

DALIT THEOLOGY: AN INDIAN CHRISTIAN ATTEMPT TO GIVE VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of dalit theology in India can be considered as a significant event in the history of Indian Christian thinking as it is very much related to the historical experiences of an oppressed and down trodden people. It can be conceived in the context of the struggles of a community against casteism and their continued aspirations for social justice both in church and society. However, the immediate concern for formulating a Dalit theology emerged within the Christian Dalit Liberation movement. So the sources and process of Dalit Theology lay in the agony and sufferings of Dalits in their search for self identity, equality and their search for a meaningful life in the community. K.C. Abraham, the President of Ecumenical Association for the Third World Theologians rightly points out:

Dalit Theology emerges out of the attempt in their seeking a new identity for themselves based on their past religions and cultures which had been suppressed or destroyed by dominant communities. In their struggle against historical as well as contemporary process of domination, the dalits and indigenous groups became conscious of their identity as people.

It is to be remembered that the inspiration drawn from the struggles of the blacks and black theology movement in the U S A and the people's theology in Korea were mainly instrumental for pioneering a dalit theology in India. Although the Christian Dalits form only a small portion of the Dalit community as a whole, the task of theologizing by them will provide for them in their struggle the motivating force to liberate themselves in solidarity with all other dalits across their religious and sub caste loyalties.

WHO ARE THE DALITS?

The social structure of India is stratified, with in built inequalities and injustices, based on the caste- system sanctified by *Brahmanic -Hinduism*. Although social stratification exist in almost all societies, the caste system is quite unique to the Indian society. Sanctioned by the religio-philosophical system, the Dalits are socially placed outside the four-fold caste system and they are referred to as the fifth caste (*panchamas*), even when they live as outcasts. Dalits are differentiated from the lowest strata of other societies with regard to their stigma of untouchability. "The Dalits form the inner core of poverty, which is birth ascribed. They have been excluded from the caste system (social hierarchy), hence *out-castes*; declared ritually unclean, hence *untouchable*; and pushed out for fear of pollution to live on the outskirts of villages, hence *segregated*." In fact, Dalits have been the most degraded, downtrodden, exploited and the least educated in our society. They have been socially and culturally, economically and politically subjugated and marginalized through three thousand years of our history.

However, the Dalits in India are believed to be the ancient *Dravidian* race, the original people of India. We can say that they only introduced culture in India. They were the owners of all property. The *Aryans*, a series of related and highly self conscious tribes sharing a common language and religion, began their invasions of India from the Northwest around 1500 B.C. If a

king wins a battle in the neighboring country, he makes the loser king and his people as slaves and snatches all their properties. Here also, the Aryans snatched away all their properties and kept them aside branding them as out-caste. So the dominant view traces the origins of both caste and untouchability to the *Aryans* themselves and to their ways of relating to the original peoples of India with whom they came into contact with. Untouchability and segregation are resulted due to the *Brahmin* supremacy among the Dravidian races. The *Dravidian* race was initially casteless and had horizontal ethnic divisions and clan groups which under *Brahmanization* became vertically graded and ritually ranked by the principle of purity- pollution.

