

Uncomfortable and Devious Paths in Dalit Theology and Ideology

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Abstract

This paper explores the trajectory of Dalit Theology and Ideology, unraveling both uncomfortable facets and emerging trends within this academic and socio-political discourse. The examination is structured into two primary sections: areas of discomfort and the unfolding nuances in Dalit Theology.

In the exploration of discomfort, three pivotal concerns are addressed. The “Danger of Essentialism” scrutinizes the construction of an abstract “pure Dalit” identity, exposing the pitfalls of this essentialist approach, including the lack of empirical evidence and the potential silencing of authentic voices within the Dalit community. The subsequent exploration, “Danger of Homogenization,” delves into the risks associated with reducing Dalit identity to a singular, homogenized category, emphasizing the need to acknowledge internal variations and alternative voices to avoid oversimplification. The “Danger of Methodological Exclusivism” critiques the exclusive focus on Dalit experience in theological spaces, underscoring the necessity for a broader engagement that addresses soci-

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etal issues collectively rather than confining Dalit scholars to specific domains.

In the section on emerging trends, a multi-faceted examination of identity unfolds. “Interrogating Identity” reveals a shift from victimhood narratives to a focus on Dalit consciousness and resistance. The acknowledgment of multiple identities, including sub-jatis and socio-cultural affiliations, challenges the singular homogenized identity construct. Additionally, the recognition of Dalits in urban spaces reflects a broader understanding of the diverse experiences within the community.

The exploration of “Interrogating the Text” exposes the intricate relationship between Dalits and the Bible. Beyond traditional readings, emphasis is placed on community readings, imagination, and dialogical approaches, revealing a dynamic engagement with sacred texts. The analysis also extends beyond the Bible to include folk tales, songs, and experiences of revolt, broadening the hermeneutical landscape.

The section “Interrogating Socio-Economic Realities from a Dalit Perspective” scrutinizes Dalit responses to globalization, challenging mainstream anti-globalization narratives and exploring alternative perspectives within the Dalit community. The discourse on reservations transcends the reservation debate to question meritocracy and the structural inequalities embedded in the education system. Finally, the examination of Dalits at the forefront of a new India critically evaluates the potential for reconceiving the nation from a Dalit perspective, challenging dominant and hierarchical values ingrained in the Indian narrative.

In conclusion, the abstract emphasizes the urgency of reclaiming devious paths within Dalit Theology. The term “devious” is interpreted in two dimensions: first, as a winding, heuristic approach, encouraging an exploration of untrodden paths; second, as a potentially wicked, heretical

tradition that challenges existing power structures. Despite the increasing recognition of Dalit Theology, the call is made to maintain its radical essence by embracing discomfort and unconventional routes, thereby revolutionizing society.

Keywords

Dalit, Theology, Globalization, hermeneutics, identity

I. Introduction

Dalit Theology as an academic enterprise made its entry in 1981 through a paper presented by Arvind P Nirmal at the United Theological College, Bangalore¹. This is not to say that Dalit theology did not exist before that, it certainly did as articulating the hopes and aspirations of Dalit Christians, but it remained within the context of communities and churches and did not find itself as part of the 'academy'. What Nirmal did in his paper though was to question the entire trajectory of Indian Christian Theology as an enterprise and offered a paradigm shift that moved it away from an Indian theology that was subservient to the national project but offered an entirely different and differing discourse².

When speaking of Dalit, it is difficult to separate theology and ideology. For if Dalit Theology is to challenge and present an alternative to the present status quo then it is my estimation that Dalit Theology should not only offer us a way to interpret the world but should also lay out a programme to change it. In this sense Dalit Theology has a political goal and is therefore ideological. No doubt it will be possible for us to map out areas of distinction between ideology and theology, in some instances it may even be desirable for us to do so, but it is my hunch that the locus for a relevant Dalit Theology lies in the grey area where these two overlap. I have to admit, with some regret, that I sometimes use the terms interchangeably.

1 This was later published in the NCCI review in 1988, Arvind P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," *NCC Review*, 1998; and again in Arvind P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, by Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute for the Dept. of Dalit Theology, 1990), 53-70.

2 Cf. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective."

The title of the paper, *Uncomfortable and Devious Paths in Dalit Theology and Ideology* itself offers us some indication of the course that this paper intends to chart. To begin with Dalit Theology has always made us uncomfortable, it is subversive, it asked the wrong question at the wrong time, it seeks out the conflict and chooses to highlight it. Yet if we are to be honest to ourselves and the task at hand we would also have to note that not only are we to let this discomfort affect others but it must affect us as well. To this end in the first part of the paper we shall make some observations on certain areas of discomfort within Dalit Theology. I have to admit that I am using the term discomfort with some apprehension as I do understand that there was a time and a place for such theological affirmations, but at the same time I also believe that these represent to us some areas of concern for doing Dalit theology in the 21st Century.

