

Online-Texte der Evangelischen Akademie Bad Boll

## Christianity in India: A Promised Land for Dalits?

*P. Surya Prakash*

### Ein Beitrag aus der Tagung:

Der Exodus der »Gebrochenen«

Die Religionen in Indien und die Befreiung der Dalits

Bad Boll, 24. – 26. September 2010, Tagungsnummer: 641010

Tagungsleitung: Wolfgang Wagner, Walter Hahn, Lutz Drescher

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Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll  
Akademieweg 11, D-73087 Bad Boll  
E-Mail: [info@ev-akademie-boll.de](mailto:info@ev-akademie-boll.de)  
Internet: [www.ev-akademie-boll.de](http://www.ev-akademie-boll.de)

# Christianity in India: A Promised Land for Dalits?

*P. Surya Prakash*

## ‘Dalits’ – A Conceptual Frame Work:

India is predominantly a Hindu nation with 80.5% of the 1,028 Million people identifying as Hindus, according to 2000 census data. There are only 24 million Christians in India, a small minority community comprising only 2.3% of the total population. (Savio Abreu, "The Making of a Christian Minority," *Seminar*, no. 602, 2009, 64-65) It is a well known fact that about 75% of the Christian community in India can be said to be of dalit origin. Dalit Christians number 23.5 Million, almost 15 Million in rural India, and a little less than 9 Million in urban India. (Satish Deshpande and Geetika Bapna, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge, Prepared for the National Commission for Minorities*, Delhi: Government of India, 2008)

## I. Dalit Christians:

Dalit Christians are dalits first and became dalit Christians on accepting Christian faith. However, their situation in no way is better when it is compared with the non-Christian dalits. Dalit Christians continue to be exploited, discriminated and their rights are being ignored. Political parties are using these groups as vote banks and their situation remains unchanged both in Church and in society. James Massey calls them as the people facing three-fold discrimination. Firstly, they are oppressed along with Dalits belonging to other religions; they continue to face multiple oppressions, which include social, economic and political deprivations from the hands of so-called upper castes. Besides this, they also face discrimination, at two other levels, one from the hand of the government and the other from the hand of their fellow Christians who consider themselves as of upper caste origin. The situation of the Dalit Christians is still the same both in society as well as in the Church. (James Massey, "An Analysis of the Dalit Situation with Special Reference to Dalit Christians and Dalit Theology" in *Religion and Society*, vol. 5, no .3-4, 2007, 74) Kothapalli Wilson sees them as 'twice – alienated.' Therefore it is to be said that the Scholars and activists use the term 'Dalit' in many ways based on the criteria of either social status or economic position. Socially the term was used to refer the 'untouchables' and on economic criterion they were called as the economically disadvantaged, regardless of their caste category. (James Massey, "An Analysis of the Dalit Situation with Special Reference to Dalit Christians and Dalit Theology", 74) As a social appellation, dalit has the added virtue of embodying contemporary realities of oppression and struggle. Dalit Christians are socially frail, economically needy and politically powerless, despite the protective discriminative policies followed by the Government under provisions of the Constitution in which Dalits are categorized as Scheduled Castes. (I. John Mohan Razu, "Deciphering the Subaltern Terrain: Exploring Dalit and Tribla religio-Cultural Spaces for an Emancipatory Vision" in *Deciphering the Subaltern Terrain: Exploring Dalit and Tribla religio-Cultural Spaces for an Emancipatory Vision*, ed. James Massey, Bangalore: BTESSC/ SATHRI, 2009, 45) Often they

continue to remain as the people, downtrodden, exploited and oppressed in subtle ways both in the Church and society. The institutional forms of discrimination and deprivation reduced the Dalits and the downtrodden to a state of lesser being, non-being and exist only for the well-being of the dominant castes and class. It is not simply illiteracy, poverty, malnutrition, ill health that became the lot of the Dalits, but in the ultimate analysis, they are reduced to source less, powerless, and baseless people. (Prakash Louis, *The Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2003, 132-133) This is the situation of Dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular.