According to James Massey, the term "Dalit" is perhaps, one of the most ancient terms which has not only survived till date, but is also shared by a few of world's oldest languages, namely, Hebrew and Sanskrit. Though they differ in their grammatical and lexicographical connotations, both these languages share the term "Dalit" with the same root and sense. It has been said that the root word 'dal' in dalit has been borrowed into Sanskrit from Hebrew. The biblical root of word Dalit is "dall". The word "Dall" is a verb which means, to hang down, to be languid, to be weakened, be low, be feeble. Massey also says that almost all English translations of the Bible have rendered these Hebrew expressions with the same meaning and various other translations, including Indian languages have followed the same English sense and meaning. Elza Tamez, a liberation theologian, while listing the major Hebrew terms used for "poor", has also included "dal". According to her "dal" is used in two senses: it may refer either to physical weakness or to lowly, insignificant position in the society. C.U. Wolf, in his essay on the term "Poor", which he contributed to the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, makes the Hebrew term more clear. For him, they are those whose prosperity and social status have been reduced. In physical strength and in psychological ability they are impaired and helpless. In other words, "dal" or "dalit" people are not only economically or physically poor or weak, they are also poor in their psychological ability and their being has been impaired to such an extent that they have become helpless. That is why Massey says, "this Hebrew term denotes a much deeper side of the state of the people known as Dalit, which cannot be covered by a simplistic term, "poor". "Dalit" in Sanskrit is both noun and adjective. As a noun dalit can be used for all three genders - masculine, feminine and neuter. It has been accepted in Sanskrit also with root 'Dal' which means to crack, split, be broken or torn asunder, trodden down, scattered, crushed or destroyed. Some of the regional languages, including Hindi Dictionaries have included in the list of meanings, which also refer to a section of people, who have suffered oppression through out the history because of the accepted religious and social norms.

The term "Dalit" in the Indian context has been used from ancient times, but not very much. Actually the present usage of this term started since nineteenth century. The original usage of this term with its unique meaning was done by Jyotirao Phule (1827 -1890), a renowned backward class social reformer to describe the untouchable and outcasts as the oppressed and broken victims of Hindu Society. Thus dalit can be considered as a title, which dalits have given to themselves, to describe as people and to denote their real state of deprivation. But it was during the 1970's that the followers of *Dalit Panther Movement* gave currency to the term "Dalit" as a constant reminder of the age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and as the people who are oppressed. According to Barbara Joshi, the title Dalit has become a positive assertive expression of pride in untouchable heritage and a rejection of their oppression. As a matter of fact, many Dalits today prefer to call themselves as dalits because this term is not a name or a title for them but it is an expression of hope for them to recover their past self- identity. Today this term is used frequently and has become popular among dalit people of various protest

movements of our country. As the uniqueness of blacks comes from what has been called the black condition or black experience, so also the uniqueness of dalits come from their "dalitness" or dalit experience.

In short, the basic meaning of the term dalit is not poor or outcast, it really denotes the state to which a certain section of the people have been reduced through systematic religious process and now they are forced to continue to live in that predicament. They are outcast and poor, because they are according to the architect of the system cannot be fit to be included in the fourfold graded caste structure of our society. On the basis of this status, they were made to bear the extreme kinds of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries, which made them almost lose their humanness and finally they reached the state of being a 'no- people'."

WHY DALIT THEOLOGY?

What is the need for a Dalit theology, apart from Indian Christian theology? In order to answer this question adequately, it is better to analyze the dominant trends that have prevailed in Indian theological thinking. It is an accepted fact that the roots of Indian Christian theology lie in the experiences of mostly upper class/ caste Christian converts of this century and last century. In fact, Indian christian theology is very much attached to the Brahmanical culture and ideology. For many of the Indian Christian theologians, cultural contextuality meant adjustment to the dominant ethos and even to such structures as caste. The *vedas*, *upanishads*, and their renowned commentators exercised a great deal of influence on these theologians. These thinkers and their experiences were very much different from the majority of Christians, who were poor and belonged to the lower strata of the society. J.C. Duraisingh and K.C.Abraham in their evaluation of New Delhi EATWOT conference (1981) from an Asian perspective observe: We, in Asia are prone to the danger of romanticizing the ancient religions and accepting them uncritically, while knowing that they have been used to exploit masses and to protect the vested interests of the high and the mighty, These religions have used to silence the masses and make them accept passively their suffering, resorting to otherworldly flight from reality.

