A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION OF THE CHURCH’S MISSION IN THE LIBERATION OF DALITS IN INDIA

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Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clean stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action
Into the heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake!

— Rabindranath Tagore

The term called ‘oppression’ has taken a significant role in the religious and social life of the people throughout the globe. ‘The oppression’ by the caste system in India which Hinduism approves, is a question of myth or fact. Religion is man made and so caste oppression is also man’s selfish, greedy and arrogant nature. If religion sanctions disparity among people in respect of caste, class, colour, race, nation, sex etc., it is not a true religion but a false religion. Therefore, religion is man made for evil selfish gains.

The caste oppression has affected in every area of our lives and particularly the ‘dalits’ of India. The suffering and misery of these people under caste hierarchy in both the Church and society is heart-breaking experience. The caste struggle between the dalits and the dominant high castes within the church has ruined the life and witness of the church in India today.

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As a result of this evil, the church’s mission both within and outside has lost its vision to reach the world of sin, hatred and jealousy with the liberating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore the signs of the times has shown a ‘clear direction’ to be taken into account by the Church in India to respond positively to the challenges facing the oppressed dalits of India. Though the oppression is global, this attempt is made for the liberation of dalits in India, as it is the main concern of this paper.

The Reasons for This Study

1. As a Christian, we cannot close our eyes to the sufferings and oppression of our own brothers and sisters in Christ by the evil caste system of our country.

2. The church and society may be enlightened and alerted in taking a right and acceptable direction in developing a relevant and meaningful theology of Mission in the liberation of dalits in India.

3. This study may help the upper caste Christians to rethink their ecclesiological stand in sharing the Church offices to develop a ‘true ecclesia’ in India.

4. This study may be one of the driving forces for demanding the constitutional rights of dalits from the Government of India.

The Definition of ‘Dalit’

According to M.E. Prabhakar, “the word ‘dalit’ means the oppressed or broken victims and refers to both the people who are deprived and dehumanised and the state of their deprivation/dehumanisation. Dalit is thus both a sociological and theological category... In other words, both their economic and social status are birth-ascribed, barring exceptional individual ability, random fate or uneven sectorial uplift/gains. The poor thus form both an economic and a social sector. Both class and caste determine their life-opportunities and access to basic life resources”. Having come to understand about the notion and meaning of dalits now let us turn to the next section of this essay, the caste system in India.
The Caste System in India

The caste system in India has been in practice for ages. It divides the people into pure and polluting castes. Hinduism sanctions casteism. Though there are four castes in theory there are around thousand castes in India. Kancha Ilaiah says that “God created Brahmins from his mouth. They therefore claim equal status with God. According to Indian Brahmin writers, the original Hindu God called Brahma created Brahmins from his mouth. He created Kastiya (a warrior caste) from his chest. Third caste called Vaisyas (the business caste of India) was born from the thighs of Brahma. The fourth caste called Sudras (this section consists of all castes that do physical labour to produce food and commodities) was created by God from his feet. The fifth section of Indian society is made untouchable. The untouchable of India are known as Dalits of India. The Brahminic books said that they were not born from God’s body at all. They were asked to deal with cattle, dead bodies and with leatherwork. Apart from these five social groups India consists 7.5% of tribal population.”

Y. Antony Raj says that “The caste system is not merely a social or economic order of the society but ‘a religious institution’. It had a theocratic foundation and religious sanction based on the belief that it was a divinely ordained institution. The caste system, as religious institution is so rigid “that upward mobility of persons from one’s caste to another is impossible.... Hindu Society is a Caste-centered society.”

The Mandal commission reports that “myths mould the consciousness of people. It makes the oppressed accept a low social status... The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin (the priestly class, highest in the caste hierarchy), but in the conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes in accepting their inferior status”.

Ambedkar and Caste System

Ambedkar was the one who attacked the Hindu caste system. He wanted to transform and change the mentality of the dalits and
the high caste Hindus. He said that the Hindu religious scriptures sanction of the caste system must be opposed and destroyed. He also said that the root cause or enemy of the caste system lies in the Shastras which upholds this wrong teaching within the Hindu society. He remarks that:

“The religion of Caste............... on the top of it all, it is mischievously propagated by the Hindu Scriptures that by serving the upper three classes, the shudras attain salvation”.8

Ambedkar claimed that religion should uphold self-respect and bring men and women to greater heights in the society. He made an appeal that dalits should not be passive and fatal. They must be liberated by their own efforts and not depend upon God. Their salvation lies in the political struggle and they have to change their attention by observing fast, worship and penance and find ways to overcome starvation.9