## II. The Origin and Growth of Christianity:

Christianity is a complex phenomenon in India as it is everywhere. Just as racism has left its mark on Christianity in the US, casteism has done so in India, but through much longer historical period. (Gail Omvedt, "The Doubly Marginalized," *Seminar* 602, 2009, 71) Indian Christianity has historical roots going back to the arrival of St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ. The planting of Christianity at this juncture preceded the triumph of caste and its *varnashrama Dharma* in India. (Gail Omvedt, "The Doubly Marginalized," 72) For instance, in Kerala, the establishment of the caste hierarchy and the dominance of Nambudiri Brahmins as its head are dated only from after 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, this hierarchy and the Brahmanization of the Malayali population included the 'Brahmanization' in different forms of its Christian population: the Syrian Christians today consider themselves as 'upper caste'. (Gail Omvedt, "The Doubly Marginalized," 72)

Protestant Christianity began its work at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the Tranquebar mission on the South-East coast of India in 1706 started by Lutherans. It was soon followed by other Protestant missions like the Serampore mission in 1793 and the Mission Movement in Calcutta. (A. M. Mundadan, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1984, 160) In South India, conversions took place among some castes almost 400 years ago, in others 200 years ago, and in a few cases, as early as 100 years ago. In other parts of India, conversions took place during the last 200 years. (Lancy Lobo, "Visions, Illusions, and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India," in *Dalit Identity and Politics*, ed. Ghanshyam Shah, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001, 242)

It was the evangelical Protestant missionaries who began to arrive in small groups in the 18<sup>th</sup> century represented a new, fervent, missionizing force, linking their message of Christian love to social equality. It is this new message of social justice and equality and alleviation of poverty and illiteracy with a spiritual vehemence eventually awoke an impressive response among Indian masses. Consequently, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were significant group conversions among tribals and untouchables in many parts of the country. Almost all the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian converts are from the Dalit communities. (Gail Omvedt, "The Doubly Marginalized," 73)

The Dalits being experienced incessant restlessness and discontentment, frustrated with the dehumanizing conditions and experiences of dislocation, had sought other alternatives which enabled and ensured to them a life of equality. In this context, these oppressed groups used conversion to

other religions as a means to escape from the severity of caste oppression, discrimination and other forms of exploitation. Consequently, there were a series of individual, group and mass conversions to other religions, especially to Christianity, because it was Christian faith which appeared to be promising to grant selfhood and equality, human identity and human dignity, which they sought for. Thus it is true that, it was the restlessness born out of dislocation most frequently took a religious form not because the other avenues for upward mobility were effectively closed to Dalits. Rather, it is because conversion to another faith offered them a new, better social and religious identity which was not dependent 'on its acceptance and recognition by the higher castes.' It was the Christians who first responded to Dalit restlessness. (Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity; Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo Saxon Protestant Mission in India*, London: Centre for South Asia Studies, University of London, 1980, 77) Thus, conversion to Christianity was identified as a viable vehicle to be liberated from the clutches of caste system. The large scale conversions of Dalits took place mainly during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and chiefly in the Protestant Churches, and these are characterized as "mass movements" and "mass conversions. (Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 2007, 144) Christian missionizing in India had paradoxical effects. Christianity was seen and depicted as a major challenge, a 'foreign' attack on Indian tradition. (Gail Omvedt, "The Doubly Marginalized," *Seminar* 602, 2009, 72) "Independence only heightened the ongoing exclusion of Dalit Christians. 'Indianization' of the Church, both before and after independence, in a context that did not challenge traditional hierarchies of wealth, knowledge, and power, could only mean a Brahmanization." (Ibid.) It is known fact that some states have gone in the recent past to the extent of pass 'anti-conversion' laws, which only heightened the existing situation. (Santanu K. Patro, "Dalit Identity in Conversion and Its Implications for Indian Church," *Theological Book Trust Journal* 4, no. 1, 2002, 71-73) The Church participation for the cause of Dalit Christians is naïve. Non-Christian Dalits too discriminate against the Christian dalits. The former are worried about the encroachment by Christian Dalits on their reservation benefits.

It is surprising to note that more than a hundred years after the mass conversions, casteism, caste spirit and caste-discrimination continues to exist in the church at all levels. The attempts of the missionaries to eliminate caste from churches was more successful in north than in the South, where missionaries became divided over whether the best strategy for eliminating caste was a hardline prohibition or a more conciliatory approach. (John C. B. Webster, *Dalit Christians: A History*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1992, 37) Due to all pervasive and deep-rooted nature of the caste system, it was always very hard to uproot caste from the churches. In the twentieth century the prevalence of casteism manifested as apathy towards the Dalits across the various Christian denominations. Various reasons have been identified for this apathy, some of which are: deterioration of the Church's initial concern for Dalits over the decades, concentration of church leadership in the hands of urban-based/ urban-oriented upper caste or elite Christian Dalits, the inadequacy of the western as well as Sanskrit moorings of the church to help effectively in the liberative concerns of the Dalits, and the increasingly institutionalized and hierarchical ministry of the Church which 'pre-occupied itself with many unproductive priorities and issues.' (Godwin Shiri and Nora, "Dalits and Christianity: A Historical Review and Present Challenges," in *New Lamps: Fresh Insights into Mission*, ed. Allen Gadd and D.C. Premraj, London: All Saint's Church, 2001, 113)

Despite the growing urbanization, the larger proportions of Christians live in the villages. It is they who are more subject to caste discrimination, economic oppression and political exploitation. Poverty, illiteracy, under-employment as well as seasonal unemployment, and the indebtedness mark and mar the life of the village Christians.

