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SYNOPTIC HEALING STORIES:
A RELEVANT BIBLICAL PARADIGM
FOR
CHRISTIAN DALIT THEOLOGY

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Abstract

The thesis offers and explores the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology in order to help redress the lacuna between Dalit theology and the praxis of the Indian Church. Through a critical analysis of Dalit theology possible reasons for the practical inefficacy of Dalit theology are postulated. The argument for the synoptic healing stories as an appropriate biblical paradigm is made on the basis of their ability to resonate and address the issue of discrimination based on notions of purity and pollution (which are argued to be foundational for the discrimination against the Dalits), as well as their potential to offer a praxis-oriented corrective to Dalit theology.

As an alternative biblical paradigm the synoptic healing stories offer scope for constructing an ethical framework, which can aid both a Christian response to discrimination and an engagement in socio-political action. Four features prevalent in the stories, *Touch* (understood as defiance of the purity code), *Faith* (prevalent in the form of initiative and persistence), *Compassion* and *Conflict / Confrontation* constitute this ethical framework. Through an analysis of the interplay of these features in select stories certain principles of practice, applicable to the Dalit situation, are identified. An integral aspect of most of these practical principles is the imperative to contest any form of consent to the prevailing status quo.

When deriving principles for action from the synoptic healing stories corresponding examples from Dalit secular politics, which have significantly influenced the struggle for Dalit liberation and contributed to social transformation, are drawn in order to endorse the practicability of these principles. In the light of their ability to: a) espouse issues integral to Dalit liberation, b) provide relevant paradigms for action, and c) offer a constructive critique of Dalit theology, it is concluded that the synoptic healing stories can be a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology, which can help reduce the lacuna between Dalit theology and praxis.

Abbreviations

<i>ARA</i>	<i>Annual Review of Anthropology</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BTESSC	Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College
<i>BTF</i>	<i>Bangalore Theological Forum</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CDSS	Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies
CLS	Christian Literature Society
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
GLTCRI	Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IJT</i>	<i>Indian Journal of Theology</i>
ISPCK	Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SATHRI	South Asia Theological Research Institute
UTC	United Theological College
<i>VJTR</i>	<i>Vidyajothi Journal of Theological Reflection</i>
WCC	World Council of Churches

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Chapter - I

Synoptic Healing Stories : A Relevant Biblical Paradigm for Christian Dalit Theology

General Introduction

A - The Problem

Christianity in India is confronted with a paradoxical situation in which the growing academic influence of Christian Dalit theology as a form of contextual theology seems almost incompatible with the continued discrimination of Dalits within Christianity as well as the passivity of the Church to engage in Dalit liberation. S. M. Michael in his article 'Cultural Studies and Theologizing on the Empowerment of Dalits in India' calls the prevailing casteism within the Indian Church 'a scandal to the Christian faith in India' and points out that 'Christian communities in several parts of India show more feelings of caste exclusiveness and hold more tenaciously to undesirable caste customs'.¹ Similarly P. Dayanandan, an emeritus scientist, in his thought provoking article 'Who Needs a Liberation Theology?' says:

Christianity is now facing the greatest challenge in its history in India, among highly prejudiced caste groups who have donned a superficial mantle called Christianity, but remain steadfastly prejudiced in their own brand of *varnasrama dharma*. There is a real danger that even if caste is annihilated in Hindu society, it might continue to flourish among Indian Christians.²

¹ S. M. Michael, 'Cultural Studies and Theologizing on the Empowerment of Dalits in India', in James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (eds.), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, (Bangalore: BTESSC / SATHRI & New Delhi: CDSS, 2005), (pp. 71-95), p. 88.

² P. Dayanandan, 'Who Needs a Liberation Theology?', in *Dalit International News Letter*, Vol. 10, No. 1, February, 2005, (pp. 7-9), p. 9.