The Scheduled Castes

The origin of scheduled castes is connected with the British Government which initiated some relief measures to help the oppressed castes in India from their sufferings. It prepared a list called ‘a schedule’, of the oppressed castes from among the various castes to identify the eligible for receiving Governments benefits and concessions. The Government of India Act, 1935 introduced a new term “the scheduled castes”, to refer to the untouchable communities. Since then it became the official term for the untouchables. M. John points out that within the Hindu caste system, there are four well defined divisions or varnas. Those who could not fit into the “four castes which strictly composed of the four varnas were panchamas the fifth class or loosely, avarnas i.e., caste beyond or outside the pale”. These people are subjected to indignities, disabilities and untouchability etc. As a result, they were pushed into a sub-human existence of misery and poverty. Until some years ago, they were described as depressed classes. Due to the objection of M. Gandhi, the term ‘depressed classes’ was taken over by the name ‘Harijans’ or God’s people. So the term ‘scheduled caste’ was approved by the Constitution of India.
In this juncture let me present Article 15 of the constitution against discrimination of any citizen of India.

1. The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

2. No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to

   (a) Access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainments, or

   (b) The use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, road and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.14

The Condition of Dalits in India

Litarcy: The Literacy rate among SCs (Scheduled Caste) as recorded in the 1971 census is only 14.7% as against the all-India average of 33.80% (excluding the SC and STs). The 1981 census revealed a literacy rate of 21.38% for scheduled castes.... This brief analysis on the condition of SC literacy brings out their unique and unparalleled state of deprivation. “Corresponding to their economic deprivation is their educational deprivation.”

Poverty: While the SC, population comprises about 15.75% of the country’s population, their proportion among the poverty groups is much larger and they represent the lowest groups. Collected data from different sources in the early seventies indicate... now the disadvantage is being born in a family of SC become clearer. The reality is still worse, because members of SC converted to other religions, who still share the economic characteristics of the SC... are enumerated with the non-SC population. When we analyse the data, we find that most of them are cultivators most small and marginal farmers, share croppers, tenants etc., almost all primary... leather workers, weavers,

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fishermen and the so-called ‘unclean’ occupations like scavenging and sweeping, flaying and tanning etc., are left to the SCs. They are among the poorest of those who live below the poverty line. Thus... two-thirds of all bonded labourers are from SCs.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{The Oppression of Dalits:} The oppression that the Dalits are facing is painful. To mention a few important events, the Dalits will cost their own-life if they cross the caste barriers. This cruel act happened many times in India. Even Hinduism accords giving capital punishment to those who break caste barriers even if it is for religious purpose.\textsuperscript{16} It is said that Dalits could be disposed of like dead animals without any voice of protest being raised; without any feeling of guilt being aroused, has been a part of the Indian Psyche formed by the practice of caste discrimination for centuries.\textsuperscript{17} Though the non dalits have been treating the dalits as untouchables for ages, but still they do not consider getting or buying anything from them as polluting. This reveals the truth that they are mainly interested in the exploitation of the dalits rather than maintaining the purity of castes. Therefore untouchably is only a myth and not a reality.\textsuperscript{18}

Another two incidents are worth mentioning for the caste oppression. ‘The Hindu’ reports that about 5 dalit families in Madurai District in Tamil Nadu have announced to embrace Islam if the Government administration fails to restore the allotted land from the caste Hindus for the construction of houses for Adi dravidars. It is said that the dalits have been waging a war from 1981 since the high caste Hindus refuse to vacate the land assigned by the Tamil Nadu Government. They have fixed December 6 as the dead line.\textsuperscript{19} This incident had shown the Government’s inaction and the Hindu caste oppression towards the poor untouchables.

The other horrifying recent happening was that in Haryana state five young dalits were brutally murdered just because of skinning a cow.\textsuperscript{20} This incident had made the nation to wake up from its long sleep of oppression and injustice done in the name of caste and colour. In this juncture, a senior leader from VHP made a statement, which conveys that a cow is more valuable than the
life of the five dalits. This incident and the statement of a Hindu leader show the evil trends of the upper castes towards the poor dalits of the country. And we can go on narrating incidents such as not allowing the dalits inside the temple, forbidding them taking water from public well etc., which has tremendous effects in the life of the dalits and in turn, they convert to other religions. The hidden factor for the oppression is that the dalits should remain as slaves. They should not come up in life.

The Government and the Dalit Christians

The President promulgated an order in 1950. This order qualified the list of the scheduled castes saying:

“Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of scheduled castes.”