### III. The Role of the Church/Christianity in Eliminating Discrimination:

#### Mass Movements and the Response of the Church:

Conversion touches upon mainly the Dalits and Tribals, since it is they who converted en masse to Christianity. Church was receptive to the signs of the day and tried its best to accommodate all those who converted into Christianity, but there were incidents in which the missionaries had to wait and confirm the tide of the day before they could accept the believers into the church. The untouchable's change of religion was not primarily a mode of economic and social improvement as many perceive. It was more than anything else, an effort to change social status, a search for freedom from caste oppression. It is truly a protest against the oppressive structures, belief system of Hinduism. (Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity; Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo Saxon Protestant Mission in India*, 74) Pickett sees, in Dalit conversion, the desire for social liberation as a legitimate motive. (J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, 2nd ed., Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1933, 136) Webster on the other hand argues that conversion to Islam and Christianity represented rejection of a hierarchy which kept the Dalits down. (John C. B. Webster, *Dalit Christians: A History*, 67) Untouchable converts are often accused of being 'rice Christians'; an answer for this accusation can be sought in the question Oddie posed, he asks: "If the desire for material advantage and protection was the only consideration, how does one explain the tenacity and perseverance of some converts who, in spite of material losses and persecutions still adhere to the missions? (Oddie, "Christian Conversion among Non-Brahmins in Andhra Pradesh with Special Reference to Anglican Mission and the Dornakal Diocese 1900-1936," 72)

Conversion sounded a threat to the traditional order of the society which was challenged when dalits got out of the Hindu fold that legitimized the *Varna* system. This is coupled with the polemics of the missionaries. Their efforts to prove the truth of Christianity caused certain reactionary sentiments on the part of many Hindus. It is indeed true, in a mass movement, the search for material improvement or enhancement of status could be the sole motif, but even then, it is the human dignity, self-respect, patrons who will treat one as an equal, and ability to choose one's own destiny become the powerful incentives to conversion. (Forrester, *Caste and Christianity; Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo Saxon Protestant Mission in India* 75) Positively, the mass movements portrayed an effort on the part of the Dalits in their search for dignity, self-respect and ability to choose their own destiny for themselves and for their social groups. There was a growing sense of restlessness among them to have a fuller life of dignity for themselves and for their children. John Webster observes that, the mass movements to other faiths including to Christianity stand as a starting point for modern Dalit movement. They were initiated and led and sustained by Dalit heroism at the face of persecutions. Webster goes further saying, so great was the impact of those mass movements that they have changed the course of the history of Christianity in India and pushed Dalit movement on to its next stage. (Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, 40) Conversion of Dalits all over the country, gave a peculiar identity, dalit identity to Indian Church and Indian Church continues to bear this identity till today.

The *Dalits* through their conversion to Christianity have shown the potential of social change that was there in the religion. It contributed to the development of a new self-image of the Dalits, responding to their deep aspirations to be treated with dignity. This quest of dalits for a different mode of life explains also their explorations for new religious avenues that would empower them. Aloysius, assessing various motives behind conversion said, “these emerging communities did not ‘accept’ Christianity in ‘cow-like’ obedience, as the upper-caste nationalist claim, but indeed consciously and deliberately moved away from one set of religious symbolism to another perceived as universal and egalitarian.” (G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism*, New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, 1998, 19)

#### IV. Church in Solidarity with the Dalits: A Struggle

From the beginning, the British government adopted a neutral stand so far as the social problems are concerned. The reservation policy introduced by the Independent Indian Constitution for the empowerment of the dalits, though not the cure-all remedy for their conditions; nevertheless it has an important role and potential to empower them. Studies prove that but for the reservation, the condition of the Dalits would be much worse. However very regrettable state of affair is that Dalit Christians are deprived of this important means of empowerment, for themselves and for their children. Why were they denied of this? The reason is just because they believe in Christian faith which is considered to be an egalitarian religion. So, conversion to Christianity means automatically the deprivation of the educational and empowerment privileges enjoyed by the non- Christian dalits.

