

INTRODUCTION TO OUR LIBERATIVE TRADITIONS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO OUR DOING THEOLOGIES

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Introduction

I want to initiate discussion on the paper with a few general observations:

First, the theme of this paper is 'Dalit liberative traditions'. Examples of Dalit traditions will be drawn from my own background and region as those of an Indian Dalit. More examples from other regions particularly from Tribal and Adivasi traditions may be added during the discussion by my colleagues present here.

Second, the expression 'tradition' is not used in this paper with the standard dictionary meaning (the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs etc from generation to generation. esp. by mouth or practice¹), because very little in that sense is left behind either written or oral by the forebears of the Dalits. What is available in writing, is what is left mostly by their rivals in some odd forms, which now is being researched, reconstructed and re-interpreted by the Dalits as well as non-Dalit activists. In this process a number of historical Dalit traditions are uncovered, which not only throw light on the lost human identity of the Dalits, but also reveal the fact of their being liberative in nature.

Third observation is related to the use of the 'Dalit liberative traditions' in the process of theologizing from Dalit perspective, which in truth is very minimum. Most of the Dalit theologians have been reflecting on the present context of the Dalits by referring to the caste system and the Text. But there are few examples of Dalit theologians, who have taken seriously the Dalit liberative traditions in their works. One such example is that of James Theophilus Appavoo, who used a participatory data collection research method to reconstruct the 'Dalit religion'.² Besides, I have my own efforts through which I have been trying to reconstruct the 'Dalit history' by re-reading the written as well as archaeological sources, which were originally not meant for such purpose.³ These efforts not only have taken us back to the historical roots of the Dalit problem, but also have revealed the lost humanity of the Dalits. Towards the same direction presently some activist cum intellectuals like M.C.Raj and Jyothi are continuously making efforts to reclaim the Dalit traditions and use the same in the process of Dalit liberation in their works. Among their well-known recent work is 'Dalitalogy'.⁴

The fourth observation is about the works of the dominant Indian Christian theologians, who have been propagating the Indian Christian theology or claiming to be confessing the Faith in India but have been only concerned with the religious traditions of classical Hinduism, the so called 'Great Traditions'. They never have

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1 Webster's Enclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, Gramercy Books, New York/Avenel, 1994,p.1502.

2 James Theophilus: *Dalit Religion* in 'Indigenous People Dalits' by James Massey (Delhi: 1994), 111-121.

3 James: *Roots-Concise History of Dalits*, 5th ed. (New Delhi: CIS, 2004).

4 M.C. Raj, *Dalitology-The Book of the Dalit People* (Shanthinagar, Tumkur: REDS, 2001).

shown any interest in the religious traditions of the Dalits, Tribals, Adivasi and other subaltern communities of India, which some of the traditional scholars have named as 'Little Traditions'.⁵ Even their reference points are limited to the so called upper castes, which include: Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen.⁶ And among the Christians also the thinkers and theologians from the so called upper caste converts are only taken into account. These include: Krishna Mohan Banarjea, A. S. Appasamy, Brahmabandhu Upadhyay and Sadhu Sundar Singh.⁷ But then the thinkers like Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, who were also not Christians, yet took serious interest in the Dalit liberative traditions and also in the Christian faith, are not given any space in the writings of the dominant Indian Christian theologians. This is quite surprising.

The fifth observation is about the Dalit engagement to uncover their lost and forgotten liberative traditions. The discovery of these traditions has generated enthusiasm among the Dalits for their fuller liberation.

Dalit Liberative Traditions

Here in this section an attempt is made to summarize under five sub heads, the various Dalit liberative traditions, which have not only created among the Dalits a hope for their fuller liberation, but also have led some of the Dalits and Dalit theologians, to enter into the process of doing theology from the Dalit perspective. These sub-heads are; Historical Traditions, Religious traditions, Spiritual traditions, Prophetic traditions, and Faith traditions (including biblical). There should have been sections on Political and Economic traditions as well, but these I have left for another presentation.

Historical Traditions

As stated earlier when we talk about the 'Dalit traditions', we Dalits cannot talk in the literal sense something handed down to us from generation to generation by our forebears. Because our forebears were forced to loose their memory of history. Their opponents, in order to bring them to this state, used many methods, which included: creation of the religious myths, manipulation, divide and rule and even principles of accommodation and assimilation. But inspite of this, the opponents of the Dalits failed to wholly suppress the humanity deep down hidden in their being, which though got 'wounded', yet not fully dead. This 'wounded humanity' hidden in a sub-conscious state, has shown signs of life in different forms now and then through out the long history of their captivity. During the 20th Century these signs of life became more and more manifest, which were the sure proof of the growing consciousness of the Dalits about this state. During their engagement of re-claiming of their past lost history, they encountered a number of their liberative traditions as well. These re-claimed traditions today they now address as our liberative traditions. These re-claimed traditions are the subject of this paper. In this section, we are referring to the 'historical traditions', which have revealed to the Dalits that once upon a time, they owned a most developed civilization, to which the 20th Century's historians and archaeologists have referred to as 'Indus Valley Civilization' ⁸

Today a large number of Dalits and non-Dalits scholars have also accepted

5 Henry H.Presler, Primitive Religions in India(Madras, 1971), 245-246.

6 Robin Boyd, An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology (Delhi, 1991 reprint), 19-39.

7 Kaj Baago, Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity(Madras, 1969), 12-70.

8 James Massey, Roots, 5-19.

that a well-civilized people were living in the cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro before 1500 B.C., which were part of the Indus Valley civilization. These views are also supported by the ancient literary as well as archaeological sources.⁹ M. C. Raj gives examples from the legends of native literature to make a point that the kings like Pari and Sibi of these cities were not only having good governance systems, but also were compassionate and just. These cities had spacious streets, market places and godowns.¹⁰

It is true the unearthed and re-discovered story of the Indus Valley Civilization tells us that it had indigenous origin and the people who owned it belonged to a pre-Aryan race. But question may be asked if these pre-Aryan people were to-day's Dalits. this question may be put in a more direct form: Are Dalits indigenous people? Based upon the existing traditions, historical data and archaeological sources, a good number of scholars have looked into this question of 'Dalits' as being indigenous people and have ventured an affirmative answer. From among these, the works of three such scholars are referred to here, namely, Ambedkar, Suresh Narain Srivastava and J. Van Troy.