Consequently, the theological thinking in India has been alienated from the reality of the masses, especially, from the Christian community, the majority of whom are dalits and tribals. "It is a well-known fact that the majority of Christians come from the lower strata of the society, that is, from across the borderline between caste and no-caste. What is missing from Indian Christian theology is the experiences of these lowliest people." Aravind P. Nirmal one of the pioneers in Christian Dalit theology had made the same kind of observation in one of his articles in the early seventies:

Broadly speaking, Indian Christian theology in the past has tried to work out its theological systems in terms of either Advaita Vedanta or Vishista Advaita. Most of the contributions to Indian Christian theology in the past came from caste converts to Christianity. The result has been that Indian Christian Theology has perpetuated within itself what I prefer to call the "*Brahminic*" tradition. This tradition has further perpetuated intuition- inferiority oriented approach to the theological task in India. One wonders whether this kind of Indian christian theology will ever have a mass appeal.

The situation did not change till seventies. Then another line of thought in Indian theological thinking came since 1970 concerned itself with the notion of development, poverty or the poor, liberation and the like. It was then the Indian theologians began to take up question of socio-economic justice seriously. As a result, the Indian theological scene then changed considerably

and there emerged what is known as Third world theology. The Third World theology with its allegiance to liberation theology seemed relevant to the situation of India, where the majority of the Indian people face the problem of poverty.

The socio- economic realities of India , however, are of different nature. Latin American Liberation theologians have laid more stress on socio- economic and political oppression using Marxist tools of social analysis to uncover the forms of oppression. This, they have done almost to the extent of excluding of all forms of oppression like, race, gender, culture or religion. Hence the use of Marxist analysis of socio-economic realities of the liberation theology is found to be inadequate in India since it neglects the caste factor, which adds complexity to the Indian socio-economic realities. Besides, the treatment of Dalits, in the context of the caste based society is inhuman, despite India's proud heritage of spirituality and the richness of its ancient culture. That is why, Saral K. Chatterji, while speaking about the rationale for a Dalit theology says, "the idea and ideology of caste as well as its morphological aspects, the nature of oppression, and the inherited inequalities perpetuated by it and its persistence through the interaction of social, cultural, religious and economic factors remained neglected in Marxian analysis."

To sum up then, the Indian Christian theology, whether it is the traditional one or the recent Third world Theology has failed to see suffering and the ongoing struggle of Indian Dalits for liberation as a subject matter appropriate for doing theology in India. What is surprising here is the reality that fifty to eighty percent of Christians are of Dalits in origin. That means, the Christian population numbering over 25 millions, about 20 millions are from the Dalit background. In other words, the Indian theologians have virtually ignored the social reality of Indian Church. To put it in another way, the concern for subaltern identity which should have been the major area of theological reflection was not at all pursued in Indian Theological thinking.

WHAT IS DALIT THEOLOGY?

Having looked at the background and the need for a Dalit Theology, it is legitimate to answer the question, what is Dalit theology? This question, according to John Webster , may be answered at least three different ways.

First of all, it is a theology about Dalits or theological reflection upon the Christian responsibility to the depressed classes. Secondly, it is theology for the depressed classes or the message addressed to the dalits to which they seem to be responding. Thirdly, it is a theology from the depressed classes, that is, the theology they would like to expound. Aravind P. Nirmal, who himself is a dalit believes that the authentic dalit theology will be based on their own dalit experiences and their own sufferings, their own aspirations, and their own hopes. It will be the story of their pathos and their protest against the socio- economic injustices they have been subjugated to through out the history.

Abraham Ayrookuzhiel talks of Dalit theology a counter culture in relation to the brahmanical culture that continues to serve the interests of the privileged sections in the society. He believes that dalit theology is a spiritual movement for meaning in life, self fulfillment and freedom.

In other words, Dalit theology is the result of the reflection of Dalit Christians upon the gospel in the light of their own circumstances. From the perspective of a local theology it is "a way of recovering a world-view or way of life that has been blocked by false consciousness on a large scale", especially by the Brahmanic culture.

METHODOLOGY FOR A DALIT THEOLOGY

Dalit theology can be considered as one of the attempts to do theology taking seriously the context of the struggles of the people who are marginalized and oppressed. Like any such local theology it also rejects the assumption that a theology that had been formulated in Europe or America has universal significance and relevant for all places and all times. Instead it starts from the experiences of the struggles of the people against different structures of domination and oppression. So the methodology adopted for dalit theology is quite different from the traditional theology but similar to that of liberation theology and people's theology.