Thus, dalits who have converted to Christianity lost the constitutional rights and privileges given to the scheduled castes. This is heavily affecting the economic situation of the Christian dalits. Moreover this order of excluding the converts to Christianity has earned an unpleasant condition in the life of the dalits. It violates the fundamental rights of every citizen of India – the freedom of conscience and freedom of profession, practice and propagation of religions (Article 25). The sorry state of affairs is that the Christians have not made any attempts against the Government nor made any legal proceedings in the court of law for the violation of the fundamental rights.

Arul Raja regrets that “the socio-economic, political and cultural position of dalit Christians worsens very much after conversion. Conversion estranges them from their counterparts belonging to Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist religions”.

In this connection, V.T. Rajasekar questions the Christians for allowing the Brahmins to get education in Christian schools. He writes that:

“But when we ask these upper caste Hindus where they and their children have studied, they say they studied in Christian convents

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and colleges. These upper caste Hindus use Christian schools and colleges, get treatment in Christian hospitals, use Christian funds and on the top they abuse the Church. But the Church is sitting quiet and beautifully serving these Brahmins and other upper caste Hindus”.

The point V.T. Rajasekar tries to point out is that the upper castes, the Brahmins get good education and other benefits from the Christian institutions but they ultimately turn against the poor dalits pushing them into untold miseries and problems. According to Dr. Rajaratnam the Church must focus on the issue of the millions of victims of oppression over the ages. This evil practice has to be taken into account for the liberation of these 2 million dalits of our country. He welcomed the Church’s triumph (attempt) in the liberation movement particularly the overthrowing of the evil practice of untouchability from the society. It is a good attempt.

But the Church’s effort in the social transformation stops there itself. The major problem of the high caste Hindu oppression of the Dalits has not been checked and it remains to be challenged by the Church today.

Moreover the Church’s Mission was only winning souls for the church, *i.e.*, Conversions from the poor, unprivileged, discriminated sections of the society, the dalits, The church was packed by the converted dalits but even within the Church, they were not freed from the caste hierarchy. They experience casteism both in the Church and in society. In this connection Dr. Rajaratnam observes:

“Missiological objectives became restricted to Baptism and Dalits who entered the Church were also not freed from caste both in the Church and in the society”.

The Dalits who became Christians are loosing Government privileges extended to other non-converted dalits. But the Church has focused on the liberation of the Christian dalits from this double-edged injustice for the last 50 years. Our Indian Church never looked beyond this discrimination by the Government and now the time has come to look beyond what affects the Church...
the time has come for Indian Church to continue the struggle of violence against untouchability for generations. Therefore the liberation of the millions of dalits from this unparalleled caste oppression is the mission of the Church today. This attempt is called the paradigm shift in Church’s focus on Mission. This need for focusing on the liberation of the 200 million dalits is the sole function of the church.

The impetus for such attempt is that there are some other revolutionary Hindu fundamentalist forces working silently to bring back the Dalit oppression once again: Dr. Rajaratnam says that the concern for dalit issues was felt seriously at the national and international level to tackle the age long caste oppression and discrimination of the upper castes of India. The Indian Church leaders, Bishops, Christian Dalit activists etc., resolved to put an end to this problem at any cost. They invited the non-dalit church leaders to join in the struggle and so an ecumenical church spirit emerged. Secondly, the new church liberation wave of this new millennium found that the traditional missiological position bore no fruits particularly in the liberation of 2 million dalits in India.

Also the member of the movement felt that there are two distinct factors involved in the act of oppression.

(1) The oppression is Global.

(2) The task is multifaced *i.e.*, the reason for oppression in India is religious approval. So multireligious approach is needed to face the challenge of religious oppression for social change and transformation. Though it was found better to have views from different religions to this problem, the initiative gained from the Christian perspective so they declared a need for a new paradigm shift in Mission.29

**The Dalits and the Constitution of India**

The constitution was framed under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, and the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar being a dalit drafted the constitution. The constitution was well

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defined and developed giving equal rights for all citizens of India. The constitution reflected a good tone of democracy.

1. The constitution made untouchability as an offence and it is punishable.

2. The constitution offered many privileges to the dalits to be in equal bar with the other advanced communities of Indian society.