Ambedkar has discussed the question in his work 'The Untouchable (1948) who were they and why they became Untouchables?' Ambedkar's work is based on his thesis that there was no racial difference between the Untouchables (Dalits) and other groups or castes at that time in history. According to Ambedkar, the divisions in the Indian society began with a primitive society, which consisted of many local communities (or tribes). In the beginning, all these communities were nomadic. But with time and because of intra-tribal warfare, they got divided into three groups: a Settled Community, a Raider Community (nomadic tribes), and a Broken Men's community consisting of the people of defeated tribes. The last group is important, because it is these Broken Men, according to Ambedkar, who at a later stage, were turned into untouchables and are today's Dalits. These 'Broken Men' were the people of defeated tribes, who got scattered or separated from their original tribes.¹¹

Ambedkar's construction of the tradition of Broken Men, which deals with the roots of the Dalits (Untouchables), is important, because besides throwing light on how the Dalits have reached their present state, it also puts forward another important point today's de-notified Tribes, today's Adivasis and the Dalits had a common origin.¹²

Suresh Narain Srivastava's work 'Harijans in Indian Society' (1980) adds further clarity to this concern of the 'Dalits being indigenous'. Besides considering most of the possible literary, historical and ancient religious traditions, he also takes into account the archaeological findings concerning Mohenjodaro and Harappa and has come to a conclusion, which is very helpful in settling this issue. The following two quotations from Srivastava's work may be sufficient for our purpose:

The pre-Dravidian settlers were the natives of India...The Dravidians were the first to have attacked the aboriginals of India...they did not make aboriginals their own slaves...After the Dravidians, another major attack was made by the

⁹ Ibid, 16-19.

¹⁰ M.C.Raj, Dalitology, 98.

¹¹ B.R Ambedkar, "The Untouchable, who were they are why they became untouchable," in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, writings and speeches, vol.7 (Bombay, 1990), 271-277.

¹² Ibid., 239.

Aryans...As the victorious people, the Aryan invaders looked down upon their opponents and called them the Dasa-Dasyus and the Nishadas.¹³

Srivastava in his work further elaborates:

Therefore, defeated aboriginals were made 'slaves' in the social order . . . These slaves have been included in the fold of Hinduism by placing them on the lowest rung of the social ladder Those who did not accept the offer of becoming slaves were driven away into forests and they remained aboriginals with their social, economic and cultural distinctions. In the course of time, these people were divided into two classes. Some became nomadic tribes and others roaming from place to place. These roaming peoples were called criminal tribesIn this way, an ancient Indian society came to be divided into four parts the Aryans, the non-Aryans, the aboriginals and the nomadic criminal tribes.¹⁴

In the second quotation, the last two lines make one point clear while leaving out the first groups of Aryans, the other three groups of people, the non-Aryans (today's Dalits), the aboriginals (today's indigenous or Adivasi people) and the nomadic criminal tribes (today's de-notified Tribes) have the same roots. In other words these three groups are in real sense the people of indigenous origin, and their forebears were the same.

The third work is an article included in 'Cultural ChotanagpurUnity in Diversity', edited by S. Bosu Mullick, Pre-history and Early History of Chotanagpur by J. Van Troy, which establishes the historical relationship between the people of Chotanagpur (Adivasi) known as Kurukh or Oraons with their past history. He has taken into account, besides the historical traditions, the archaeological and linguistic evidences. He comes up with two possibilities: first, the forebears of Oraons were the descendants of the Pre-Harappa people; second, the Oraons came from North-West India. The latter view is based on linguistic evidence.¹⁵

Van Troy's article has not proposed any final conclusion, but it certainly raises a possibility of establishing a link of the Adivasi people of Chotanagpur and those who once lived in the ancient part of India known today as North-West India. This attempt definitely points towards a close relationship between the Dalits and the indigenous and ultimately they're having common forebearers.

On the basis of the discussion and other views, it may be said that the Dalits share their historical roots with the Adivasis, therefore they along with the Adivasis and de-notified Tribes were makers of the Indus Civilization.

Up to now we have been concerned with the earliest historical traditions, which revealed that Dalits once had a glorious past and were living with full human dignity and also they represent one of the sections of the indigenous settlers of India. But because of their opponents made all efforts to destroy their humanity, but still they could not succeed fully. To make this point clear, we will refer to the two stories, which are narrated in the two great Hindu epics Ramayana (5th B.C) and Mahabharata

¹³ Dr. Suresh Narain Srivastava, Harijans in Indian Society (Lucknow, 1930), 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁵ J. Van Troy, "Pre-History and early History of Chhotanagpur," in Cultural Chhotanagpur Unity in diversity, ed. Bosu Mullick(New Delhi, 1991), 34-35.