Dalit theology, like liberation theology and people's theology has a social and sociological dimension, an awareness which was very much lacked in the traditional Indian Christian Thinking. Like Classical theology, Traditional Indian Christian theology also gave so much importance to philosophy and the theological truths are understood as a series of prepositions which has to be logical, consistent, coherent and systematic. Moreover, these prepositions are believed to be revealed truths. In other words, the traditional theology was a theology 'from above' grounded in the vertical revelation. However, with the emergence of liberation theologies, sociology has become an important discipline in doing theology. So a shift from philosophy to sociology has occurred. That means, a movement from prepositions to people's experience with all its absurdity, inconsistency, incoherence, unsystematicness became the starting point for doing theology. Thus Dalit theology implies a social and sociological critique of classical theology. It is a movement "from below", as it is interested in the horizontal relations rather than in vertical revelation. In fact, the theological affirmations in Dalit theology are grounded in people's experiences. So the methodological implication of Dalit theology is that it serves the interests of Dalit people.

It is a fair question to ask of any theology: whose interests it serves and why and how? In answer to this question, we must say that Dalit theology serves the interests of Dalit people, because they are an oppressed people. It does this by empowering them for their liberation struggle.

As the liberation theology runs the risk of being so pre-occupied with socio- economic and political issues, the religio- cultural issues could be completely neglected. So Frank Chikane, a Third World Theologian suggests a comprehensive theory of social analysis to deal with our complex religio- cultural and socio- economic-political reality. So Dalit theology like other Third World Theologies must include both the religio- cultural and Marxist tools of analysis. Integrating these two models of social analysis into a comprehensive system of social analysis which is capable of capturing any level or any form of oppression in our societies and in the world at large.

Historical consciousness is another dimension for doing Dalit theology. The reason is that, now a days, more and more Dalits are becoming aware of the fact that their deplorable condition is not God- given or by their *karma*, but man made. So they have begun to question the rationale behind the notion of considering them as untouchable in the Hindu Social order. In fact, the historical consciousness is very much related to their self- identity. Moreover, the historians either in general or particularly church or religious historians never represent the views of Dalits. The awareness of their past history will alone will reveal to them that once they were also fuller human beings enjoying all the benefits of a normal human being. Since the existing views of history or theology are mostly produced by upper caste or Europeans, they represent the view "from above". The commitment to historical project of the powerless makes the non- persons to become persons and agents or subjects of their own history and cease to be the objects of exploitation and manipulated history. It involves a critique of existing ideologies and theological

methodologies which are mainly based on caste hierarchy becomes an essential requirement for this theology. Therefore, history from their point of view or "from below" has to be prepared in order to restructure their theology for recovering their lost dignity. Actually, the Dalit people have no written historical traditions. Their histories are oral histories based on oral traditions. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel has pointed out this fact very clearly in one of his articles:

Their history is buried in their folk songs, stories myths, certain extent religious symbols and practices... It is difficult to nurture and strengthen the dalit identity and their struggle for liberation with out the aid of history. At present the masses among them are governed by a mythological consciousness promoted by the *Brahmanical* religion.

Another important dimension in doing Dalit theology is to affirm people are subject of theologizing and not the object. It seeks to interpret the history and identity of the people theologically, which comes out of the biographies of the suffering people. By people we mean primarily the powerless, the oppressed, the marginalized, the exploited as well as those who struggle to win back and maintain their dignity. Aravind P. Nirmal, therefore, sees Dalit pathos as the epistemological starting point and an important criterion for doing Dalit theology. "It is in and through this pain- pathos the sufferer knows God. This is because the sufferer in and through his/her pain-pathos knows that God participates in human pain." That means, Dalit theology is a way of understanding God in the context of the every day experiences of the ordinary people.

