders, (Masao Naito); an essay demonstrating the significant contribution of Jogendranath Mandal, within the framework of the movement toward Partition (Masayuki Usuda); and a final essay on how elections at the Gram Panchayat level in West Bengal in 1993 led to debates on the politics of naming and the policies of social and economic benefits (Masahiko Togawa).

These essays, which are painstakingly written and meticulously researched, offer us a large mass of data which needs to enter into and interact with the wider discourse on Dalit realities and Dalit liberation in India today. While it is easy to speak in generalities and engage in over-simplifications, the importance of this book lies in the display of thorough and detailed analysis, which forms the seed-bed on which scholarship on Dalit issues can continue to expand.

What strikes one is the scrupulous attention to detail that characterises each contribution. This is evident in the scope of information provided and the richness of the literature quoted and used. Ongoing scholarship on the caste system and its discontents is well served by these contributions. There is no over-simplistic problematizing of caste realities that are then addressed with prescriptive formulae. Rather it is in the laying out and enfleshing of the complexities of human interaction that are generated by the caste system, and in the indication of the various levels of desire that the caste system produces, including the desire produced in those who are the victims of this system, that the book succeeds in demonstrating how pioneering and dedicated academic work can serve as an instrument of Dalit liberation.<sup>11</sup>

All this leads me to my first methodological point: Dalit theology, which at one stage was accused of being a narrow theological 'ism', of relevance only to those who had the 'pathos' experience, or were in empathetic or sympathetic agreement with it, draws its strength from the rich and complex inter-connections with the methodological possibilities thrown up by epistemological inquiry in the spectrum of fields of knowledge. In other words, the strength of Dalit theology lies precisely in the possibility of its inter-disciplinarity, something that needs to be acknowledged and fostered.

### **Representation and Identity: Some Questions**

In his contribution to a colloquium on Christian identity and cultural nationalism, Satish Deshpande, who is Professor of Sociology at Delhi University, in an extremely interesting and thoroughly documented study of 'Caste Inequalities among Indian Christians: A Statistical Note',<sup>12</sup> makes certain observations that need a thorough analysis. Using data from the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) 55th Round national survey conducted in 1999 – 2000 he indicates, with detailed statistical tables, a very comprehensive and at times quite startling interpretation of the social and economic realities of Indian Christians. One of the most attention-grabbing and controversial figures that are presented relates to Caste and Religion in both Rural and Urban India. Noting that 'all NSSO data on

caste and community are self-reported data; they are not matched with official lists as is done in the Census', the figures reveal that as far as Caste composition of Indian Christians are concerned, in the rural areas the reported figures are Scheduled Tribes – 36.9%, Scheduled Castes – 12.5%, Other Backward Castes – 18.1%, and 'Upper' Castes, where this category 'is a residual one – it includes all those who do not fall into any of the other caste categories' – 32.6%. For Urban India the figures are Scheduled Tribes – 17.9%, Scheduled Castes – 8.4%, Other Backward Castes – 26.4%, and 'Upper' Castes – 47.4%. These are indeed disquieting figures. Deshpande notes that the 'word "upper" is put in quotes to indicate that it is claimed rather than legally sanctioned data'. If this is so, given the assertion of the Dalit scholar and writer Chirakarodu in the same book<sup>13</sup> that 50 – 60% of Christians in India come from the Dalit background, then the figures here of 12.5% (rural) and 8.4% (urban) is indeed astounding. This raises several questions – in terms of 'self-reporting' there seems to be a huge tendency among Christians of Dalit origin to claim a different status, and scholars and researchers would do well to investigate this phenomenon. Also, this calls into question the methodology adopted by those who were involved in the survey – were they attuned to how people responded to issues regarding caste? Did they try to probe beneath what was 'self-reported'? Deshpande also offers several other tables which offer much food for thought, not to say anything about matter for analysis, including comparing caste inequality across religious communities, consumption patterns, figures regarding those living below the poverty line by caste and religion, and also regional variations in intra-Christian caste inequality, the last including tables regarding the regional distribution of Christian population by caste and region in rural and urban India. In conclusion he points out two areas of concern: 'the wide gap between STs of the North East and those in the rest of India; and the question of Dalit Christians in all regions, who continue to suffer from the disadvantages of their caste status and lag far behind upper caste Christians.' Given the statistical figures quoted, the further question is, if this is the case regarding those who have claimed the Dalit status for themselves, then there seems to be a correlation between economic mobility and the denial or rejection of certain caste identities. This is another matter that requires investigation by sociologists and theologians who are concerned about the question regarding identity and self-assertion.<sup>14</sup>

The Princeton philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah writes:

[It] may be helpful to consider two rival pictures of what is involved in shaping one's individuality. One, a picture that comes from romanticism, is the idea of finding one's self – of discovering, by means of reflection or a careful attention to the world, a meaning for one's life that is already there, waiting to be found. This is the vision we can call *authenticity*: it is a matter of being true to who you already really are, or would be if it weren't for distorting influences.... The other picture, the *existentialist* picture, let's call it, is one in which, as the doctrine goes, existence precedes essence: that is, you exist first and then have to decide what to exist as, who to be, afterward....