Secondly Dalit Theology has always been deviant, that is to say that it has strayed down a road that was not acceptable to mainstream theology, it took the crooked path, it accepted heretical traditions as being part of its formative factors and it was the voice on the margins, therefore in the second section of the paper I have made some attempt to identify new trends in Dalit theology. These are not necessarily well accepted trends, some of them are of course, but I believe that these are threads that enable us to pick a devious track that we can walk down. The 'beauty' if I can call it that, of a devious path, is that of course that it can often bring us to new insights, sometimes of course it can bring us to the same insight but through a different path and of course we have to admit it can take us nowhere at all, but all the time through a different route.

Lastly as way of introduction I would like to state that what I am offering in this paper is not to propose a new direction that Dalit Theology or

Ideology must take, rather what I propose to outline is to lay before you the devious path that Dalit Theology has taken. In this sense the paper is not prescriptive but rather descriptive, it takes stock of what has is happening.

II. The Areas of Discomfort

In the following section I will outlay three areas of concern for Dalit Theology in the present time. I do not claim that these are the only three areas of concern; I am sure that there are others, but it is my estimation that these three represent a certain fundamental concern to the future of Dalit Theology itself in the sense of the new directions that are emerging.

Will the pure Dalit please stand up? The Danger of Essentialism: For long Dalit Theology has been speaking about *The Dalit* or its plural *The Dalits*. But the question of who really are *these Dalits* that we speak of often goes unanswered. The fact remains that Dalit Theology has constructed for itself a Homo Dalitos, an abstraction, whom Dalit Theology often refers to in the process of theologizing³. There is of course value in making such abstractions, the primary value of which is pure political expediency. Essentialist claims and the power of such abstractions is that it offers us a rallying point around which certain political goals can be lobbied for and gained. Yet on the reverse are several dangers, the primary danger of which is the danger of homogeneity which we shall deal with as a separate point. But there are also other dangers to be dealt with; the

3 Cf. C. Raj, *Dalitology: The Book of the Dalit People: Written in the First and Second Year of the Ambedkar Yuga* (Tumkur: Ambedkar Resource Centre, 2001).

first of which is danger that essentialism creates for itself the abstraction of the 'pure Dalit' with a specific set of characteristics which typify all Dalits. This abstraction of the 'pure Dalit' of course need not and does not necessarily match with Dalits that actually exist in reality. Often tall claims or claims without the supporting empirical evidence are made of Dalits. Even when empirical evidence is used it is often universalized and a-historicized thereby negating the specific socio-historical and geographical basis on which a claim is being made. A second danger is of course that those who follow such an essentialist position often speak on behalf of Dalits and do not let the real voices of the masses be heard or even when they are heard they are heard through the filters of those who 'let Dalit voices speak'.

Will all real Dalits please sit down? The Danger of Homogenization :

Closely linked to the difficulty of essentialism is the danger of Homogenization. What essentialism does is to basically set down a set of characteristics for a group all of which any entity belonging to the group must have. By doing this essentialism does not allow for any variations across individuals or even across time. There are fixed traits which exist and exist universally. The danger with this position of course is that it denies variances across time and space. No doubt this has the advantage of speaking of the Dalits as a single political block, to impose a sense of commonality on those who were and are divided in myriads of ways. Yet at the same time it also glosses over crucial differences and variances in political goals and world views. Dalits everywhere are not the same; they have different experiences of even being Dalit. The difficulty with homogenization is that it overlooks how different Dalits could possibly come to terms with their Dalitness and how they would reflect theo-

logically on this process, in this fourth decade of Dalit Theology we must come to terms with Dalit Theologies.

A further danger of homogenization is that it denies alternate voices and could go as far as to suppress alternate identities. The problem with homogenization is that it would hold only a certain experience as being normative and the question therefore is whose experience is this? The term Dalit is of course a pan identity but in the creation of such a pan identity marginal voices of women, sub-jatis and others who do not 'fit' into the homogenized category of "Homo Dalitos" go unheard and unattended to.