Above all, liberative praxis is the method of Dalit theology. By praxis, we do not mean rejection of theory, rather it should emerge from the practice that is oriented to transformation.

Theory represents a dialectical moment within practice, as does action. Theory's task is to illumine the exact nature of those social relationships. By so doing, theory can point to false and oppressive relationships within the social fabric. This pointing to false and oppressive relationships brings them to awareness, which is the first step toward transforming them.

Therefore Dalit theology is an effort to examine critically and re- interpret the liberative and humanistic values in their culture which have become long forgotten.

DALIT CHRISTOLOGY

In Dalit theology, Dalit Christology is of utmost importance. As a meaningful Christology, Dalit Christology finds its uniqueness as it is developed through the dialectical encounter between the Jesus of faith and the context of the Dalits in which he is experienced. Like Black theology, Dalit theology also affirms faith and praxis of the "dalitness" of God in Jesus Christ. So the Dalit Christology is not produced in class rooms, nor in theological conferences, but in Christian communities, where Jesus is "encountered, experienced and lived". For Dalits, the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. Thus Dalit theology affirms both divinity and humanity of Jesus in his 'dalitness'. According to Nirmal even the genealogy of Jesus itself is suggestive of his Dalit conditions, despite he, being a Jew. His reference as carpenter's son also is also suggestive of his "dalitness".

The solidarity of Jesus with the poor and the outcasts finds its Christological symbol in the incarnation. According to George

Soares Prabhu, this particular history of Jesus has been best expressed in the marvelous Johannine *sutra* (dictum): "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". For him flesh stands for not only humankind, but solidarity and relatedness. "Flesh stands for the solidarity of

humankind, for the fact that humankind is not a collection of individuals, but an organic whole in which what happens to one happens to all"

Nirmal also points out that the title " Son of Man " implies the "dalitness" of Jesus. The group of Son of Man sayings, which are indicative of Jesus' present sufferings and his imminent death is significant for developing a Dalit Christology. These sayings speak specifically of Son of Man as encountering rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, and finally death. Dalit believes that all these sufferings are from the dominant religious traditions and the established religions. Jesus underwent all these experiences as the prototype of all dalits. So the Christological task of Dalit theology is to bring about a Dalit consciousness, which consists in being aware that their dalit humanity is constituted by their "dalitness".

Yet another noteworthy feature of Jesus' life and ministry is his total identification with the Dalits of his time. The dominant religious leaders accused him of eating and drinking with the publicans, tax collectors and sinners of his day (Mk. 2:15-16). Dalits believe that Jesus' approach and attitude towards them and the Samaritans, the dalits of his day has demonstrated that Jesus loved and cared for the Dalits. In contrast to the liberation theology, Dalit theology recognizes the total identification of Jesus with the poor, rather than the 'preferential option for the poor.' "...Jesus did not 'opt' for the poor- he identified himself totally with the poor- He was the hungry one, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned- he was the dalit."

Besides this, the Dalit theologians firmly believe that the Nazareth Manifesto in the Gospel according to St. Luke is of great significance to Dalit Theology. Here the liberation which Jesus talks is about the liberation of Dalits. The gospel that Jesus brought was the gospel for Dalits and not for non-Dalits, not for Israel. The whole situation changes at Jesus' explosive words and we read, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong". (Luke 4: 16-29) The Nazareth Manifesto then is really manifesto for dalits.

Jesus' action of cleansing the temple is of great importance for the Dalits in India. If the incident is interpreted in terms of its implication for the gentiles, it makes sense to Indian Dalits who had to struggle a lot for the temple entry rights. Jesus the Messianic King restores to the gentiles their religious rights, which prefigures the Dalits' struggle for prayer and worship rights.

We, the Indian Dalits know what it means to be deemed the entry to the temple and to be denied of the right to pray and worship. Ambedkar and his followers had to agitate for the entry to Kala Temple in Nasik. We know about many such temple entry agitations. In his action of restoration of the Gentile rights to worship, we a pre-figuration of the vindication of the Indian Dalit struggle for their prayer and worship rights.