Just like the conversion issue, the ensuring the reservation benefits for Dalit Christians has been a much debated question. On this basis, the Christian Dalits in India are confronting the problem of perpetual denial of political as well as economic rights granted by the State. It is a well-known fact that the present state of affair goes back to a presidential order of 1950 which explicitly states that “no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu or the Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of a scheduled caste.” (The Constitution, Scheduled Castes Order, 1950, Article 3) As a result of this, the dalit Christians, who are converted to Christianity, cannot enjoy any benefits of the Scheduled Castes; because once they are converted they cease to be Hindus. Ever since, the Dalit Christians are in a struggle to attain their legitimate benefits like their fellow Hindu Dalits. The issue is very complex one. Their struggle is multi-pronged. Their argument to claim the benefits have acquired a sharper edge since the presidential order was amended twice to include the Sikhs (1956) and the Buddhists (1990). Though the discrimination on the basis of religion the government contributed for weakening of national dalit identity, it contributed towards the strengthening of Christian identity.

James Massey identifying this struggle as one of the levels of discrimination faced by the dalit Christians in India at the hand of the State said, this has to do with the very fundamental right granted to all citizens of the country, the right to equality before the law in article 14. He substantiates his argument by citing the Constitutional Right which reads: “The State shall not deny to any persons equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.” (Massey, "An Analysis of the Dalit Situation with Special Reference to Dalit Christians and Dalit Theology," 72) Here it clearly



furnished that all, every person is eligible and entitled to attain these benefits granted by the government. But it is ironic that all the laws under which special protection is provided to Dalits belongs to Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist religions and the Dalit Christians are denied of it because they are 'Christian'. While expounding Christian spirituality, which seeks to embrace all, the new converts clung to their old menial jobs. The servitude and subjugation continue unabated. The Indian Constitution, a sublime one as such, pledges equality and freedom for everyone, abolishes discrimination of any kind, but it is a big paradox that it allows shamelessly discrimination on the basis of religion. Article 25 of the Indian secularism is a fragile myth. Dalit Christians when they cease to be Hindu, automatically become ineligible for concessions or aid. (Deshpande and Bapna, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge, Prepared for the National Commission for Minorities*, 81-83. Whole report proves to be true what has been argued in the above)

This clearly shows that, the practice of Indian Government amounts to violation of the freedom to 'profess, propagate and practice' any religious faith depending upon one's choice which is guaranteed in Constitution. Paul Chirakarodu, in the same vein said "confining concessions or aids to Scheduled Castes alone is a calculated step of caste people to blunt the conversion strategy, a preventive step to decrease the numerical strength of Dalit Christians....Dalit Christian finds it difficult to earn his (sic) bread even when he (sic) is receiving no aids and concessions." (Paul Chirakarodu, "Dalit Christians: A Case of Social Plight," in *Christian Identity and Cultural Nationalism Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. E. C. John and Samson Prabhakar, Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2008, 36) It is indeed true; cutting the concession is a calculated move to make Dalits live in dire poverty once for all, and a desire to see them far away from empowerment. They want them as bonded labor with low wages, ready for cheap agricultural jobs and above all slaves at disposal.

On the economic ground the Constitution of India also has granted them special right and privileges and a remarkable share in the political powers. It offered them the reservation of seats at all levels (article 330-334), such as jobs, education and in various government departments and public undertakings (article 16, 320, and 353). These reservations have been offered to the Dalits according to their percentage of the total population of the country. (No-Name, *The Constitution of India*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2000, 6) All these benefits are granted only to those Dalits, who are recognized as 'Scheduled Castes' and profess Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism, but not to Dalits professing Christianity and Islam. They are not entitled to have any privilege and the Government continues to discriminate Dalit Christians on the basis of religion and denied of equality before the law. Such discrimination is prohibited in article 15.1, which is also part of the fundamental rights; the article reads as, "The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, place of birth or any of them."

Violating these privileges is communal and anti-constitutional, be scrapped. At the same time, globalization directly has threatened the constitutional and economic rights of both the Dalits and Tribals. (James Massey, *Another World Is Possible-Dalit Perspective on Human, Globalization, Just Society*, New Delhi: CDS Pamphlet, no 6, 2004, 13-15)

Globalization, which is based on hardcore market economy and therefore strongly supports 'privatization' against State ventures, has become a threat to the Dalit Christians along with other Dalits. Consequently, the privileges enjoyed by the Dalits under the Constitution, both in the public and private sector, are now impeded miserably forcing them to face a major economic threat. It is a blatant rupture of justice. The point in question is not whether the doctrinal and ethical teachings of the religions professed by these believers accept or do not accept caste discrimination. The concern here is whether in general the Indian society in which they live does or does not discriminate against them?