The prevalence of casteism in the Indian Church, the majority of which is Dalit, raises a pertinent question: What is the influence of Christian Dalit theology on the Indian Church? In a paper which was instrumental in setting the agenda for Dalit theology John C. B. Webster remarks that Christian theology is '*a task carried on primarily by the church for the sake of the church*' and so 'one test, of an Indian theology ... would be its utility to the Indian Church'.³ Considering the fact that the Indian Church, bears a 'permanent Dalit Stamp', as nearly '70% of the 25 million Indian Christians are Dalits',⁴ the question of Dalit theology (as a mode of Indian theology) being of service to the predominantly Dalit Indian Church is all the more important.

Caution is required at this point. The development of Christian Dalit theology has clearly shown that, though it is being developed within Christian circles, it cannot and should not be understood as a totally 'church-centered' theology, catering to Christian Dalits within the Church alone. It is concerned with the liberation of non-Christian Dalits and other oppressed groups as well.⁵ Its overall emphasis is on the liberation of all Dalits, and thus wider than the concern about the discrimination of Christian Dalits within the Church. So, when we are talking about the impact of Christian Dalit theology on the Church, we are not only asking questions about the way it has affected Christian attitude towards and treatment of Dalit Christians within churches, we are also asking questions about how it has affected the engagement of the Church in the transformation of the situation of the Dalits. We are asking whether Dalit theology has aided the Church's praxis. We are asking the question about the

³ John C. B. Webster, 'From Indian Church to Indian Theology: An Attempt at Theological Construction', in A. P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, (Madras: GLTCRI, 1991), (pp. 93-127), pp. 93-94.

⁴ Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 9.

⁵ According to Franklyn J. Balasundaram, 'Dalit liberation theology cannot be merely 'Christian' ... Dalit theology is not and cannot be exclusive... Dalit theology is pursued for the liberation of others also'. 'Dalit Struggle and its Implications for Theological Education', in *BTF*, Vol. XXIX, Nos. 3 & 4, September & December, 1997, (pp. 69-91), p. 89. See also Saral K. Chatterjee, 'Why Dalit Theology', in James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), (pp. 179-200) and M. E. Prabhakar, 'The Search for a Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 201-213). (Both these articles were also printed earlier in Nirmal (ed.), '*A Reader*', and M. E. Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988).

relationship between Dalit theology and *praxis*, the enhancement of which is the primary focus of this thesis.

B - The Aim

In the light of the prevailing lacunae between Dalit theology and the Church's praxis the aim of the thesis is to offer and explore the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm which can enhance the praxis potential of Dalit theology. The concern regarding the practical feasibility of Indian Christianity to engage effectively in praxis dictates the aim and content of the thesis. Praxis is understood as the *unity between faith and action*, action here implying all efforts - social, economic, political, religious, psychological and theological - towards the transformation of the Dalit situation of oppression.

Part of the aim of this study is to critically identify the theological reasons for the gap between Dalit theology and praxis. The argument will be that the present biblical-theological paradigms for Dalit theology haven't sufficiently created an ethical framework for Christian praxis inspite of the inundated rhetoric implying the need for praxis. The hypothesis put forward is that the synoptic healing stories can not only provide a Christian ethical basis to critique notions of purity and pollution, (which, as the thesis will argue, constitute the predominant basis for caste discrimination), but also can enable a critical methodological and theological revision of Dalit theology with a focus on praxis. The suitability of the synoptic healing stories will be tested on the following grounds:

- 1) Their potential to offer an ethical framework which can influence Christian attitudes towards notions of purity and pollution.
- 2) Their ability to critically enhance the praxiological efficacy of Dalit theology.

In order to evaluate the viability of the healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology this study will engage with the following questions:

- 1) Is it valid to premise the discrimination of Dalits within the framework of notions of purity and pollution?
- 2) What are the theological reasons for the lacunae between theory and praxis in Dalit theology?
- 3) What are the revisions which can enhance the praxis potential of Dalit theology?
- 4) Can the synoptic healing stories bridge the lacunae between Dalit theology and praxis?
- 5) On what grounds can the proposal to explore the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology be justified?
- 6) How can the Synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology help to critique and enhance the praxis-potential of Dalit theology?