(600 B.C A.D.500).¹⁶

The first story is told by Valmiki, the author of Ramayana who reveals, how far Sudras, (the fourth caste) had become degraded (not to speak of the Dalit or outcaste). According to this story, in Lord Rama's time only the three upper castes were allowed to do *tapasya* (penance and meditation). Yet a Sudra undertook penance in order to attain divinity, as a result of which, a Brahman boy of 15 years died. The bereaved father complained to Lord Rama, who after learning the cause of the death, went in search of the Sudra. On meeting him, Lord Rama said to him:

You are indeed blessed. Tell me in which caste you have been born. I am Rama, son of Dasaratha. Out of curiosity I have asked you this question. Tell me the truth. Are you a Brahman, Ksatriya or a Sudra? The ascetic replied, O King! I am born of Sudra caste. I want to attain divinity by such penance. When I want to attain divinity I won't tell lies. I am a Sudra by caste, and my name is Samvuka. As soon as the ascetic uttered those words, Rama drew forth his sword and severed Samvuka's head. ¹⁷

In the continuing narrative it is said that Lord Rama asked the gods to restore the Brahman boy to life and he was told that he had already been revived the moment the Sudra ascetic was killed. But it was Sudra's yearning for divinity and his being truthful that led him to the point of death.

In the Mahabharata also there is a reference to the degraded state of the Dalits. The story of Eklavya, an indigenous boy, tells how he had to lose his 'right hand thumb' because he had learned archery and was in no way inferior to Arjuna in his skill.¹⁸ Again the main point of the story is how at the time of Mahabharata low castes or the Dalits did not have even the basic right to education or attaining skill, but still Eklavya represents a Dalit's power of humanity by the use of which he could supersede, the so called Ksatriya caste person Arjuna.

Religious Traditions

Because of the Dalits' becoming conscious of themselves and their captive state and because of which they have named themselves as 'Dalits', they have been pushed through the centuries-old oppression by the so-called caste people, many liberative forces (traditions) have arisen. These include: the protest movements of Lord Mahavira (540 B.C. 468 B.C) and Lord Buddha (563 B.C 483 B.C.), Hindus Bhakti (devotional) movements, Muslims Sufi (mystic) movements, Christian and Missionary movements, and the teachings of Sikh Gurus, till these reached the times of Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, who helped in giving a positive shape to the present Dalit liberation movement. Now it will not be possible to deal with all these religious traditions in this paper, but we still will be referring to the contributions of Phule and Ambedkar in a separate section. Here in this section we will be only giving a few examples of our Dalit religious traditions, in order to see how rich these are.

¹⁶ Fr zacharias, An Outline of Hinduism (Alwaye, 1956), 375-376.

¹⁷ Ramayana, trans. by Makhan Lal Sen (Calcutta, 1989), 699-702.

¹⁸ Srikipat Mahabharata, ed. Jayadal Goyandaka(Gorakhpur), 69-72.

About the existence of Dalit religion or religious traditions, even the oldest Hindu religious literary source *Rigveda*, bears testimony to the fact that the Dalits had their own laws to govern their religious life, which as expected, the Aryans regarded as alien laws.¹⁹ However, we do find remnants of Dalit religious traditions of which some forms have been preserved by the Dalits in different parts of India. The traditional scholars of religion have labelled the religious traditions of the Dalits as 'Little Traditions' and those of their opponents, the Aryans as 'Great Traditions'.

The roots of Dalit religious traditions lie in the veneration of nature, earth, water, trees and animals etc. In contrast to Aryans who worship in a temple or in a building, the Dalits practise corporate worship in an open space. For instance, in my village Zafferwal (Panjab), the Dalits worship a human-made dome shaped mound of earth, called *Bala Shah*. This mound faces eastwards and is placed under a tree or on an open spot with an earthen lamp (*diya*) burning over it and also red flag on top of it. On an auspicious day, the devotees worship here with their offering. Burning lamp and the red flag are for security from all kinds of evil forces.²⁰

The other examples which we want to refer to is of a song sung by a Dalit community *Pulayas* in North Malabar (Kerala), which they use from ancient times to worship a god named Pottan Teyyam. This song is known as 'Tottom (song) of Pottan Teyyam'. This song contains a very powerful message against the practice of untouchability and caste discrimination. It also affirms the basic human equality. Presently this song has two versions: a Dalit (*Pulaya*) version and non-Dalit (*Brahminised*) version. The later version came into existence during 11th Century as part of the assimilating process by the so-called upper caste. Today both the versions are available in a long poems' form. Both the poems follow dialogue between a Dalit character and a non-Dalit character. In the Dalit version these characters are Chinna Pulayan (a little Dalit) and Chovar, a Sudra. From the Dalit version, here a passage is given, which not only offers a criticism against religious beliefs and practices, but also brings the message how all the human beings belonging to different groups (even so called castes) are same and equal. This passage reads thus:

Why you Chovar quarrel over caste?
Suppose Chovar and we break a coconut
Shan't we find inside the same kernel?
The knives of the Chovar are sharp
And also are our knives
When you are wounded blood comes out
When we are wounded blood comes out
Why you Chovar quarrel over caste?
We planted a plantain tree

In the rubbish heap
With the fruit thereof
You make offering to god.
Yes, we planted a Tulasi

¹⁹ Rigveda 10.22.8.

²⁰ James Massey, "Popular religious Beliefs among Rural and Urban People," in *Popular Religious in the Panjab Today*, ed. John C.B. Webster (delhi, 1974), 81-82.

In the rubbish heap
With the same Tulasi
You make offerings to god
Why then distinctions
Between us.²¹

Beside the ancient remnants of Dalit religious traditions, from which we are only able to give two examples, we are also having a great number of Dalit liberative traditions available from 15th Century onward from which a large majority can be listed under the religious traditions. Some of these are in literary form and some represent the spirituality of the Dalits. We have labeled them as 'spiritual traditions' in the sense of 'dalit spirituality', which actually is the 'spirituality of liberation'. In the next section some of these Dalit liberative traditions are briefly reflected upon.