According to a study done by Satish Deshpande and others, after the last judicial verdict of the Supreme Court concerning this says that, "there is a lot more evidence available on the social economical and educational backwardness of Dalit Christians"; and as per this study "there is no compelling evidence to justify denying SC status to Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians." The study emphatically concludes: "Based only on the descriptive and statistical evidences available, there is a strong case for including both the Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians in the SCs category.... Accordingly, due statutory recognition to Dalit Muslims and dalit Christians would not only right a wrong, it would also remove an indefensible anomaly in our politico-legal system that can legitimately be construed as discriminatory." However, the recommendations made by this commission are yet to be realized (Deshpande and Bapna, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge, Prepared for the National Commission for Minorities*, 81-83) this throws a new challenge to the Church, because the Church is to be an agent of Justice and Peace in the world. Indian Christian leaders have realized the discrepancy between secular ideals and religious practices. It is lamentable that often the efforts of the Dalit Christians to secure their legal rights were futile in spite of submitting memoranda, agitations and speeches. The authorities are still adamant. Yet the uproar of the Dalit Christians still echo in front of Indian Parliament, State Legislatures and Public platforms.

#### Church and Empowerment of the Dalit Christians

Today every denomination has empowerment programs meant for the poor Dalit Christians. The Church in India has identified both empowerment and being in solidarity is the need of the hour. These activities of empowerment and initiation to be in solidarity with the struggling masses have become a dynamic force, an agency of identity assertion and affirmation with revolutionary implications in the process of the upliftment of the Dalits and Tribals.

The government inter-action with Christians is primarily through heads of the churches, which tend to act separately as denominational leaders, rather than as representatives of the whole Church in India. While heads of Roman Catholic Sectors speak or act on behalf of or under the auspices of a well structured and coordinated body called Catholic Bishops' Conference in India (CBCI), the Protestant heads of the Churches, even within National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) continue to act as representatives of their own denominations. The Evangelical Federation of Churches has their own separate organizations, and the independent Christian fellowships are not members of national councils. This indicates there is a need for change in the process of collective response to such issues which is imperative for Churches today.



To mention some of the initiatives taken by the CSI-Synod are starting a department called 'Board of Diakonia Ministries' (BDM) and along with this there is another committee which is called as 'Board of Dalit and Adivasi Concerns', Board of Social Concerns, functions both at diocesan and Synod level. Their main goal is to organize empowerment programs both at Diocesan and Synod level. It looks into the concerns of the Dalit and Adivasi Christians in the CSI as a whole. The major activity of this is to bring empowerment and be in solidarity with these oppressed groups of the society through community development programs for Dalits and Adivasis (Tribals). CSI Synod is also known for producing Christian literature time to time basing on the contextual issues such as women, children and other contemporary issues that are pertinent both in the Church and Society. There are other regional organizations, such as AICC, Andhra Christian Council and other representative bodies like Human Rights forums and other government and non-government agencies to mediate between the Church and the Government and Society at large. However, here we are reminded of caution given by George Oommen, he points out very succinctly, that the Indian Church hasn't made many significant attempts to engage in struggles for Dalit emancipation, except 'defending the right to convert and looking after Christian communal minority rights'. (George Oommen, "Majoritarian Nationalism and the Identity Politics of Dalits in Post-Independent India," in *The God of All Grace: Essays in Honour of Origen Vasantha Jathanna*, ed. Joseph George, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation and the United Theological College, 2005, 339-340)

#### V. 'Dalit Christian Theology': An Engagement to Awaken the Consciousness to Create Inclusive Community

'Dalit theology' is one of the theological expressions found in India, its starting point is caste discrimination, deprivation and dehumanization that the dalits or the untouchables of the country are subjected to and the historical determination to free themselves from every form of suppression and subjugation. The Christian Dalit Liberation Theology in India can be traced back to the early 1980s, when Christian as well as social movements spearheaded the causes of the oppressed and marginalized of the South India. Dalit Theology having the potentiality of becoming a major form of Liberation Theology began to focus on the struggles of the Dalits of various parts of India, reaching out to the very need of the neglected people. (John Crasta, "Wake-up Call for Dalit Emancipation a Symposium on Dalit Theology and Hermeneutics," *Vidhya Jyothi: Journal of Theological Reflection* 70, no. 9, 2006, 687) It was in response to the realization of 'the insensitivity of the Church and Indian Christian theology to Dalit Christian concerns and the deeper dimensions of their experience of discrimination and struggle and aspirations for fuller humanity, despite the majority of Christians being of Dalit origin (M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology," in *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey, Delhi: ISPCK, 1998, 203) has ultimately provided the impetus for the emergence of Christian Dalit Theology as a theology of liberation. Thus the central concern of Dalit Theology is the Dalit people, the 'untouchables' and who are still a vast number of poor, despised and underprivileged people. Conversion did not change their lowly position. It was in 1980s, the growing Dalit movement in India was accompanied by a new theology, first articulated by A. P. Nirmal, a dalit Christian from Maharashtra, - 'Shudra theology'. He says it is a theology of Identity (A. P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. A. P. Nirmal, Madras: Gurukul, 1990, 139) Later on prominent theologians such as M. E. Prabhakar, James Massy, M. Azariaah, K. Wilson, V. Devasahayam and others identified themselves as dalit theologians and

others continue to make theological articulation in the light of the sufferings of the people at the margins.