3. It offered aid programmes, for the upliftment of the dalits from their poor and miserable living conditions.

4. The more noteworthy aspect of the constitution was that it offered political reservations both in the state legislature and Parliament.30

To quote Dr. Rajaratnam: “At least a hundred members of the Parliament are elected under this reservation from the Dalit community—a fifth of the total members of the national Parliament”.31

As a result of these reformative welfare programmes through the Indian constitution now they have came up in their social life as Professors, Principals, Doctors, Engineers, and Civil servants etc. In fact the poor conditions of the Dalits has changed to a great extent and to call them even dalit elites.32 But the real and hidden truth of the dalits is yet to be disclosed and faced with great courage by the church as a whole. What are those hidden factors related to our concern?

The Other Side of the Indian Society

The Indian constitution has made tremendous changes and transformations in the day-to-day life of the vast majority of Dalits of our country. The 1950 presidential order ignored or rejected the Christian dalits of the many benefits such as educational concession and employment reservations extended to other dalits. So the leaders from both the Protestant and Catholic Churches including National Christian Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and Catholic Bishop’s Conference of India (CBCI) have made many attempts by meeting the Prime minister for redressing the grievances of
dalit Christians. But it has proved to be of no use. But alas, it had no impact on the cultural, social values on the part of the Hindu majority of India. The traditional notion of untouchability (caste oppression) continues even today in one form or other in all the states of India. Even this uncivilised human trend has sought for legitimising it in spite of several legal opposition against such efforts. To put it in Dr. Rajaratnam’s own words: “A slave is a slave. There will be no emancipation even in the 21st century.”

The New Vision of the Church’s Mission the Durban Conference

The traditional Church’s mission was to increase the membership of the church, bringing new souls into its fold. This task is obligatory of the Church because it is the great commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the fact is that the Dalit issue did not appear in the missionary trend of the Church. Conversion was the sole aim and purpose of the church’s outreach ministry. The concern for justice, cruelty, poverty, hunger, did not bother the minds and hearts of the Christian community of India. The Church has closed its eyes and refused to see the social imbalance created by the social, political systems of our country. The caste hierarchy in the national politics of India is affecting the vast majority of the Dalits of India. The church has totally overlooked this issue of inequality in the church and society.

However the Durban UN conference on Racism has changed the situation upside down. In the conference, along with the Dalits of India, Christian leaders and like-minded people raised their voice in support of human rights of the dalits of India. The Evangelicals, the non-dalit church leaders supported their cause openly and it made a great change in the thinking of Dalit Christian leaders. The Dalit leadership has accepted the cooperation of the Christian leaders and Churches at large fighting for the liberation of the depressed and oppressed Dalits of India.

Thus, a new vision for mission has to be developed out of the collective cooperation and support of the Indian Christians. Now
the Church cannot ignore and shut its eyes not to see or witness the horrible oppressive inhuman conditions facing by the dalits in India. And it is an imperative on the part of the Indian church to evolve a new mission theology for the liberation of Dalits in India.

A Discussion of Various Mission Theologies

In this section let me present some important missiologies for their developing a relevant theology of mission for our Indian context. M. John advocates for change of attitudes and inner conversion so that the yoke of caste oppression will be removed from our dalit people. Further he feels that unless we take serious decisions or rethink our views in the light of the Gospel, we cannot find liberation from our inherent sinful tendencies. Once we experience an inner conversion we will be able to relate with the dalits and participate in their life struggles. This in turn energise us to face the challenges and oppose the evil structures of oppression and discrimination emanates from casteism. And we will not be afraid even to oppose the oppressors and we shall be bold enough to face opposition even if it risks our life and security.36

Michael Taylor presents the study report of the teaching of the churches in two countries. He points out:

“Both take a negative attitude to material poverty and believe it is not acceptable either to God or the Church. (Philippines & Russia). Both take a similar attitude to injustice and the unjust systems, which include a few and exclude the majority. A concern for justice is central to the Bible, the Gospel and the church’s mission”.37

According to Taylor, the church stands for justice and equality in the Church and Society and strongly rejects the unjust evil systems of the society and declares, this is the mission of the church.

Samuel Escobar a Latin American Theologian claims that mission as “the freedom of which the Gospel speaks”.38 He points out that: We are subject to Christ as Lord who delivered us from sin and Satan. But at the same time the freedom, which we enjoy
in Christ, does not mean that we should be slave to economic, political and social oppression. He says:

“However, the heart which has been made free with the freedom of Christ cannot be indifferent to the human longing for deliverance from economic, political or social oppression... I am with you in your search for a way out...to find a better way out of your social and political oppression”.

K.P. Aleaz defines in his own terms that Mission of God is entering into action for transforming the situation with a view of God’s kingdom. Then he explains the meaning of transformation, as it is the liberation of the oppressed people in a society. Therefore he calls the Church to resist or fight against the evil structures or forces of the society. In this respect, he calls for political involvement of the church in this context of oppression. He claims that:

“Mission demand a serious commitment to the political task of working for a world that more faithfully reflects the Gospel Values”.