Spiritual Traditions

Most scholars, when they refer to the Indian spiritual traditions, they refer to the religious traditions drawn from the classical Hindu writings such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Purans* and the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the *Manusmriti*. Two passages from *Rigveda* (1500–1000 B.C) and other from the *Vishnu Purana* A.D. 1045) are given here as examples of these traditions.

Dominant Myths and Stories

(a) When they divided Purusa (creator god Brahma),
how many portions did they make?
What do they call his mouth, his arms?
What do they call his thighs and feet?
The Brahman (priest) was his mouth,
of both arms was Rajana (Ksatriya warrior) made.
His thighs became Vaisya (trader),
from his feet the Sudra (serving caste) was produced.²²

(b) From the arm of Vena, thus rubbed, sprang a celebrated monarch named Prithu, by whom, in olden times the earth was milked for the advantage of mankind when he (Vena) was inaugurated, by the Rishis or sages, a monarch of the earth, he caused it to be everywhere proclaimed, that no worship should be performed... no gifts bestowed upon the Brahmins. I, the King, said he, am the Lord of sacrifice... Then those pious Munis (Brahman sages) were filled with wrath, and cried out to each other: Let this wicked wretch be slain ... and they fell upon the King... slew him... And the people... said Now that the Kingdom is without a king... The sages, hearing this consulted, and together rubbed the thigh of the king, who had left no offspring, to produce a son. From the thigh, thus rubbed, came forth a being of the complexion of charred stake, with flattened features..., a dwarfish stature... His descendants, the inhabitants of the Vindhya mountains... By this it means the wickedness of the Vena was expelled; those *Nishadas* (a title for Dalits or indigenous) being born of his sins, and carrying

21 Abraham M. Ayrookhuziel, "Chinna Pulayan: The Dalit Teacher of Sankaracharya," in *Religions of the Marginalized*, ed. Gnana Robinson (Delhi, 1998), 24–25.

22 *Rigveda*, 10:97:11,12.

them away... The Brahmans proceeded to rub the right arm of the king, from which friction was engendered the illustrious son of Vena, named Prithu... And thus was born the mighty Prithu,...the Lord of the earth... was the first ruler to whom the title of Raja (King) was ascribed.²³

If one reads carefully these two passages, the most important point that will become clear is that the classical Hindu (*Aryan*) spiritual traditions were oppressive in nature, because of their exclusiveness. On the other hand, some examples of Dalit liberative traditions are being given here also, which will show that in contrast to the Aryan traditions, the Dalit spiritual traditions were liberative in nature, because of their inclusiveness. These examples are:

Dalit Bhakti Saints:

(a) God in the beginning created Light

all human beings belong to Him.

Since from one Light is the whole world created,

Here who is noble or who is inferior?²⁴

(b) You considered upper caste well-known is my cobbler's caste.

But still in my heart, I continue to praise my Lord.

You should know even the wine made with sacred Ganga water,
the real devotees will now drink.

Even after impure liquids,

if gets mixed up with the sacred Ganga water, is not different from it.

The Tar tree is considered impure.

So also the paper (made from it) is considered such.

But when words of the Lord's devotion over it are printed,
it is worshipped and bowed to.

People of my caste are hide-beaters and binders,
carrying dead animals around Banaras.

Yet upper caste Brahmins to me make obeisance.

As Ravidas, Thy servant with Thy Name has taken shelter.²⁵

In Panjabi language there is a saying, *Jis tan lage, soi jane* (the real pain is known by the victim). The two examples given above reflect the harsh truths of Dalit spirituality and the anguish felt by saints and poets as Dalits.

The two passages are quoted from Sikh scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*. The first passage is written by a Dalit Muslim saint, Kabir, who has boldly declared that all human beings are equal as they share one source of origin (Light). Therefore he questioned, who is noble or who is inferior?

The second passage represents a testimony of a Dalit conscience in the middle ages, that of Ravidas, whose spirituality even the Brahmins respected. His poetry clearly shows that the Brahmins respected him and therefore attempted to elevate his

²³ The Vishnu Purana (A.D.1045), Book 1:13.

²⁴ Kabir, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, 1389.

²⁵ Ravidas, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, e.p.1293.

status in the hierarchy though on their own terms. This is reflected in the line: Yet upper caste Brahmins to me make obeisance. The reason for this was because Ravidas' relationship with God had been set right.

Jashuva Kavi, A Dalit Christian Poet²⁶

(a) I have heard that four sons were born to Old Brahma
But tell me, O Savithri,
who is this *Panchama* (fifth)
who is worse than faeces?

(b) Having waved farewell to the setting sun
He sat down to eat his meagre meal of gruel.
At the end of a long day's back-breaking toil
And stretched on a cot, resting his weary limbs.
Welcome Queen of Bats, resident in sacred Shrines,
Enjoying honour we lowly men can't have,
Convey our greetings to your kinsfolk too
Meditating head down in the awnings of temple towers.

(c) Crying I told her of the incident,
Hugging me to her breast and kissing me
She said, 'Son, this is an awful country,
But don't complain of caste discrimination;
You'll lose your food, as a *Panchama*
You have no claim to human rights or your life.
These gods here won't grant their favours
They will not accept a *Panchama* worship
The Lord Jesus Christ is your refuge,
Adore Him, He'll be merciful.'

(d) Justice has never been a coward
Truth cannot be put to death
There is no need of fear for
A creature to speak to the Creator.

