

OF DALITS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

[Sathianathan Clarke was, till recently, Associate Professor at the United Theological College, Bangalore, one of the leading Christian seminaries in India. His book on Dalit Christian Liberation Theology was published by the Oxford University Press. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand, he talks about what Dalit Theology means to him. Excerpts :]

Q: How does Dalit theology differ from liberation theology as it has developed in South America?

A: Dalit Christian theology actually developed in the wake of the emergence of liberation theology in South America and black theology in the USA. All these theologies are a counter to the colonialist, western Christian theology, which is highly individualistic and does not take history, especially that of the oppressed, seriously. But what marks Dalit Christian theology out is the centrality it gives to the question of caste and caste oppression, which is unique to India. Caste is an important category in Dalit Christian theology in analysing social oppression. This should be seen in the light of the fact that the leadership of the Indian Christian Church sought to convince its own members that everyone was equal in Jesus Christ, that we are all part of the body of Christ, despite the existence of gross discrimination against the Dalits inside the Church itself. What Dalit theology began to do was to force the Church to recognise this discrimination and oppression of the Dalit Christians.

Q: What about the role of the Dalit experience in developing Dalit theology?

A: Yes, that has been central, too. A P Nirmal uses the term 'pain-pathos' to describe this, and he sees this as the basis of constructing Dalit theology. And this argument of God being preferentially intertwined with the lives, experiences and struggles of the Dalits was seen as the source of Dalit theology. So the message that was put across very forcefully was that a genuinely Indian Christian theology was not simply about celebration and joy, but was also rooted in the sufferings of the Dalits.

Q: Does the question of Dalit pride, in terms of a positive affirmation of Dalit identity, play a central role in Dalit theology?

A: It certainly does. Dalit theology affirms the identity of the Dalits before God as people among whom God is working for struggling against oppression. Here the role of affirming pride in terms of who they see themselves as in God's eyes is central. This gives them ammunition to place their identity with pride before the wider human community.

Q: Has Dalit Christian theology managed to emerge as a mass movement or is it still restricted largely to the four walls of the seminaries?

A: It is difficult to answer that question in explicit terms. Today, many Dalit communities are beginning to feel empowered by claiming their Dalit-ness and using that as a means of protesting against iniquitous Church structures as well as a means for expressing their identities and their special relationship with God. On the other hand, many Dalit Christians themselves have not responded positively to the emergence of Dalit theology. They say, 'We embraced Christianity primarily to escape our Dalit identity, so why are you trying to impose it on us again?' They say that they are now Christians and so have nothing to do with the Dalits. In other words, you have both sorts of reactions to Dalit theology from Dalit Christians. And then there are some Dalit Christians who say that much of this theological business is of no relevance for the common masses. They say, 'You sit around in seminaries and get free trips abroad for conferences to talk about Dalit theology, but we really do not get to share in all that'. Now this sort of reaction is a protest against the ways in which

- Dalit theology is being done, but it is also a knowledgeable protest. It comes from Dalit Christians who identify themselves as Dalits in order to make this critique.
- Q: Are the reflections that are emerging from Dalit Christian formulations being preached to Christian congregations from the pulpits of the churches?
- A: I should hope that this is being done, but, frankly, very little follow-up work has been done there. One of the main reasons is the apathy of influential Church leaders, most of whom are of so-called upper caste background. I see the role of Dalit Christian theology as challenging the structures of the status quo, both within as well as outside the Church, which are primarily casteist. That is its prophetic function based on what we believe that Church should be. This is the task of unveiling the structures of power that are putting on a mask of neutrality to hide the operation of caste within the Church but are still using the power of caste in ways that are unjust. Dalit theology has another important role—that of empowering Dalit communities to reclaim their positionality in a way that could lead them to bring out their own experiences and express them in their own symbolic modes. This would add strength to their struggle for empowerment and for a more equal distribution of power and resources. And this is actually happening today, through a networking of many resistive forces, of which Dalit Christian theology is one. This is part of the general awakening of the broader Dalit community.
- Q: Why has so little been written on liberation theology by non-Christian Dalits so far?
- A: That I cannot say, but perhaps that is due to the fact that there are actually relatively very few Dalit writers, although their number today is certainly more than a decade ago. Further, a question that must be asked here is whether the modality of writing in and of itself has historically been more geared to certain castes than to others. Denied access to writing and education for centuries, the Dalits have expressed themselves, their pains and their struggles primarily through oral traditions, folk tales, songs, etc..
- Q: Do you think non-Dalits can write Dalit theology?
- A: I myself am not a Dalit, so in terms of what it means to reflect on Dalit a pain-pathos I cannot really write Dalit theology myself. However, what I, as a non-Dalit, can do is to interrogate the writings of Dalit theologians and lift up offerings from the Dalit communities that could form important ingredients of a Dalit liberationist perspective. In other words, at the very most I, as a non-Dalit, can simply be a facilitator of the process of developing Dalit theology. So, I would not call myself a Dalit theologian, but simply a theologian who writes about Dalits and Christianity. What I want to stress here is that the Dalit Christians must be careful not to be co-opted by caste Christians. They must not let caste Christians appoint themselves as their spokesmen to tell the world what Dalit theology is all about.
- Q: What role does Ambedkar play in Dalit Christian theology?
- A: What we share with Ambedkar, and what needs to be resurrected today, is the potency, value and usefulness of religion as a symbolic framework. This comes out very strongly in Ambedkar. Ambedkar believed that true liberation for the Dalits was not possible without religious change, or, in other words, a reinterpretation of who the Dalits were. So, in this link between religion and social emancipation, Dalit Christian theology and Ambedkarism share much in common. Where the two might differ is on the question of the world-view of the Dalits themselves, something that Ambedkar does not really explore. It almost seems that he believed that it was completely overwhelmed by the dominant Hindu ethos. But what recent anthropological studies have done is to look at the good sense preserved in the world-views of Dalit communities that are not just fragment of Brahminical schema. This