C - Method

The study will be inter-disciplinary. A variety of methodological approaches will be used. The study will use sociological, anthropological and ethnographic studies to analyse the Indian caste context and identify the social, cultural, religious, political and economic situation of the Dalits. To understand the notions of purity and pollution in the context of the synoptic healing stories the socio-scientific methodology will be employed.⁶

⁶ See Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1996); *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); 'The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 37, 1982, (pp. 229-242) also reprinted in Norman K. Gottwald (ed.), *The Bible and Liberation*, (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1982), (pp. 11-25).

This methodology will help us to understand the social and cultural significance of the patterns of social interaction which appear in the text as it proposes culturally appropriate scenarios for interpreting the gospel narrative. One of the major theorists of this methodology, Bruce J. Malina's presumption is that meaning then, as well as today, 'ultimately resides in the social system shared by persons who regularly interact with one another'.⁷ According to Malina the New Testament documents were high-context documents in a high-context society where 'much of what they intended to communicate (was) absent from the text, yet rather firmly in place in the common social system into which they were socialized'. Thus there is a need to provide first century Mediterranean scenarios and fill in the contexts to facilitate interpretation of the text in modern contexts.⁸ This construction of a broad, encompassing social system offers us a systemic perspective by way of which one can understand the coherence and interrelation of the components which constitute and characterize the social system in the synoptic healing stories.

While I will adopt the social-scientific methodology as my preferred methodology it will not be an indication that I am ignorant of the generalization and abstraction that characterize this methodology. I am also aware that this hermeneutical venture is prone to be more of a cross-cultural analysis that straddles two entirely different geo-political and religio-cultural realms, which are further divided chronologically. Sufficient precaution will be taken against anachronistic relativising. The socio-scientific approach will help us not only to be on guard against ethnocentrism and anachronism but also provide space to derive anthropological insights about hierarchical social stratification, laws and codes of social interaction and rules of purity and pollution which prevailed in the context of the synoptic healing stories – all issues central to this research.

⁷ Malina, *The Social World*, p. xi.

⁸ Malina, *The Social World*, p. 28.

The thesis will also engage in a critique of Dalit theology to identify the areas which need to be revised to facilitate effective praxis. For this purpose the prevailing criticism of Dalit theology as well as the recent theological developments, especially the introduction of post-colonial theory will be taken into consideration.

For appropriating the selected biblical texts to the Dalit context a number of perspectival readings from different contexts will be used. Insights from subaltern, post-colonial, socio-historical, feminist, political, materialist and liberationist hermeneutics will be used. As the Dalit struggle is not a monolithic struggle but has a multi-dimensionality and dynamism, a multi-perspectival approach to reading the bible is justified. The researcher recognises that rereading the bible for social justice in such a dynamic context requires a 'nomadic reader, who will have to use and develop different methods and new theories of reading'.⁹ One 'is constantly forced to delve into completely new reading strategies' and engage in a continuous re-reading of biblical texts to deal with new challenges.¹⁰

In conformity with the purpose of what is identified as 'people's hermeneutics', our purpose in the hermeneutical appropriation of select healing stories in this study will be 'to gain enlightenment on their (Dalits') existential problems and to empower themselves to solve them through transformative action in order to enhance life'.¹¹ The Bible will be viewed as 'a lens through which one might read the story of today and lend it a new perspective'.¹² It is envisaged to glean the meaning of the biblical narrative for the present through a circular dialectic 'between the biblical word on liberation and our process of liberation'.¹³

⁹ Musa W. Dube, 'Rereading the Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Social Justice', in Emmanuel Katongole, (ed.), *African Theology Today*, (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2002), (pp. 57-68), p. 66.

¹⁰ Dube, 'Rereading', p. 65.

¹¹ Anthoniraj Thumma, *Wisdom of the Weak: Foundation of People's Theology*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 163. Addition mine.

¹² Christopher Rowland, 'Epilogue: the Future of Liberation Theology', in Christopher Rowland, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), (pp. 248-251), p. 250.

¹³ Jose Severino Croatto, *Exodus Hermeneutics of Freedom*, (New York: Orbis, 1978), p. 3.