(e) Equality and friendship are mere words
Rules and regulations are only slippery knots
Mercy and kindness are but crocodile tears
I condemn these strange ways of religion.
Jesus sacrificed Himself, For the good of the world
How come the divisive doctrines and denominations
Caste factions, communal problems and troubles Preaching words
without doing good works is not Salvation.

(f) You have demonstrated to all equality,
Eating with the poor and despised tax-collectors

26 Jasuva Kavi: "Gabbilam (The Bat)," These passages are quoted in an article "Christian Dalit Aspirations" by Swarnalata P Ranjan, in *Indigenous People*, ed. James Massey, op.cit, 324-325, 327-329.

You have shown to the world, your humility
Washing and wiping your disciples' feet...
Come to my house too, great teacher.

Gurram Jashuva (1895-1971) is known as Jashuva Kavi. The word *Kavi* means poet. His works are originally written in his mother tongue, Telugu, and have been translated into English by M.E. Prabhakar. He was a poet of the Old Testament prophetic traditions, for whom the suffering of Christ was symbol of equality.

Jashuva questioned the authority of the Rigvedas on the mythical explanation given for the caste structure. In doing so he raised a question of the very 'Root of Dalit Spirituality' when he asked: I have heard that four sons were born to Old Brahma. But tell me, O Savithri who is this Panchama who is worse than faeces? The title for Dalits is *Panchama*, and means the fifth. Jashuva questioned the identity of the Dalits who according to Brahmanical Hindu traditions were a 'no people' or non-existent. The Creator had nothing to do with the Dalits and they were therefore non-spiritual.

Jashuva Kavi compares a Dalit with a Bat. The latter is neither an animal nor a bird. This is precisely the reason why Kavi chooses the Bat as a symbol of his messenger to God. He asks the Bats (who unlike Dalits, have access to sacred shrines) to extend the greetings of the Dalits to other kinsfolk, who are 'Meditating head down in the awnings of temple towers'. This also reflects Jashuva's inner thirst for spirituality.

Jashuva Kavi's mother was spiritually rich and she laid the roots of spirituality in him in his childhood. When he was alienated by his upper caste mates she was his companion. She told him, as a Panchama he had no claim to human rights or your life. Since a Dalit has no place in the religious and social systems of the country, he has to look for an alternate spirituality. She told him, The Lord Jesus Christ is your refuge. Adore him, he'll be merciful for only Jesus Christ demonstrated to all-equality including the poor and despised tax collectors.

Like the Old Testament prophets, Jashuva had complete faith in divine justice. Every creature can speak without fear to the Creator and no one can put Truth to death.

He questioned the structure of the Christian Church, and the preaching of the pastors, as he felt that they did not practice what they loudly preached. His spirituality was deeply rooted in his Dalit experience and life and it was this that gave him that courage to question the existing religious and social structures. Here we see in Jashuva's poetry the foundation of Dalit theology getting laid down.

This much about the Dalit liberative poetic traditions. Now we move to discussion on the next section.

Prophetic Traditions

In this section the contribution of Jotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar to the process of

doing theology from Dalit perspective is being reflected upon.

Jotirao Phule

Phule's major contribution to Dalit theological thoughts we find in his interpretation of the personhood of Jesus Christ by linking his coming into this world as part of the fulfillment of the oldest Dalit legend based prophecy, which reached us through a folk song sung by the women of Maharashtra, which has the following opening sentence in Martathi as: *Ida pida jao anni Balliche rajya yeo* means let all troubles and misery go, and the kingdom of Bali come. Phule saw in Jesus Christ, the second coming of Baliraja, who according the legend was the most righteous non-Aryan King. He ruled a larger part of ancient India at the time of Aryan's coming to India.²⁷ Phule's own words about this read as follow:

Thus the prophecy of our venerable old ladies May Bali's Kingdom Come!' seems to have materialized (partially). When Baliraja (Jesus Christ) was crucified by a few wicked desperadoes a great moment of liberation was set in motion in Europe, and crores of people became his followers (embraced his teachings) and the strove ceaselessly to establish His Kingdom on earth in consonance with the dictates of our creator.²⁸

Based upon these views of Phule, we have given the heading of this section 'prophetic traditions'. But before moving to our discussion further, we may have to briefly narrate the Baliraja's story (legend), which will also introduce to us his personhood and characteristics, because of which Phule saw his second coming in Jesus Christ.

If one reads Phule's work 'Slavery' as translated from Marathi into English by P.G. Patil, one will see that Baliraja and his second coming in Jesus Christ is one of the main theme of his work. After introducing in part one to five, who are the Aryans and their origin, he gave the details of their coming to India and their battle with Baliraja in parts five to nine. In part six he tells, about the extent of Baliraja's Kingdom. According to Phule, beside his rule in the whole of western India and part of today's North India up to Ayodhya and Kashi (Banaras), it was also spread over wide areas of other parts of India. He also adds: It may be conjectured that he controlled some islands round about Ceylon (i.e. in South-East Asia) one of the islands was 'Bali' (in Malaysia).²⁹

About the Baliraja's righteousness and truthfulness, according to Phule, he never attacked his enemy from the back, he always hit them on their fronts or faces. Hence, he came to be known as 'hitter on the front (mouth)' He was a friend of the downtrodden. He was fond of music also.³⁰

How Baliraja's end came? Phule narrates a legend in this regard, according to which it was Adi-narayan (Aryan supreme God) who got incarnated and took the form

²⁷ Jotirao Govindrao Phule, *Slavery*(In the Civilized British government under the clock of Brahmanism), trans. by P.G.Patil (Mantralaya, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra Education Department, 1991), xxx(First Introductory Essay).

²⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁹ Ibid., 13-15.

³⁰ Ibid., 13-14.

of a poor and short Brahmin (priest) Waman in order to banish Baliraja into the nether world. Waman appeared before Baliraja as a poor beggar and asked him the gift of three steps (of the earth). He knew Baliraja was very kind and compassionate in heart, who will never say 'no' to the needy and the poor. So according to his nature, Baliraja told Waman to take three steps from anywhere in his kingdom. At that moment the size of the wicked Waman increased and reached to the skies, so much so by his first step, he could cover the whole earth and by his second step the whole sea, then he asked Baliraja, where he should put his third step. He made Baliraja helpless, but then Baliraja offered his own head for Waman's third step. At that moment the treacherous Waman after putting his step on Baliraja's head, he pressed him down to the nether word. This is how the end came of a righteous king Baliraja, about whom the Marathi Dalit women pray 'May Bali's Kingdom come'!³¹

About the second coming of Baliraja in Jesus Christ and about the fulfillment of the prophecy of old ladies and its purpose, Phule says:

The universal Creator of us and our universal Father the Almighty God so ordained that the sacred knowledge of the Truth and human rights that he generously bestowed on us all should be enjoyed by us all in amity and harmony. To translate this desire of the Almighty into reality, Baliraja, the champion of the oppressed, the holy, the repository of the wisdom, and always spoke the truth manifested himself on this earth after a few years. He undertook the great mission of emancipating his depressed, oppressed and weak brethren from the trammels of the treacherous, wicked and cunning ensnarers the Bhats (Brahmins) and strove to establish the 'Kingdom of God' in this land of ours.³²

The first part of this passage is already quoted earlier. Phule says here that it is in Jesus Christ that Baliraja has come again to establish God's Kingdom on this earth and here he added in this land of ours means India. Phule also has seen the Christian missionaries' work in India as actualization of the mandate to preach the true teaching of their Messiah.³³

B.R. Ambedkar

Unlike Jotirao Phule who tried to find the link between the religion of Jesus Christ and the Dalit liberative traditions, Ambedkar on the other hand proved to be a constructive critic of both Hindu and Christian religious traditions. In that way he falls within the Old Testament prophetic traditions, which always were outspoken against the religious traditions of their time either to bring back the followers to the right understanding of their faith or to pronounce upon them the divine judgment. Some examples from Ambedkar's works are given here.

B.R. Ambedkar was the first person who though not a Christian, yet looked upon Christianity and its message seriously from the perspective of the Dalits particularly the Dalit Christians. This was the reason he used in his writings both

³¹ Ibid., 20-21.

³² Ibid., 36.

³³ Ibid., 38.

directly and indirectly, illustrations from the Bible to clarify a number of his beliefs. Along with Christianity, he also used other egalitarian religious traditions. In one of his essays, 'A Warming to the Untouchables', he told the Dalits in very clear terms that they should not expect the Hindu religion to perform the mission of bringing about social justice. Such a task may be performed by Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. The Hindu religion itself is the embodiment of inequality and injustice to the Untouchables. For it, to preach the gospel of justice is to go against its own being.³⁴ Ambedkar used the Christian religion to explain the meaning, the number of important concepts and principles, which even he introduced in the Constitution of India based upon his vision of a 'just society'. For example to explain the meaning of 'fraternity', he gave a quotation from the Bible (Galatians 3:28) and from the writings of a Christian Order, 'Pilgrim Fathers' as follows:

Fraternity is the name for the disposition of an individual to treat men as the object of reverence and love and the desire to be in unity with his fellow beings. This statement is well expressed by Paul when he said, 'of one blood are all nations of men. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female; for yet are all one in Christ Jesus.' Equally well was it expressed when the Pilgrim Fathers on their landing and Plymouth said: 'we are knit together as a body in the most sacred covenant of Lord, by virtue of which we hold ourselves tied to all care of each others' good and of the whole.' These sentiments are of the essence of fraternity.³⁵

Again, how important is an 'individual' and one's moral responsibility? This aspect of life is important, because it gives due place to an 'individual as centre of social purpose'. To make this point clear he quoted a passage from the Book of Prophet Ezekiel (18: 4, 20) of the Old Testament in which God recognizes the worth of an individual person in these words:

Behold! All souls are mine; as the soul of the Father, so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sinneth it shall die the son shall not bear the iniquity of the Father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked upon him.³⁶

Ambedkar also compared two religious traditions about creation of human beginning in the Bible and the *Rigveda* and raised an important question of concerning the explanation of the origin of the four social castes. He wrote:

No theology has made it its purpose to explain the origin of classes in society. Chapter I of the Genesis in the Old Testament, which can be said to be analogous in intention and purpose to the *Purusha Sukta*, does nothing more than explain how man was created. It is not that social classes did not exist in the

34 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, vol.5 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1980), 398.

35 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol.3 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987), 97.