Gladstone defined, Dalit theology as, a reaction against the ‘dominant Hindu culture’, and it demands social justice in society at large. It seeks to restore social justice within the Christian church. Dalit theology is two-edged. It is directed against the caste system and the Hindu culture and also criticizes the missionaries and the upper-caste Indian Christians for not having taken care to train a Dalit leadership in proportion to their numerical strength within the church. (J. W. Gladstone, "Christian Missionaries and Caste in Kerala," in *Towards a Dalit Theology*, ed. M. E. Prabhakar, Delhi: ISPCK, 1988, 104 ff) Thus we can call it as a protest theology, protesting against the injustice found both within the church and in the society.

According to M. E. Prabhakar, Dalit theology is, ‘not only a prophetic theology in identification with the oppression of Dalits and their struggles for equality and justice’, but also as ‘a political theology for social action towards the transformation of injustice, undemocratic and oppressive structures.’ (Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology," 211) With this objective, Dalit Theology could serve to challenge the Christian community to return to the Gospel message and motivate them to love and follow the predilection of Jesus Christ and it is indeed a source of empowerment of the marginalized and the oppressed. Its starting point is the experience of the *pain* and *pathos* or oppression and discrimination suffered by the Dalits and the Dalit community as a whole. Thus, Dalit Theology evolved as counter to the Brahminic theological tradition which had hitherto imposed itself on the Dalit Christians. It is a reflection on the articulation of the faith experience of people in a given context. Its object is to ‘help people’ in their struggle for ‘justice’ and ‘freedom.’ (K. C. Abraham, "Third World Theology: Paradigm Shift and Emerging Concerns," in *Confronting Life: Theology out of Context*, ed. M. P. Joseph, Delhi: ISPCK, 1995, 207-208)

James Massey observes: Like other sister liberation theologies, Dalit theology is a theological expression which has taken birth on one side from the historical experience of oppressed people who address themselves by the name ‘Dalit’ and on the other side their encounter with the God of the Bible, who is always in favor of the oppressed and poor. (Massey, *Dalits: Issues and Concerns*, 185) The Dalits had very long history that has been the silent witness and victims of the suffering, which is unending. Consequently, the Dalits as the objects in this history had lost every thing, including land, culture and political and social rights. (Massey, *Dalits: Issues and Concerns*, 187) It is in this context the Dalit theology in India has a major role to play, as the oppressed masses in our country is in need of liberation from poverty, exploitation, gender inequality, and powerlessness in order to actualize their subjecthood and new humanity in Christ, the source of their liberation, because it is they who are the true representatives of the undivided God and God’s love for humanity. It was this sense of ‘divine representation as the humanity created in the image of God’, which the opponents have tried to destroy intentionally. Dalit theology seeks to recover this lost image or original state or identity, by being and working in solidarity with all those who lost their human rights that is educational, social, economic, cultural, political, spiritual and religious privileges. This involves affirmation of Dalit identity. However, we need to confess that the faith articulation, the new methods of reading and appropri-

ating the 'Bible' from the perspective of the oppressed has not reached the grass root levels. It continues to remain a rational exercise of the theologians and theological seminaries.

How does Dalit theology enable the dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular to recover their lost identity? The answer is found in what, James Massey postulates (Massey, "An Analysis of the Dalit Situation with Special Reference to Dalit Christians and Dalit Theology," 84-85) regarding the role of Dalit theology in India in the following way: He believes that Dalit theology has 5 specific roles to play in its process of recovering lost identity. They are:

It creates the space for the agency and subjectivity of the Dalits to come to the fore.

Dalit theology takes efforts to create awareness among both the oppressor and the oppressed and be conscious of the suffering and pain of Dalits and also their own fallen state or non-humanity.

It raises consciousness of the Church/Christian community as a whole. In this process of raising consciousness it enable all those inside the church and in the society to discern the changing trends in current traditional theologizing process which seeks to maintain status quo both inside the church and in the society and empowers them to work against such legitimizing structures of the church and society. Thus it enables the church and society to become a transforming agent.

It motivates ordinary Christians to take active part in their struggle for human dignity.