D - Outline of the Thesis

The plan of the proposed study is as follows:

Part One (Chapter : II) - Notions of Purity and Pollution and Dalits

Chapter II argues that the discrimination and marginalization of Dalit communities can be premised within the framework of the notions of purity and pollution. It analyses the various anthropological and sociological arguments which have theorized the caste system in India and the Dalit situation to arrive at the conclusion that in spite of the changing social circumstances in India one can make sense of the discrimination against the Dalits in relation to the notions of purity and pollution.

Part Two (Chapters : III & IV) - A Critical Assessment of Dalit Theology

Chapter III furnishes an overview of Dalit theology. It surveys the background in which Dalit theology emerged. Two reasons are identified as leading to the development of Dalit theology:

- a) The consciousness of growing discrimination within the Indian Church against the Dalit Christians who converted to Christianity believing it to be an egalitarian religion.
- b) The discontentment with the predominantly Brahmanic nature of Indian Christian theology which was non-representative of Dalit struggles and experiences.

The chapter also identifies the praxiological framework of Dalit theology and explores the relation between the theological content of Dalit theology and its praxiological framework.

Chapter IV critically analyses Dalit theology in the light of the central problem of this thesis, which is the failure of Dalit theology to influence the praxis of the church. After an analysis of the dominant paradigms for Dalit theology, the following reasons are identified for the lacunae between Dalit theology and praxis of the Church:

- a) The failure to engage sufficiently with the core foundations on which Dalit discrimination is based, namely notions of purity and pollution.
- b) The failure to recognise the agency of Dalits in liberation struggles, and provide appropriate paradigms of praxis for Dalit Christians.
- c) The inordinate focus on ‘pathos’ and suffering when articulating Dalit Christology which can lead to masochistic resignation and reinforce inferiority consciousness, which Dalit theologians and social scientists have identified as an important reason for the passivity of Dalits to strive for liberation.
- d) The failure to articulate a bipolar ethical imperative, which can lead to praxis of partnership between Dalits and non-Dalits.
- e) The hermeneutical incompatibility of Dalit theology to the Dalits because of its focus on textuality and its conceptual nature.

Part Three (Chapters : V & VI) - Synoptic Healing Stories as an Alternative Biblical Paradigm for Dalit Theology

Chapter V proposes and explores the synoptic healing stories as a viable alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology, in the light of the conclusions of chapter 2 (which identifies notions of purity and pollution as the basis for Dalit discrimination) and chapter 4 (which critically identifies the reasons for the lacunae between Dalit theology and praxis).

Chapter VI identifies ethical features from the synoptic healing stories, which can be used as a foundation for the Indian Church's praxis in the context of casteism. The following features are identified; touch/defiance of uncleanness, compassion, faith, conflict / confrontation. The distinctive manner in which these features are manifest in the synoptic healing stories are identified. These features are further plotted in the wider context of Jesus' ministry. The pertinence of these features for the liberation of the Dalits are brought out by identifying how these features are implicit in the wider struggle of the Dalits in the secular context.

Part Four (Chapters : VII - IX) - A Praxis-oriented Reading of Select Stories

This section will try to exegetically re-read a few select healing stories from a Dalit perspective focusing on Dalit praxis. The attempt will be to see how the ethical features identified in chapter 6 are operant in the passages. My focus in the healing stories will be on the interaction between Jesus and those who approach him for healing. It is this aspect, which, when explored in the light of post-colonial theory as well as the problems besetting Dalit theology, will provide paradigms of praxis which will be pertinent for the Dalit situation. The reasons for choosing the passages are:

- 1) Their presence in more than one synoptic gospel.
- 2) Their ability to resonate different problems which are analogical to the Dalit situation.
- 3) Their ability to comprehensively represent the central features of the synoptic healing stories.

Chapter VII deals with the story of the leper found in all three synoptic gospels. It is taken as a representative passage to deal with purity concerns. The story is briefly read in the light of motif of boundary transcendence in order to demonstrate the interplay of the different ethical features. We read the passage in the light of the

marginalization of the Dalits on grounds of impurity. Implications for a liberative Dalit christology are drawn from the image of Jesus which emerges in the story as one who transcends boundaries.