Therefore, we need to involve ourselves in political ways for the liberation of the poor, oppressed of the society.

In the same line of thought, R. Hedlund quote an ecumenical affirmation regarding mission and evangelism. It affirms that “through its internal life of Eucharistic worship, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer, through planning for mission and evangelism, through a daily life style of solidarity with the poor, through advocacy even to confrontation with the powers that oppress human beings, the churches are trying to fulfill this evangelistic vocation.” The church needs to rethink its stand in respect of the poor and marginalised dalits of the church. This is the foremost and important part of the Church before confronting the enemies of the society.

And finally among the missiological discussions, let me present a Lutheran Theologian Richard H. Bliese’s view on Church’s mission today in our Indian Context. His view is based on Paul’s
famous theological position on freedom, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male or female; for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). He observes:

“The Indian Churches should consider grounding their mission efforts not on the shallow waters of liberation and renewal but on the ocean depths of Paul’s gospel of freedom”.44

He explains the Gospel of freedom in three ways.

1. It is not wholistic. He affirms that this approach is primarily with the responsibility of the state to establish a just and orderly society.

2. It is very wholistic. This freedom according to him is that it is a freedom from slavery and from all oppressions. He claims that through faith we are free from all bondages.

3. It recognises the church’s engagement in revolution against the political unjust orders which prohibit freedom when the Gospel of freedom of Paul is under threat and attack.

By explaining Paul’s Gospel of freedom, he affirms that this ‘missional orthopraxis’ is well suited to situation such as this today in our own context.45

An Analysis of the Missiological Views:

From the various missiological views which we come across a few important aspects of missiological thrusts are clearly seen on the surface. I point out those aspects as follows:

1. Mission of the Church is that which opposes man-made caste oppression and unjust structures of the society.

2. Mission of the Church is inward conversion or change of attitudes within the Church. Once this realisation is attained, then this will in turn equip ourselves to oppose the oppressors even the Government through political ways.
3. Mission of the Church is related to Paul’s Gospel of freedom which will not only liberate us from our bondage to sins but also liberate us from all human unjust, oppressive systems. In this venture, the church will enter into political revolution if the freedom is attacked.

A New Shift in Mission Paradigm

What is the response of the Church in India for those who are under the evil caste clutches for many generations? Does our effort to develop a suitable and relevant theology of mission for the liberation of dalits throw any light on this caste issue for future development? On the basis of a few findings there may be a good response from the Church and Society. Let me give the recommendations for further exploration.

1. The Church’s mission would be that human—open—purposeful oppression and injustice that perpetrate the supportive structures both within and outside the Church must be addressed.

2. The expected transformation of the Indian society outside the Church will be possible only when the inner human attitude or inward change or conversion is realised among the Christians.

Paul’s concept of “Gospel of freedom” will be meaningful and applicable only when the Church experiences ‘a change of heart’ within its life and ministry. However as a church we may organise, mobilise and fight for the constitutional rights of the oppressed dalits and other communities even opposing the Government of India. This change of heart must be ‘a priori’ than throwing down the oppressive structures of the Indian society. So in this situation Jesus’ understanding of the liberation of the ‘self’ will be a breakthrough in the present evil condition of the church and society. To quote:

“If the son sets you free you will be free indeed”. Jn.8:36.

Very recently, this view has been manifested in a different way but with the same thrust in the final statement of the recent

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seminar held at Gurukul, Chennai. To Quote the final part of the statement:

“Ultimately the struggle of the oppressed people will be won locally by the empowerment of the local people....”

Conclusion

Hinduism is a false and oppressive religion. It sanctions casteism. If Hindus oppress dalits it is because of religious approval and the spiritual blindness. But Christianity teaches equality and brotherhood of people. When the Indian Church maintains Casteism, then there is no point of claiming to fight for the Dalit rights in Church and society. Only when the Church stands as a model to the society or when the Church maintain oneness and acceptance of people irrespective of caste, class, race etc., naturally the society will slowly follow the example of the Church. Therefore the Indian Church should be a salt or a leaven in the heathen world and the saltiness or the leaven will slowly transform the evils of the Indian society. The transformation must therefore starts from within the Church and it should permeate the whole society. This may be one of the ways through which the liberation of Dalits can be achieved in the Indian oppressive context. If not we are bearing false witness to Christ and the church’s mission is one-sided and mere an act of hypocrisy.

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