But neither of these pictures is right. The authenticity picture is wrong because it suggests that there is no role for creativity in making a self, that the self is already and in its totality fixed by our natures....

By the same token, the existentialist picture is wrong because it suggests that there is *only* creativity, that there is nothing for us to respond to, noth-

ing out of which to do the construction.... The reasonable middle view is that constructing an identity is a good thing (if self-authorship is a good thing) but that the identity must make some kind of sense. And for it to make sense, it must be an identity constructed in response to facts outside oneself, things that are beyond one's own choices.<sup>15</sup>

This leads to my next methodological point: Dalit theology is a theology that is in constant quest of defining, refining, interrogating, forming and re-forming/reforming the identity question. Rather than merely affirming simplistic and essentialist myths of origin, Dalit theology constantly searches for that existential yet elusive element, identity, which offers a fertile possibility of understanding the self, leading in turn to the interrogation of those forms of self-understanding that, very often, have been constructed or imposed.

### **Popular Dalit Religion, the Bible, and Questions Regarding Baptism**

Given the numbers, it is surprising that Indian Christian theology too had ignored Dalit hopes, fears, aspirations and modes of theologizing for so long. The emergence of Dalit theology and the growing literature on various phenomenological aspects of the Christian Dalit experience is a welcome corrective to traditional modes of discourse.<sup>16</sup>

Homi Bhabha, in his programmatic essay 'Signs Taken for Wonders', has offered us a very interesting reading of a particular incident regarding missionaries, Indian Christians, and the Bible, where he comments that 'the words of the master become the site of hybridity – the warlike, subaltern sign of the native – then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain', and goes on to conclude by quoting a 'much-tried missionary' who wonders angrily as to why the 'natives' would want to receive a Bible and exclaims that it may be for curiosity value, to sell for a pittance, as an object for barter, or to 'use it for waste paper'.<sup>17</sup> Such questions and attitudes recur with telling familiarity two hundred years later.

I want to offer four examples from my pastoral ministry, the first three coming from my time as a pastor in the rural, predominantly Dalit, Gauribidanur congregation of the Karnataka Central Diocese of the Church of South India. During my many pastoral visits, I rarely took my own Bible with me, but after the usual preliminaries, asked for their Bible, so that I could read a passage before prayer. In one case, the family proudly pulled out a steel trunk which was under the rolled-up mattresses in the small house, took out several layers of folded clothing, took out a clean white towel in which a pristine Bible, with many of its pages uncut, lay wrapped; in another, the family pointed to the open Bible which had been placed on a small shelf on the wall, decorated with coloured flashing lights, but when I gingerly took it off the shelf, discovered not only a thick layer of dust, but the remains of a number of flying insects; and in a third case, was given the Bible from among a pile of magazines, only to discover on opening it, that it was serving as a store for the cut-out pictures of film actors and actresses, preserved amongst its pages. The fourth example comes from the time when I was a pastor in the urban Hudson Memorial Kannada congregation in Bangalore, where (among many other things) I had to bless unusual objects, including in this case a machine which converted old paper into pulp and then into egg-trays. The owner told me that he employed a number of 'rag-pickers' to bring him paper of suitable

quality for this purpose, and discovered that there were a large number of New Testaments and Bibles (most probably those distributed gratis by organizations like the Gideons) in what had been brought in. He told me that at first he had tried to 'rescue' the Bibles from the pile, but then when he realized how many there were, just let them continue the journey of reincarnation into egg-trays.