Chapter VIII deals with an exorcism located in both Mark (5:1-20) and Luke (8: 26-39) in the country of the Gerasenes and in Matthew in the country of the Gadarenes (8: 28-34). Attention is paid only to the Markan version of the story. This story is chosen for the fact that it deals with the issue of resistance which is an important feature of the Dalit struggles for liberation. The socio-political background of the story will be furnished and the insights gained will be employed in a praxis-oriented reading of the story in the light of the various forms of resistance in which the Dalits are engaged. The role of the Dalits as subjects and agents in the liberation process is discussed in this chapter.

Chapter IX discusses in detail the story of the Syrophoenician / Canaanite woman found in both Matthew and Mark. The text is chosen because it offers space to engage with the praxis of partnership. The passage throws up issues which have not be dealt with in Dalit theology so far - like the issue of hybrid identity and contrapuntal readings of scriptures. This passage has the capacity to critically expose the flaws in the methodology of Dalit theology.

Chapter X offers a summary of the findings of the previous chapters and concludes the thesis with an assessment of the problems and possibilities of using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology.

(Part - One : Notions of Purity and Pollution and Dalits)

Chapter - II

**Analysing the Indian Caste System through the Lens of
Purity**

and Pollution

Introduction

This chapter attempts to assess the importance and relevance of the ‘notions of purity and pollution’ in understanding the caste system in contemporary India. I will engage with the following questions in this chapter:

- a) Are notions of purity and pollution relevant theoretical categories to understand caste discrimination in India?
- b) What are the functions of notions of purity and pollution in the Indian caste context?
- c) What is the position of the Dalit communities with regard to the notions of purity and pollution?

For reasons of clarity I will divide the chapter into five sections. I begin with a minor section on the Indian caste system and the situation of the Dalits. In my second section I will deal with a theoretical analysis of the notions of purity and pollution. I start with a general analysis of the notions of purity and pollution using the theory of Mary Douglas before narrowing down my focus to anthropologists who have analysed the Indian caste society through the theoretical lens of purity and pollutions. At the end of the section I evaluate their theories in the light of some criticism and work out some preliminary points about the instrumentality of notions of purity and pollution in the Indian caste system. My third section analyses the inconsistencies that exist in the empirical operation of

caste and explores whether it is still pertinent to understand the operation of caste through the epistemological lens of notions of purity and pollution. In the fourth section I specifically analyse the discrimination of the Dalit communities on the basis of the notions of purity and pollution. In the fifth section I draw attention to the prevalence of casteism within Indian Christianity where Dalits are discriminated on the basis of notions of purity and pollution.

A - Who are the Dalits? A Brief Overview of the Indian Caste System

The Indian Caste system encompasses a complex and hierarchical ordering of social groups. In the Indian context, the word 'caste' can denote not only '*varna*'¹ but also another concept called '*jati*'.² The European term 'caste' conflates the indigenous concepts of *varna* and *jati*.³ While *varna*, the term widely used to denote caste can refer to 'a notional all-India fourfold division of society into estates based on function', *jati* refers to 'named endogamous groups which are usually more or less localized or at least have a regional base'. For the sake of methodological clarity it would suffice to recognize *jati* as referring to common origins or birth; while in the concept of *varna* the basic inherent idea is 'not of

¹ The *Vedas* divided the Hindu society in the post-vedic time into four categories or *varnas*. These *varnas* were associated with privileges as well as well-defined and particular social occupations. The four *varnas* were *Brahmin* (priest and teacher), *Kshatriya* (ruler and warrior), *Vaishya* (trader) and *Sudra* (servant). A popular term, that was used to denote the first three *varnas* were '*Dvijas*' or the 'twice-born'. The people belonging to the '*Dvijas*' were entitled to wearing the sacred thread and studying the *Vedas*, while the *Sudras* (the people of the fourth *varna*) did not possess any such rights. They were considered as slaves and the only right they had was to serve the three other 'higher' *varnas*. See Rebati Ballav Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-human Society*, (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994), pp. 6 ff.