In short it seeks to re-assert the liberative social vision and identity affirmation and this becomes the content of Dalit theology; therefore, the role of Dalit theology is to facilitate transformation within both Dalits and non-Dalits. To impinge upon the behavior of both Christian Dalits and non-Christians and enlist and nurture all potential partnership which in result opens up the possibilities for a just and egalitarian society. Thus the praxis of Dalit theology is both socio-political and economic transformation and liberative partnership with all those who work for the empowerment of the Dalits. It invites the Church in Indian to be open to join hands and work in cooperation with secular humanizing forces, which is what the Indian reality demands.

According to A. P. Nirmal, the ultimate goal Dalit theology is not 'simply gaining of the rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is realization of full humanness or conversely, full divinity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in us.' (Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," 143) The realization of full humanness is possible through reading and interpreting the Christian message in the light of the experience of the sufferings of those who are at the margins. This kind of reading and interpretation of the Christian Gospel has a great empowering effect on the community. It has the power to challenge the caste discrimination and domination of the upper castes within the Church. Consequently today we notice a remarkable difference in the life and a tremendous growth in the consciousness of the Dalits and Dalit Christians, which in turn led them to seek for liberation, social justice, equality and peace, ultimately a new identity. The affirmation of Dalit identity in Dalit theological articulation has taken place predominantly in relation to the areas of history, culture and theology. Consequently, there is a gradual growth and a remarkable change in their consciousness, which is peculiar to the Dalits alone, is visible both in the church and society.

## VI. Conclusion:

Today, it is claimed that the Church in India is Dalit Church. After the Roman Catholic Church which hoped to bring the Upper classes of the Society into the Church failed in spite of its very Herculean feats of identifying the Church with upper class culture (de Nobili) both the Protestants and Roman Catholics turned to the Dalits and opened their doors to the Dalits who embraced the Church in large numbers.

The Churches welcomed the Dalits into their embrace and built the Churches on the numerical strength of the Dalits. Although the Dalits were in a large majority in many Churches, representing the social milieu, the minority upper classes in the Church were in leadership of the Church. The Dalits of the Church accepted the situation without question. The Dalits in the Church, were however much better than the Dalits outside the Church, with educational opportunities thrown open to them, had better social standing and in deed they were freed from the Hindu religious and social regimentation.

The Church grew in Dalit numbers. The Church found a place in the society through their pioneering educational and healing ministries. A new milieu for the Dalits in the church was established with Dalits even becoming priests, an enviable position of leadership in the society. During the days of British rule, the foreign missionary was the real ruler of the Church and Indian leadership had not reached the higher echelons of power and prestige but after the independence, the foreign missionary largely left the leadership of the Church to the upper class leaders in the Church. In Churches where there were sufficient trained leaders from upper classes, they took over the leadership and Dalits occupied a second place. In Churches where Tribals and Dalits were in a majority and upper classes were not a significant community, leadership passed on to the Dalits and Tribals.

### *The dynamite that the Gospel was*

It should never be forgotten that it was Christianity, that was the dynamite that burst the rigidity of untouchability. The early missionaries when they started schools were challenged by upper classes not to admit untouchables to the schools. The Missionaries stood firm and allowed Dalit children to the schools and that was the beginning of human touch at least in the school community. Then the hospitals where most of the nurses were Christian Dalits and upper class patients accepted their services. Thus it was Christianity that represented the first break through, as far as untouchability is concerned. Unfortunately the social revolution terminated at that point.

### *Missiological Aims of the Church*

During the foreign missionary regime, the Gospel was preached widely. Evangelism was the central aim of all ministries, education, healing and social welfare. Conversion through Baptism was the sole aim and function of the Church. This objective was accepted by the whole Church as a sole commitment of Christian faith and praxis.

Gospel campaigns outside the Church were aimed at conversion bringing saved souls into the membership of the Church through baptism.

The Dalit community outside the Church was the hunting ground for new baptisms.

This was the role and function of the Church.

### *After independence the first shock to the Church.*

The New Constitution governing the Indian Republic provided fundamental rights of equality before the law, the rule of law and special rights to minorities especially religious minorities, and protected minorities against religious discrimination. However, a 1950 Presidential Order, deprived the Christian and non-Hindu minorities of educational concessions and employment reservation extended to other Dalits. Ultimately Christians alone were singled out for this discrimination as Sikhs and Buddhists were admitted to those privileges at a later stage.

From 1950 onwards the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) have waged a relentless battle against this discrimination employed all peaceful and constitutional means to secure the privileges to the Christians such as presentation of Memoranda, deputations to national, State and district authorities, closure of schools, mass rallies, processions and even court arrests by Bishops and what not, all this struggle for over 50 years, has proved of no avail. It is fairly clear that the new political forces particularly the majority Dalits, did not want the educated and enlightened Dalit Christians to compete for the privileges with the largely illiterate non-Christian Dalits.