The question of the 'fetishization' of objects is an old issue in religious studies and the interaction between religious objects precious to one tradition in the encounter and acceptance of another is also an important area of research.<sup>18</sup> The question that we need to ask now is whether 'fetishization' describes this reverence to the object and not the 'Word'? Is there something that we have not tried to understand while trying to use such explanations as fetishization? What is interesting and intriguing in the examples is the complex nature of the inter-link between the reality of commitment to a faith-praxis and the instrumentalization of the orienting symbols of that faith. The Bible, in these cases, has variously been seen as something so precious that it needs to be carefully stored away and although out of sight, is unlikely to be out of mind; as something to be illuminated externally, while the 'lamp to our feet' idea, in terms of 'containing' something illuminating, is switched off; as something adding value and providing security to that which offers enrichment to one's life; as something whose worth would not be erased, even when the 'black marks on white paper' were no longer legible. These are just some of the ways in which the incidents can be interpreted and there is certainly a wide assortment of interpretations that they can generate. Hence we need to investigate the relationship between the way in which the local has interacted with what was sought to be a given. Clarke in his analysis of the religion of the Paraiyar community, where he looks at the use of the drum in countering a word-centered religion, talks about subaltern religion making use of 'all and sundry in its religious construction. Bits and pieces are collected from various sources through numerous ways: some religious resources are discarded as irrelevant, many others are useful pieces annexed conveniently from the dominant communities' framework, while some are discovered from years of their own collective life experience.'<sup>19</sup>

In recent years the work of the Mylapore Institute for Indigenous Studies, in Chennai, has moved in the direction of identifying, exploring and researching the growth of indigenous forms of Christianity in India. This kind of work also involves, directly and indirectly, analysing the phenomenon of 'unbaptized believers'<sup>20</sup> and one of the most important pieces of research on this area is the work by Herbert E. Hofer, originally published in 1991 and recently reprinted.<sup>21</sup> Some of the questions that can be raised in relation to baptism when one examines Dalit religious practices, the growth of indigenous Christ-oriented communities, and attitudes to the Bible include questions regarding how baptism is understood as a 'physical' phenomenon – is the water seen as something that 'physically' functions to 'achieve' something during the baptismal sacrament? Is water understood metaphorically? How is the water used during baptism seen in relation to water in daily life, especially in a context where Dalit communities are marked by boundaries of purity and pollution and denied access to common wells and sources of water by those so-called 'upper caste' people? If, as Bradshaw notes '[i]n our fallenness, brokenness and confusion there is no place for rejection and lack of care for those intending discipleship... the baptismal imperative challenges all cold judgmentalism',<sup>22</sup> then what about those who have been judged and denied access to possibilities of a fuller life for no fault of their own? If it is a



fact that many of the 'unbaptized believers' come from a Dalit background, how can there be growth and nurture of such people in a context where they decide to remain where they are and not openly identify with a Christian church?<sup>23</sup>

One must also note that the role of the Bible and Christian practices have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, especially by those who have benefited from the challenges set forth by postcolonial thinking. R.S. Sugirtharajah, in a series of writings,<sup>24</sup> has challenged the way in which the Bible was used to create and foster 'colonizing monotheistic tendencies' and reminded us of the need to recollect 'the many-layered polytheistic context out of which it emerged'.<sup>25</sup> For him the recollecting is not a passive activity, but something that has to be done with a sense of urgency, given the explosive way in which adherents of different religious strands deal with each other. Focusing on the exponentially burgeoning strategies being used to 'market' the Bible to all kinds of interest groups in the West, and the transformation of the Bible into a kind of 'indulgence', he wryly notes that

[T]he Bible is introduced into various sub-cultures and a niche carved out for it. The Bible which was hailed as a universal word, transferable to all cultures irrespective of time and space without contaminating the purity of its message, is now being marketed tarnished with traces of the very cultures it once abhorred. Now it is presented as an easily consumable commercial object – a postmodern fate for an artefact which emerged as a shining example of modernity.<sup>26</sup>

Although his primary examples are drawn from marketing strategies and the identification of niche groups in the West, nevertheless, in completely different contexts, issues and themes emerge which are of interest to those who want to learn from religious practices of Dalit communities.<sup>27</sup>

This brings me to my next methodological point: the traditional understanding/s of religion, religious practices, the 'why' of conversion, religious 'objects', the instrumentality of worship and the liturgy, the importance given to the mediation of priests and those believed to have access to the numinous, have to be investigated using methodological tools that recognize that so-called academic 'respectable' modes of inquiry not only have serious in-built shortcomings and overt and covert 'prejudices', but that such modes of inquiry are deliberately skewed against the knowledge-praxis of the modes of inquiry of those marginalized communities, whose very marginalization was actively promoted by such 'scholarship'.