The God who revealed in Jesus Christ is also a servant -God - a God who serves.

This God is a Dalit God, a servant God, who does not create others to do servile work, but does work himself. Servitude is innate in the God of Dalits. Servitude is *svadharma* of our God, and hence we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and privilege.

The Gospel writers identified Jesus with the suffering servant of Isaiah. Since the service of others has been the privilege of Dalit communities in India, the Christology of a suffering servant is very much relevant in Dalit Christology. Therefore, to speak of a servant God is to recognize him and identify as a true Dalit deity.

Our housemaid or the sweeper who cleans commodes and latrines are truly speaking our servants. Do we realize that? Let us be prepared for further shock. Are we prepared to say that my housemaid, my sweeper, my bhangi is my God? He is waiter, a dhobi. Traditionally all such services have been the lot of dalits.

It can be very well mentioned that all people's theologies recognize this model of Christ as the servant in their Christology. Christ, the servant is seen and affirmed in the faces of the poor. "The servant God is the righteous one who accepted humiliation and suffering for God's sake"

Above all, Jesus' dalitness is symbolized at its best on the cross. On the cross he was broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven - the dalit, in the fullest possible etymological meaning of the term. The cross is no arbitrary intrusion in the life of Jesus. It is the natural outcome of a life of solidarity with the poor and the outcasts and of the confrontation with the powerful who oppress them. "He (Jesus) hung on the cross not on behalf of the victims, but himself a victim, in solidarity with all victim people of all ages." In the thought provoking article, "Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult", Samuel Rayan remarks that Jesus suffered outside the camp in order to disclose, proclaim and affirm the inborn dignity and native purity of all our castes.

So Jesus suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood (Heb 13: 11-12). This is a witness of special interest and relevance to our situation... The Christian witness is that Jesus in his suffering, life and death does not belong with the holy city, its nobility, purity, and orthodoxy. He belongs to the realm of outside; he belongs to the region of carcasses and of defilement, which is a realistic description of the life of many outcast group... He suffered as an outcast....

The high point of Dalit experience and Jesus' experience on the cross is the experience of godforsakenness. The Son of God feels that he is forsaken when he cried aloud from the cross, "My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me". Jesus shares in the historical experience of godforsakenness true of all Dalits. The history of Dalits shows little or no evidence of God's love or concern, justice, presence or existence. Truly the being God- forsakenness is the heart of the experience and consciousness of India's millions of untouchable. It is none other than the Dalitness of the divinity and humanity of Jesus that the cross symbolizes. As it is firmly rooted in the humanity of Jesus, it is meant for the whole of humanity. and not simply to the Dalits alone.

The resurrected Jesus who gives the hope for a bright future encounters the Dalits in their day to day experiences. No Christian faith is possible in India today without the identification with them and commitment to their resurrection from the tombs in which they are now held, guarded by the musclemen of the ruling classes according to the law and otherwise.

God's divinity and his humanity are both characterized by his dalitness. He is one with the broken. He suffers when his people suffer. He weeps when his people weep. He laughs when his people laugh. He dies in his people's death and raised again in his people's resurrection

On the whole, the Dalit Christology is a paradigm of humiliation and suffering reflected in the life of the poor. Here Jesus is seen as a historical figure, rather than a dogmatic figure. Dalit Christology shares the views of all other people's theologies.

Theology by the people implies a Christology which sees the Lord in the frail and ugly specter of human existence and Christology is not understood in terms of power, but in terms of what is humble and frailly human. But such theology is also a call to make sacrifices on behalf of the poor and the weak. Power is seen in acts of love, not in status.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DALIT THEOLOGY

Dalit theology, which is being taken shape in India can be considered as one of the attempts to do a local theology taking seriously the context of struggles of the people who are marginalized and oppressed, reflecting on their struggles for liberation from the structures which marginalize them. It is very much committed to the liberation and humanization of the Dalits, the most oppressed of India. It is understood as the systematic reflection on the liberating and humanizing actions done by and on behalf of the oppressed, which becomes the mediation as well as the sacrament of God's saving action in history. Its concern is not mainly what would happen to the soul after the death, but what happens to the human being to have their human dignity and honor as anybody else.