While it was understandable, the Church, in relation to Dalits even Christian Dalits, has come to dead end.

The Church's interest in the Dalits has been rather narrow. The Church wanted the Dalits to enlarge her membership which is the traditional messiological aim. It was regarded as a holy Biblical aim. The fight for Christian Dalit rights also is in the same direction. The Church did not look at Dalit issue beyond the Church's own interests and aims, that is beyond baptism. The Dalit issue per se, its injustice, atrocity, cruelty, sub-humanness its poverty, hunger and misery, did not interest the Church. For the Church, outside its missiological goals, the 'Dalits' was a non-issue.

The predicament of the Dalits in India is a challenge to the Church in India and indeed to the Gospel of Christ in India.

Can the misery of 200 millions Dalits of India be adequately described by any prose writer, any poet, any playwright, any essayist? It is beyond the pen of any of these writers. The suffering has been on for ages. From the experience of the Durban Conference, it is beyond any doubt that the Hindu dominated Government, and the Hindu leaders are determined to perpetuate the slavery of the Dalits and keep them under their heel. Generation after generation, the Dalits are in conditions of misery and helplessness. They have no right of any kind. Even the kind of their dress, their food, their education and habitat are all enforced on them by the existing upper classes in the villages and indeed by ancient law and custom. The periodic cruelties and atrocities perpetrated against Dalit men, women and children throughout the country are indisputable evidence of upper class hegemony over the hapless Dalits.

To people in such slavery and misery, it is the Church, the Church alone that can offer a hope of emancipation. The Church has the mandate from Jesus Himself to liberate them. The Church must take up the Cross, to liberate the Dalits and in this process of advocacy of the Dalit cause, the Church finds new purpose and strength. God will breathe life into the present day almost lifeless Church.

### *Paradigm Shift*

The Church must throw away its old paradigm the reward of conversion which in any case offers no mass liberation. Conversion of a Dalit to Christianity, represents an option of new form of slavery.

The Church must accept a new paradigm of the Mission of Dalit Liberation. The Dalit issue must be placed in the context of Mission of the Church for Dalit Liberation. The Church must accept Dalit Liberation as its new agenda and join hands with all forces that enable Dalit Liberation: oppose all forces that perpetuate Dalit slavery. Foes of Christianity who accuse us falsely of converting the poor; by thousands every day, can be faced with this new challenge. Church must be committed to liberate the Dalits from the age old Hindu oppressors.

1. Christian Faith is a true faith and a right path

Christian faith has made it possible to worship a God who is:

true, protecting

one, liberating

Good, not harming

loving, not expensive

forgiving, a God who gives eternal life

helping, a God who gives real peace

healing

Further,

The Christian faith helps one to believe God.

it grants divine knowledge

it is a faith superior to all other faiths

it helps one to lead a good life.

it helps one to lead a better life.

it gives peace, health and even material blessings.

it leads to the Truth.

it grants light and knowledge (to leave idol worship, superstitions and menial traditional occupations).

it is a stable faith.

it helps us to live without fear.

It may be noted that the majority of Christian Dalits tend to [perceive Christianity in line with the broad category noted above. While some tended to point out one of the aspects noted above, in most cases however, it was an combination of more that one aspect.

2. Existential Emphasis



A very considerable number of the Christian Dalits' expressions contain a strong existential emphasis to them. The following expressions prove this point very clearly:

The Christian faith is just religion

it is a religion where love prevails.

There is self-respect and equality in the Christian faith.

It is a pro-poor religion.

Christianity is a simple religion.

It is a religion in which all can hear His word.

The Christian faith has given us a place of worship.

In the Christian faith there is only one God (as against many Gods in Hinduism).

Christianity has helped us to give up all the *hocus-pocus* and superstition of Hinduism.

The Christian God does not make any caste discrimination.

The Christian faith says all are equal.

He is a God of the poor people.

The Christian's God is an 'inexpensive' God.

In the Christian place of worship all are welcome (none denied entry).

There is no caste discrimination in Christian places of worship.

We get respect as Christians.

Christian faith helps us to give up superstition, and caste-based menial occupations and practices.

Christian faith destroys *Jathi* (caste).

It gives us equality in society.

It helps us to understand that all are equal.

It enables us to get respect in society.

It liberates us from the stigma of being outcaste.

It liberates us from the clutches of upper castes.

It helps all people to live as one people and with equality.

Christianity liberates us from bonded labour and slavery

It gives us a status.

Rt. Rev. Dr. P. Surya Prakash, Bishop CSI- Diocese Karimnagar, India

(Source materials researched by Bethel Krupa, D.Th. student, SATHRI, Bangalore)