### **Conclusion: Bypassing the Bypass**

Diverting one from the undoubted gains is something that can easily be done. Dominant forms of discourse have the disconcerting habit of raising questions like 'relevance' and 'viability' which forces people to enter into the bypass once again. Questions raising issues like 'reality' and 'representation', often lead to internecine conflicts that help no one but the dominant. Contemporary globalization discourse has also thrown up a number of such 'issues' which, for various reasons, become fashionable, gain an audience, and demand all one's time and energy, and a lot of effort is expended in trying to fit one's own concerns into this dominant frame of discourse. One perceptive commentator notes:

Neoliberal capitalism, in its triumphant phase, offers no ideological alter-

native to laissez-faire; nothing else – no other political-economic system – seems even plausible, save as an embodiment of primitive or ‘fundamentalist’ unreason. The primary question left to public policy is how to succeed in the new world order. Why? Because this new world order hides its ideological scaffolding in the dictates of economic efficiency and capital growth, in the fetishism of the free market, in the exigencies of science and technology.... Under its hegemony there exists no such thing as society; the social is dissolved into the natural, the biological, the transactional, or the mythic chimera of community.<sup>28</sup>

Although so much has been achieved, including major interventions in the field of Biblical studies and hermeneutics and the rediscovery of Dalit literature, there is much that still needs to be done in the field of Dalit theology.

This brings me to my final methodological point: in so far as Dalit theology has systematically questioned all attempts at theological reductionism, the ongoing challenge is that of continuing to fearlessly speak the ‘truth’ to power, without succumbing to the dictates of mere fashion, without simplistic mimesis, without pandering to the desires of the dominant, and without overlooking the intra-Dalit dynamics. Apart from this *via negativa*, Dalit theology should affirm what it has always been – a way of living, of praying, of relating, of questioning, a way that is not a bypass, but a way that is itself the way of truth.

Let the last words of this presentation come in the form of a challenge from Namdeo Dhasal:

The naked infant of our existence in the Kali Yuga  
Pisses in your direction,  
O devil among devils!  
Do shower some kindness on it.  
We slaved away for generations  
We were worn-out and died  
While we hoped for good luck and happiness.  
O beguiling spy! O grand illusion of gravitation!  
Bond with our family;  
Become our kin.  
From now on, live for us; die for us.  
And if that does not happen,  
As of now, you’re nobody to us.  
O brazenfaced one!  
I slay the seven horses of your chariot  
And break its wheel.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This phrase comes from the poem ‘Ode to Dr Ambedkar: 1978 – Equality for all or Death to India’, by Namdeo Dhasal [founder of the Dalit Panther in 1972 and winner of the Lifetime Achievement Award bestowed by the Sahitya Akademi in 2004] in Dilip Chitre, selected, intro., and trans. from Marathi, *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld – Poems 1972 – 2006* (Chennai: Navayana, 2007), 81 – 86, here at p. 83.
- 2 Presented at the Seminar on ‘Revisiting and Resignifying the Methodology of Dalit Theology’ organized by the Department of Theology and Ethics, United Theological College, Bangalore, Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, New Delhi and Christian Institute for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore. The semi-

nar took place at the Ecumenical Resource Centre, UTC, Bangalore from 13th – 14th July 2007

- 3 See my 'Creative Exploration: Arvind P. Nirmal's Ongoing Contribution to Christian Theology', in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2 (December 1999), pp. 44 – 52.
- 4 Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818 – 1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 28. On the agency of Ditt amongst his own Chuhra community see *Ibid.*, pp. 118 – 119.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 269, with note 70 on p. 327.
- 7 Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), p. 74.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 387 – 388.
- 9 S.M. Michael, ed., *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*, (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999).
- 10 H. Kotani, ed., *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Japanese Studies on South Asia No. 1 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997).
- 11 My comments on the Michael and Kotani books come from my review of these books published in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (March 2003), pp. 96 – 101.
- 12 In *Christian Identity and Cultural Nationalism: Challenges and Opportunities*, eds., E.C. John and Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI for Ecumenical Christian Academy, 2006), pp. 50 – 77.
- 13 Paul Chirakarodu, 'Dalit Christians: A Case of Social Plight', in *Ibid.*, 30 – 36.
- 14 I made these observations in my review of the book in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 1 (June 2007), pp. 209 – 212.
- 15 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 17 – 18.
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- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 11. Sections of this article are also found in the 'Afterword' of his *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 27 This section was part of a presentation on 'Interrogating Christianity: Popular Religion Across the Ocean', made at a seminar on 'Exploring the Indian Ocean as a Cultural Terrain', Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, 9th – 10th December 2005.
- 28 Jean Comaroff, 'The End of History, Again? Pursuing the Past in the Postcolony', in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul et al., *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006), pp. 125 – 144, here on p. 132.
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