suggests the possibility of retrieving liberative elements from the world-views of the Dalits themselves while constructing a Dalit liberation theology.

This good sense to be found in Dalit world-views is to be distinguished from what Gramsci calls common senses something that is placed hegemonically on the dominated. I do this in my discussion of the role of the drum in Dalit religion in my book on Dalit theology. There I show that according to some the drum is simply a Brahminical design or device to force the Dalit drummers to reiterate their low status, because with the drum they had to deal with the skin of dead animals, which was considered a source of pollution. But you can twist that around and consider the subjectivity of the Dalit drummers themselves. In a context where they were completely denied access to the written word, where all communication was centred round the temple which they could not enter, here you have a people who, based on what they do everyday, can pick up an instrument and use it in such a way that it starts mediating, just like the scriptures do, between them and God.

Q: How does Dalit Christian theology see the question of religious conversion?

A: I think here we share a lot in common with Ambedkar. Conversion of Dalits to religions like Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity has been above all a protest against Hinduism and its caste structures. So, it is more of a social issue than an individual quest for spiritual truth. Gandhi saw conversion of Dalits to non-Hindu religions as simply a result of Dalit vulnerability and gullibility. Ambedkar, however, strongly refuted Gandhi, saying that in converting to another religion, the Dalits have consistently, consciously and collectively made a decision based on what they have been denied by Hinduism and what they are going to get by joining another community. His point was that religion and religious conversion is a social phenomenon and that not everybody needs to jump for joy in their hearts in order to be convinced of something. In India, says Ambedkar, religion has always been a social phenomenon, and he says that the Dalits will use whatever it takes, including change of religion, to be converted into what it means for the Dalits to be most human. The highly individualistic way of looking at religious conversion is really a Brahminic way of perceiving things, which is very different from how Dalits have seen it as a means of social liberation. As Ambedkar did, we need to counter the whole idea that the Dalits are passive, dumb and easily misled into conversion. That really disrespects their humanity. We need to see how conversion has been used by them as a powerful means of critiquing and challenging the structures of upper caste domination. But at the same time, we need to be aware of the fact that even after their conversion, the Dalits have continued to suffer discrimination. In the case of Dalit Christians, the oppression is from the wider society as well as from within the Christian community itself.

Q: Many Dalit communities have sought to shed their Dalit-ness by claiming a higher caste status for themselves and adopting the practices and beliefs associated with Brahminic Hinduism. What do you feel are the potentials and limitations of this form of the quest for upward social mobility?

A: This process, called Sanskritisation by sociologists, has never succeeded in taking the Dalits forward, and so to my mind, it should be unveiled and countered. It only further divides the Dalits and strengthens the caste system and Brahminism. Frankly, today this strategy will not work because there are no incentives for that, because in politics and in the economic sphere the Dalits are now finding that it in fact pays to assert, rather than deny, their Dalit identity. So, as I see it, the trend is towards assertion of Dalit pride, and reclaiming and galvanising their identities. That was the path taken by Ambedkar, and I really feel that that is the way forward.

Q: But what dangers do you see to the Dalit movement from the process of Sanskritisation?

A: Primarily, Sanskritisation threatens to co-opt the Dalits into a hegemonic Brahminic system, where they will still be at the bottom of the heap. The Hindutva agenda is concerned, above all, to weave together the whole country into an ordered organism with Brahminic Hinduism at its heart, disciplining anyone who dares to dissent. This disciplining will be primarily directed against social groups such as Dalits, Tribals, Christians, Muslims and others who are pushing for the recognition of their own ontological differences in order to improve their social and economic positions. □□□