36 Ibid., 99.

old Jewish Society. Social classes existed in all societies. The Indo Aryans were no exception. Nevertheless, no theology has even thought it necessary to explain how classes arise. Why then did *Purusha Sukta* make the explanation of the origin of the social classes its primary concern? ³⁷

Ambedkar in another essay explained that the so-called higher castes would never accept Christianity because it meant surrendering their power and prestige drawn from the system of *Chaturvarn*. In this regard he said:

Applying this analysis of the working of the human mind it is clear that the Brahmin and the higher classes could never be receptive to the Christian doctrine. It preaches brotherhood of man and when applied leads to equality of man. Now the interests of the Brahmin and the higher classes is to maintain the system of *Chaturvarna* which is system based upon inequality and which in the scale gave them a higher rank, greater opportunity to dominate and exploit the others. How can they be expected to accept Christianity?. It means a surrender of their power and prestige.³⁸

One final example of Ambedkar's views is about the Dalit Christians: how as Hindus they were oppressed by the use of *karma* doctrine and when they became Christians they have to face the doctrine of *original sin* according to which they have to suffer because of the sins of the ancestors, Adam and Eve. In either case there is no escape for them.³⁹

Faith Traditions (including biblical)

The Faith traditions, which I am going to refer in this section are common to all of us. In my case, I am the third generation as Christian to receive these, because my grandfather, the late Mr. Bhagh became Christian during the second decade of 20th Century. I still remember my father, the late Rev. Jalal Masih (22 March 1907-18 September 1980) used to gather all our family members to read the Bible everyday followed by singing psalms in Panjabi and prayer by my father or mother (the late Mrs. Fazl Bibi, died 26 March 1983) and these to end with Lord's prayer said by all the members of the family. I continued to take part in the family gathering till the age of twentyone, then I went to higher study from my village to university, where I lived in different hostels. But the practice of reading the Bible and saying prayer every morning continue till today. The extension of my Bible reading today has taken other forms, namely reading the Bible from the perspective of the Dalits.

Secondly, the 'faith traditions' instill in us the 'faith commitment', which in truth is not only the first proof of an authentic believer, but it is the first requirement or step to enter into the process of doing theology from any of subaltern perspectives including the 'Dalit'. In the case of a Dalit theologian, he or she has to bring into the process a personal commitment, on one side with God and on other side with the (fellow) Dalits and the world around (which needs transformation). Now this personal commitment is not possible without getting grounded in one's 'faith traditions' and in

37 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol.7 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 28.

38 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol.5, op.cit., 444.

39 For detail discussion see: Ibid., 471-472.

the various 'Dalit liberative traditions'. But then these faith traditions we inherit from our parents (the family) and the communities called the Church, within which we move, live, think, worship and act. This Faith commitment also demands from us to pass on these traditions to our children from generations to generation (Deut 6.20-25, 1Cor. 1:26-28).

One main source of our faith traditions is the Scriptures (*the Bible*), which also needs the same personal commitment. When we read it, it actually gives us a perspective to read the Text. Once this happens even our way of reading the Text also changes and we will not only start perceiving the new meaning of the Text and its relevance to our specific context, but also start perceiving the Word getting incarnated in that context and finally becoming a liberative force for bringing about a change in the given context.

Now how this happens? I will answer this question by giving an example of my personal experience of reading the Text while working on the commentary of the Gospel according to Luke.

While reading the text of Luke, I found myself dialoguing with him. Some times instead of dialoging with Luke, I suddenly found myself in dialogue with some of the characters of his Gospel. These characters some times help me to perceive the meaning of phrases and words. But in these dialogues, I always tried not to lose myself and the situation of my people, the Dalits. These dialogues sometimes take the form of hopping flights and I find myself journeying between two worlds that of Luke and the biblical world, and of Dalit. The purpose of these hopping flights as to search for the meeting points or relevance between two worlds. In the process many times I was directed by a text to another text to perceive the intended meaning of the text and to see its relevance to the world of the Dalits. Here an example of such a dialogue which I experienced while reading Luke 2: 820 is shared. The title given to this experience is Divine Encounter with an Excluded Community which reads as follows:

Here a direct encounter takes place between the divine and a group of shepherds. The main occupation of shepherds, as it is even today, was to care for their sheep. In Greek the name 'shepherd' is drawn from the term *poimen*, which means to 'care'. In the same way in some of the Indian languages also a name is taken from the occupation or certain function that is performed in the society, to identify a person or his group. For example in Panjabi language the title of a person who takes care of animals is '*palee*' because his function is 'to take care' (*palana*). In most of the Indian contexts these *palees* are Dalits. They are more or less in similar situation like that of the shepherds of the biblical times. For example, all the shepherds were abhorrent to the Egyptians (Gen 46: 34). Most of the times, like our animal caretakers in the villages (palees), the shepherds in the biblical times had to work on contract basis (Gen 31: 41). They had to protect their charges from all kinds of dangers including those of fierce jungle animals (Am 3:12). In case of loss of any animal/sheep it was the 'who had to bear the loss (Gen 31:39). Sometimes they kept dogs to assist them in protecting their animals (Job 30:1) when they went far in search of grass and water for their charges, in dry and stony land (Ps 23:2) When these shepherds went far from human locality they kept a bag in which they carried their immediate necessities (1 Sam 27:40,49). After work, these shepherds returned

home which was situated outside the village or town (v 8). This fact brings the shepherds of the biblical times closer to the Dalits in India, who are also forced to live outside a village or a town. But the shepherds in the biblical times seemed to be always on the move, because their taking up a permanent abode in a town or city was considered a sign of destruction and disaster for such places through divine judgment (Jer. 4: 3; 33:12, Zeph. 2:11 15).

Such in brief, is the profile of a shepherd community in the biblical time. There is yet another side of this profile. At that time, the profession of the shepherds was considered one of the oldest which began with Adam's son Abel (Gen 4:2). Almost all the Patriarchs were shepherds. The famous king David, with whose family Jesus had a direct link, was also a shepherd (1 Sam 17: 15). A common title used for Lord (God) is also 'shepherd' (Ps 23: 1). So while on the one hand, in the biblical times, the shepherds did not enjoy full respect in society, yet on the other hand, God considered them as His people (3:7-12) and Himself as their shepherd.