Will the non-Dalits please get up and leave? The Danger of Methodological Exclusivism: Unfortunately Dalit Theology has become obsessed with the idea of Methodological Exclusivism⁴, what Nirmal offered as a method for making Dalit experience normative in the process of theologizing in India in a specific historical situation has become a way of life for some. We cannot deny that Dalit experience must be the ground on which Dalit Theology builds itself, God knows we are fed up with others speaking on our behalf. But at the same time methodological Exclusivism has had two dangers. On the one side it has held Dalit theology back from presenting itself as a theology of life for all, a term which was mentioned in the invitation letter and a phrasing which I liked very much. The fact is that the Dalit issue is a issue for the whole Church and society to fight for it is not only an issue for Dalits. On the flip side of this of course is that Dalits are pushed only into Dalit spaces reducing Dalits to 'a ladies compartment on a male run train'. Therefore in theological faculties for example Dalits can only do Dalit Hermeneutics, but hermeneutics in general is left to the

⁴ Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," 141-142.

non-dalits.

In the following section we shall highlight some new emerging trends in Dalit Theology. We shall specifically be looking at three areas, interrogating identity, interrogating the text and interrogating socio-political realities.

III. Interrogating Identity

The question of identity has played an important role in the formulation of Dalit Theology, yet in the present context there has been considerable new work done on how the question of identity is being looked at.

Interrogating identity that is formulated by victimhood: In a lot of earlier Dalit Theology and of course Dalit ideology, Dalit identity was often seen within the framework of pain and pathos. This of course offered us a new way of doing theology in which God was conceived of as being pain and God as pain. No doubt the very term Dalit which was signified with the meaning of 'broken', 'pressed down', 'crushed' etc. gave easy vent to this kind of a theology. Yet there were also difficulties with how far one could actually push this concept, some younger Dalit theologians and scholars began to question this entire paradigm and ask whether a suffering God could actually come to the rescue of a suffering community. Some theologians began to interpret the term Dalit as a consciousness of being broken and therefore as a mobilization against all that breaks. Still other theologians began to question the idea of victimhood and began to search for the concrete contributions that Dalits have made

to society. Others sought to discover the resources that Dalits used to protest and overcome their oppression while others sought to rediscover the celebration of Dalits in their daily approach to life.

However what we are finding as new work on the question of identity is an entire rethinking on the concept of Dalit itself. There has been some amount of work in resignifying the term in a new generation, Bama the Tamil Dalit author for example resignifies the concept of Dalit as meaning 'rooted in the soil'⁵. No doubt the concept of rooted in the soil has problematic connotations in the sense of being too close to sons of the soil ideologies that are often exclusive and often used for parochial political ends, yet it is interesting that Bama does not speak about Dalit as being 'broken' etc. Other young Dalit ideologues have called for a rejection of the term Dalit and have chosen other such terms as *Mulnivasi*. *Mulnivasi*, a hindi word, which can be translated as aboriginal is used by some to refer to both indigenous people in India as well as Dalits. Still others have questioned the psychological benefit of using a term like Dalit, particularly in a context where others use concepts of 'chosenness'

Interrogating singular homogenized identity: As seen above in the section the difficulty of homogenization is also a difficulty of reducing ones identity to a singular identity, in an increasingly casteist and communal society, identities are more and more becoming polarized and people are being pushed into accepting singular identities. I speak of a situation where my Dalitness defines me in totality, no doubt Dalitness is an aspect of my identity, but it is also precisely that, an aspect. There are also other

5 Bama, 'Recognition For The Language Of My People Is The Biggest Award I Can Win', interview by Manoj Nair, 2001, accessed 10 September 2017, <http://www.outlook-india.com/full.asp?fodname=20010425&fname=Bama&sid=1&pn=1>.

aspects to our identities, each one of us has multiple identities that are constantly and consciously being constructed. No doubt we are Dalit, but we are also of a particular sex, a particular political persuasion, supporting a particular cricket team, from a particular region, speak a particular language and have certain religious and denominational affiliations⁶. But not only are there several voices that point to the multiplicity of our identities, but there are also voices that speak about the various sub-identities that exist under Dalit as a pan-identity. This is of course to raise the contentious topic of sub-jatis among the Dalits, while the term Dalit has sought to overcome the division and hierarchy among these sub-jatis, fact remains that there are voices within the context of Dalit theology. Will raising the issue of sub-jati take Dalit Theology forward or are we falling back into a notion of hierarchy and conflict that has in reality been imposed on us from outside is of course a question that only time will answer. Yet this may be one of the many devious paths that Dalit Theology has chosen to tread and will have to tread.