Dalit theology not only shows a relevant perspective for doing a local theology, but also questions the so-called neutral philosophical perspectives of theology. It exhibits its conflict with the elite perspective, which justifies the status quo, that leads to exploitation and oppression.

Dalit Theology is a "theology from the underside of history" That means, this is based on the discernment that the theological reflection should be done from the perspective of those who are victims of domination and oppression. It is clearly an attempt to give voice to the voiceless of the Indian society. That is why, it provides a paradigm for assessing the signs of the times. The irruption of the poor and the oppressed is one of the greatest signs of the times. It is also the time of the irruption of God in history to establish his reign and righteousness. It is needless to say that no theology can be done today ignoring the signs of the time. In his preface to one of Gutierrez's books The Power of the Poor in History Robert Mc Affee Brown gives the salient feature of such a theology from a Latin American context.

This is not a theology created by the intelligentsia, the affluent, the powerful, those on the top. It is a theology from the bottom, from the underside of history created by the victims, the poor and the oppressed. It is not a theology spun out in a series of principles of timeless truths that are applied to the contemporary scene, but a theology springing out of poverty oppression, the heartrending conditions under which the great majority of Latin Americans live.

Moreover, Dalit theology affirms the Biblical faith that the poor are today's suffering servants, today's "crucified peoples". Their sufferings sheds light on the evil and injustices prevalent today in the religion and society and condemns them. Their struggle for a full human life and dignity announces the hope of a new world, the redeemed humanity. Despite the fact that Dalits are India's suffering servants and crucified people, their theology calls for an "obligatory solidarity" with the poor of the whole world, a necessary task in doing theology today.

Dalit theology as a local theology differs very much from the missionary theology which is evangelistic in nature and aimed at the conversion of Dalits to Christianity from their original religion. The teachings of the missionaries in India provided only a half salvation to the Christians. It was a half salvation, because in it no effort was taken to relate the teachings of Christian faith to the real life of the people. But Dalit theology seeks to help the Dalits to live in solidarity with their fellow Dalits despite the religious background. Since it assumes religious pluralism of our context, it not only helps the Christian Dalits but also shares a common ideology with other Dalits in their common struggle for liberation, justice and dignity.

Further, Dalit theology shows a radical discontinuity with the Indian Christian Theology of the *Brahmanical tradition*. In this case Dalit theology is a counter theology in relation to other

dominant theologies. The dominant theologies are considered to be normative and therefore imposed upon the oppressed. As the Brahmanic theological tradition is the dominant one, it has been imposed upon Dalits who are the Christian majority.

CONCLUSION

The growing interest in Dalit theology has raised number of questions. Is not Christian theology common for all Christians irrespective of caste, color, and different historical contexts in which Christians find themselves? Are we not in danger of creating divisions and encouraging polarizations, thereby endangering Christian unity by speaking about Dalit theology? Would we then accept Non- Dalits to develop a Non-Dalit theology? Although we cannot give a satisfactory answer to these questions, it is evident from the above discussions that Dalit theology is not meant to reject the known expressions or its usefulness. Rather, it is another expression of Indian Christian theology based on the living experience of Dalit themselves, which have been neglected in the earlier Indian Christian Theology. It comes as a powerful voice from the Dalit people in their language and for the service of the people. As a contextual theology it seeks to confront situations of oppression perpetuated by the dominant religious traditions without neglecting the ecumenical concern for one human community. As a matter of fact, an active commitment to peace and justice becomes an integral concern of this theological enterprise. It can also provide an opportunity for the non- Dalits a repentance of their past participation either directly or indirectly in the unjust structures, practices and attitudes produced and nurtured by the caste system.

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