It is in this dual background, that one has to see the encounter that took place between the shepherds and the divine messenger (vv 2-20). Prior to this encounter, a long time ago, another similar encounter took place with a shepherd called Moses. It was through him that God decided to liberate His people who were enslaved in Egypt (Gen 3:1-6). However, in the present encounter, the good news for the shepherds had a twofold message: one, the salvation for all the people (v 10), and two, for the shepherds a Savior was born in the city of David in Bethlehem (v 11). The shepherds were given the sign that they will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, (v 12). Possibly the bands made of ordinary or used cloth, and manger a place of animal food were the two realities of the life of poor shepherds which connected them directly with their future Savior. It was because of these circumstances that they found that without any hesitation they could approach him. Had the Savior been born in rich or royal surroundings, the shepherds might not have dared to visit him. But the Savior had chosen a place of their level. Therefore after the divine messengers left them, without any delay they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger (v 16). So the shepherds, having 'heard' (vv 10-12) and 'seen' (v 17), returned satisfied to their place (v 20). It seems they also understood the second part of the message, which was in the form of a song of praise by the heavenly hosts. Here a reference to the heavenly hosts comes as a testimony to the divine meaning of Christ's birth (v 3) and what it contributes to human history on earth peace among those whom he favors (v 14). Certainly the first favored group/community was of the poor and the excluded shepherds.

But the situation of the Dalits is worse than that of the shepherds of Jesus' time, because most of the shepherds in our country do not own sheep and cattle. Dalits, very rarely will have their own animals. So Dalits in India normally take care of animals that belong to others. But certainly like the shepherds of Jesus' time, they are economically poor and excluded.⁴⁰

40 James Massey, *The Gospel according to Luke: New Testament, Dalit Bible commentary* (New Delhi: CDS, 2007), 48-51.

This is one example of reading the text as part of my commentary of Luke's Gospel from the Dalit perspective. But similar experience I am having every morning at the time of my brief personal devotion and reading of the Text.

Concluding Observations

I want to close this paper's discussion, with two concluding observations:

My First observation is about the various sets of Dalit liberative traditions. In brief the historical and religious traditions reveal to us that the Dalits once were also full human beings enjoying all the benefits of a normal human being – land and property, natural resources, dignity and freedom. Their ownership of 'Indus Valley Civilizations' is the proof of this fact. They had their own religious and social rules to govern their life. This is what we learn from the Dalit religious traditions. But the main point which these traditions reveals is how the opponents of the Dalits made efforts by creating myths and stories and through various forms of manipulations to separate the Dalits from other human beings on one side and on other side to sever their relations with God. But then in the sub-section on 'spiritual traditions' of the Dalits we also saw, how the early Dalit saints like Ravidas sought to reestablish the relationship of their community with God. All the movements of conversion to Christianity and other religions grew out this quest.

Dalit Christian poet Jashua goes for an alternative Dalit spirituality, because of his mother's strong assertion that as a *panchama* (Dalit) he had no claims to human rights, nor to his/her own life, therefore he has to go for alternative and the alternate he found in the friend of the poor and despised tax collectors, Jesus Christ. Phule's seeing the righteous king Bali's second coming in Jesus Christ according to the plan of Father the Almighty God to emancipate (liberate) the depressed and oppressed from the yoke of the caste system, endorsed the views of Jashua Kavi and his mother. B.R. Ambedkar as a constructive critic of both the Hindu and Christian religious traditions and how they are interpreted challenges the Dalit and non-Dalit theologians, to go back to the methods used by Jesus and his disciples and to approach the problems of the poor and the Dalits. Ambedkar's raising questions about the mission methods, Jashua Kavi and Phule's seeing Jesus Christ as a 'refuge' and emancipating' source for the Dalits, these are all part of the laying down the foundation of doing theology from the Dalit perspective.

The second concluding observation is down from the reflection on the Dalit liberative traditions particularly the 'faith traditions', which directly lead to the process of doing theology from the Dalit perspective. Because as held by the theologians of various liberative theologies that the 'theology' is a critical reflection on the relationship of God and human beings in different historical circumstances, we can trace the roots of Dalit theology back to the very dawn of the history of the Dalits. By looking to the contents of the Dalit liberative traditions, we not only come to know the lost human identity, but also the truth that, it is the Dalits of Indian society, who represents the undivided humanity of the created world. Dalit theology's role includes enabling them to recover this original state of theirs, which their opponents tried intentionally to destroy. At this point I want to conclude my observation of the theme.

Abstract

This article is about Dalit liberative traditions with linking with Doing theologies. As a results, the first observation is about the various sets of Dalit liberative traditions. In brief the historical and religious traditions reveal to us that the Dalits once were also full human beings-enjoying all the benefits of a normal human being-land and property, natural resources, dignity and freedom. Their ownership of the 'Indus Valley Civilizations' is the proof of this fact. They had their own religious and social rules to govern their life. This is what we learn from the Dalit religious traditions. The second concluding observation is drawn from the reflection on the Dalit liberative traditions, particularly the 'faith traditions,' which directly lead to the process of doing theology from the Dalit perspective. Because the theologians of various liberative theologies hold that 'theology' is a critical reflection on the relationship of God and human beings in different historical circumstances, we can trace the roots of Dalit theology back to the very dawn of the history of the Dalits. By looking to the contents of the Dalit liberative traditions, we not only come to know the lost human identity, but also the truth that it is the Dalits of Indian society who represent the undivided humanity of the created world. Dalit theology's role includes enabling them to recover this original state of theirs, which their opponents tried intentionally to destroy.

Key Words

Dalit, liberative traditions, Doing theology, Dalit spiritualiy, the Untouchable, Indus Valley Civilization, R.B.Ambedkar