Recognizing Dalits in the context of new spaces: Dalit Theology has primarily concerned itself with rural Dalits, no doubt a large majority of the Dalits live in rural areas. Yet there is also now a growing awareness of caste reality and Dalit atrocities within the context of urban spaces as well, the case of the autorickshaw driver Chitralekha and the work done by Carmel Christy on Dalits in urban spaces is just one example of this⁷. There have been several issues of atrocities against Dalits within the con-

6 Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 1.

7 Carmel Christy K.J., 'The Politics of Sexuality and Caste: Looking through Kerala's Public Space', in *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, by Sathese Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Varughese (Orient BlackSwan, 2015), 126-145.

text of university campuses in our country in recent times. The prejudice, discrimination and violence faced by Dalits in premier institutions like AIIMS, IISC and the IIT's are only a few cases in point⁸. This fact not only blow up the two myths that caste violence is only to be found in rural areas and that education serves to develop more humane citizens, but it also offers us a new space in which Dalit Theology must be done. What is of course a point to note is the space given to such atrocities within the context of the English media in our country. A simplistic answer would be to point out to a growing consciousness of English media, a deeper analysis would probably reveal the growing number of English speaking middle class Dalits who are able to make a dent on the market system. One does not credit the media within the market economy to run on altruistic motives, if Dalits news has a place in modern media it probably indicates that a sizeable number of Dalits now have the purchasing power as consumers and make this felt on the market system.

What is also of equal interest to us to make note of is the relationship that may exist between the growing Dalit middle class and the increasing communalism among Dalits, the embarrassing fact is that Dalits were at the forefront of the genocide in Gujarat. Subhash Gatade makes the interesting connection between the growing hiatus between the Dalit masses on one hand and the Dalit middle classes on the other as one of the possible reasons for the newfound enthusiasm for Hindutva⁹.

8Cf <https://scroll.in/latest/1029176/sc-st-doctors-and-students-face-discrimination-at-delhi-aiims-alleges-parliamentary-panel> accessed 21st December 2023.

9 Subhash Gatade, "Communal Fascism In Action: Coopting The Dalits, Terrorising The Minorities," *Countercurrents.Org* (blog), 4 April 2013, accessed 12 December 2023, <https://countercurrents.org/gatade040413.htm>.

IV. Interrogating the Text

Another area in which a lot of new work is being done in the area of Dalit Theology is in the area of Biblical hermeneutics. There seems to be a renewed interest in academia and at popular levels in the Bible. We now have a Dalit Biblical Commentary being written. Young scholars in theological colleges are working on new and interesting ways of reading the Bible from a Dalit perspective. In this section we shall note the deviant paths that are being followed in the reading of the Text.

Interrogating the relationship between Dalits and the Text: Dalit theologians have often spoken of the centrality of the Bible in Dalit theology. Yet if we are honest with ourselves we must begin by making the assertion that the Dalits have an ambiguous relationship to the Bible. To begin with we must be conscious of the fact that Dalits have traditionally been denied access to scripture. This was not only in relation to the written text of scripture but it is said that even the hearing of scripture is enough to warrant hot lead being poured into the ear of the Dalit. The hegemonic control of the text and its interpretation by the Brahmin castes was an instrument to ensure the status quo of society by sanctifying and justifying the hierarchical and discriminatory system of caste. Coupled with this denial of access to scripture is the fact that Dalits are traditionally and even today denied access to education and literacy.

Having said this one cannot deny the place of the Bible within both the context of Dalit lives as well as within the context of Dalit theology. Some Dalit theologians like Clarke and Devasahayam have shown us how the Bible is often kept in the houses of the Dalits with great reverence even though they may not be able to read it, thus indicating to us the power of

the Bible in India even as a 'closed' book,¹⁰ At the same time Dalit Theology has always maintained a close relationship with the Bible and Dalit Bible Studies are and remain at the forefront of new hermeneutical work.

However new strategies and ways of reading the text are constantly emerging, Dalit theologians, Dalit theologians are stressing the need for not only reading for Dalits and but also of the importance of reading with them. Community readings of texts have emerged as a new strategy for reading the text from a Dalit perspective. At the same time other strategies such as imagination, dialogical reading between the silences in both the text and the community, using Dalit personal stories as narrative and hermeneutical tools are also emerging.

Reclaiming and interrogating other texts: Yet there is also a growing awareness that for several Dalits the Bible is only one text among other texts. There is a realization that within the life of the Dalits there are also other texts that need to be studied and interpreted. These include folk tales, songs, dances, art and other cultural productions of the Dalits. These other texts also include the writings of Dr. Ambedkar and other Dalit ideologues. The other texts also include the Dalits own experiences of revolt, protest and revival, stories of which are told and retold. Other texts that are studied include the elements from the symbolic world of the Dalits as well as texts that they have appropriated from other communities, text which have found and provide meaning within the multiple layers of Dalit consciousness. It should be mentioned that a significant amount of work is being done in this area. These new strategies and

10 Sathianathan Clarke, "Viewing the Bible through the Eyes and Ears of the Subalterns in India," *Biblical Interpretation* 10, no. 3 (2002): 251.

methods moves away from an essentialist understanding to unravel the threads of how Dalits understand the text and deal with it at various levels.

V. Interrogating socio-economic realities from a Dalit perspective

It has for long been understood that Dalit Theology has been more interested in concepts such as equality, land, pollution/purity than traditional theological concepts such as God, Christ, Spirit etc. In fact the effort of Dalit Theology has often been to reflect on non-traditional themes as well as to reflect on traditional themes in non-traditional ways. Some of these non-traditional themes have been a theological reflection on socio-economic realities, a few of which are highlighted below.

Dalits and Globalization: The critical assessment of the global economy and its impact on vulnerable groups has for long been on the agenda of global theologians, Dalit theology of course has not escaped this phenomenon. There has been considerable work done both quantitatively and qualitatively on the impact of globalization on Dalits. Some Dalit theologians have looked at specific issues within the context of globalization, highlighting specific areas of concern namely land, water and other resources in the context of globalization and its impact on Dalits. Almost universally Dalit theologians have condemned globalization as having a negative impact on Dalits.¹¹ A few Dalit Theologians

11 Chandran Paul Martin, "Globalization and Its Impact on Dalits: A Theological Response," in *Globalization and Its Impact on Dalits: A Theological Response*, by

and Christian thinkers have of course sought to discover how the system can be manipulated for the benefit of Dalits. Yet Dalit Theologians have not really dared to tread the devious path of Dalit ideologues like Chandra Bhan Prasad who welcomes globalization,¹² while there may be some inklings of it here and there none have dared to go the whole hog. On the other hand some Dalit theologians have treaded the devious path of critiquing popular anti-globalization activists for leaving out the caste equation from their analysis and offering an alternative critique of globalization from a Dalit/Adivasi perspective. A classic case of Dalit Theology asking the uncomfortable question!

Dalits and Reservations: It cannot be denied that much of the urban caste debate has crystallized around the discussion on reservations. Dalit Theology has done seminal work in highlighting the ethics of injustice at work in denying reservations to some Dalits on the basis of religion, the case of continues in the Supreme Court. At the same time however there are Dalit Theologians and ideologues that are questioning the very concept of meritocracy and the terms on which the reservation debate is being set. They are asking the larger structural question of who does the education system actually benefit and what are we being educated into? They are further asking the question of accessibility to the education system and whose experience does the school and college syllabus actually speak of?

Dalits at the forefront of a new India?: We are aware that there have

James Massey (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2004), 17-18.

12 Aditya Nigam, "Flight to Freedom: Travel through Dalit Villages," accessed 17 July 2023, <https://kafila.online/2008/06/10/flight-to-freedom-travels-through-dalit-villages/>.

been dramatic movements in the Indian political landscape. The rise of authoritarianism and the entrenchment of Hindutva as an ideology with the context of the state apparatus, mixed with rising right wing populism among the masses has reached disturbing levels. Looking at Indian history from a Dalit perspective though it can be argued that this has always been the case, that Brahmanical Hinduism as the official discursive practice has been part of the Indian narrative from the very outset. The term Dalit, which is an anti-caste and an anti-hierarchical discourse posits the possibility of a new India that is not based on dominant and dominating values but can be reconceived from below.

IV. Conclusion

Dalit theology is now entering its fourth decade of existence, now, more than anytime before Dalit theology has earned an area of respectability both nationally as well as internationally. However with the power of recognition and acceptance also comes the danger of stagnation and co-option. In our liberal schools of theology, Dalit Theology is no longer seen as a radical option for life for all but is duly accepted as being a theology among other theologies. I believe more than any time ever we have to reclaim for ourselves the devious paths that create discomfort. The term devious of course can have two meanings, on the one hand it means winding - a movement away from the mainstream, finding a devious path means taking another way, following a road less taken, finding the answer by stumbling down an untread road, A.P. Nirmal had a term for this, he called it Heuristic. We have to reclaim this meaning of devious for ourselves.

But another meaning of devious is wicked, it is this meaning that I would also like to claim for Dalit Theology, the term itself has its roots in wicken, a so called heretical tradition, if we use this sense then for me then Dalit theology should seek to manipulate the places of the powerful, changing their agenda, taking over their spaces, revolutionize society!

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