² To try and explain the concept of *jati* a bit further, the words of Declan Quigley prove useful:

The sense of *Jati* is of those people who are in some fundamental way alike because of their common origins, and fundamentally different from those who do not share these origins. One cannot choose one's *jati*; it is defined by birth. But one can choose whether one's *jati* refers to a more or less inclusive group: this is going to depend on context. In one context, one's *jati* is one's lineage; in another, it may be all the lineages with whom one can intermarry; in yet another, it may refer to those whose common ethnic or cultural heritage sets them apart from their neighbours. Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste*, (Indian paperback edn.), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 4,5.

³ Ursula M. Sharma, *Caste*, (Buckingham / Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), pp. 5,6.

birth but of function' – a function deemed necessary to ensure the maintenance of social harmony and cosmic stability.⁴ In every day life particularly in the villages, the operative conception of 'caste' is *jati* rather than *varna*.

'Dalits' are those communities which have for many centuries occupied a deeply ambiguous place within Indian society. As they are the communities which fall *beyond* the four-fold *varna* system their position is much inferior to the *Shudras* who are the lowest caste in the fourfold *varna* system. The Dalits are considered as the *avarnas* (casteless ones). Surprisingly the Dalits are accommodated in the local *jati* system in the villages.⁵ Nevertheless in both the *varna* and the *jati* system, the Dalits are discriminated against. An oft-quoted passage describes the precarious existence of the Dalits as follows:

More than one-sixth of India's population, some 160 million people, live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society because of their rank as untouchables or Dalits – literally meaning "broken" people – at the bottom of India's caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state's protection. In what has been called "hidden apartheid" entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. National legislations and constitutional protections serve only to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the "pollution line".⁶

⁴ Quigley, *Interpretation*, pp. 5 ff.

⁵ This is primarily because the Hindu caste system, which has severe inequalities, is also 'marked by an organic unity among castes made possible through internalisation of the egalitarian values, embodied in the twin concept of 'Karma' and 'Dharma' observed both by upper and lower castes'. This phenomenon was made possible by a 'peculiar complex system' called as the '*Jajmani* system' which entailed the exchange of goods and services among various castes. But the negative impact of the system was that the Dalits always were placed on the wrong (exploited) side of exchange. They were always subservient to the other caste communities (*jatis*). They are denied access to the vital economic resources and do not have bargaining power. All this makes them the most exploited peripheral group in the Indian society. Tripathy, *Dalits*, pp. 13 ff.

⁶ *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables"*, (Human Rights Watch Report), (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp. 1,2.

Having had this brief introduction to the Indian caste system and the life of the Dalits we now delve into a deeper theoretical understanding of the caste system through the lens of purity and pollution.

B - Theorising Notions of Purity and Pollution

In this section I will begin with Mary Douglas' analysis of the notions of purity and pollution. Later, I move on to study certain anthropologists who have analysed Indian caste system from the epistemological premise of purity and pollution. At the end of this section I will point to a few preliminary points about the nature and function of the notions of purity and pollution.

1 - Mary Douglas : Purity and Danger

In her phenomenal study *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas argues that purity is a concept which has been evoked to create a semblance of order in an inherently untidy, disorderly and chaotic reality. She says:

...I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.⁷

Douglas delineates how notions of purity, taboo and pollution have been shaped by the fears of mysterious forces (especially in primitive communities) which were supposedly incomprehensible, un-understandable and above all uncontrollable in the particularity of the 'universe' of one's culture.⁸ Douglas attempts to make sense of pollution ideas in reference to a total structure of social

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London / New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 4.

⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966, p. 4.

ordering whereby rituals of separation define boundaries, margins and internal lines. Purity in her understanding represents the notion that every thing, animal, person and body effluvia has a place. Purity occurs when everything is in its place. Pollution denotes the opposite and occurs when things, body effluvia, and animals and people are out of their place.

Douglas posits this opposition between the pure and impure as a universal phenomenon and goes on to explore how people's perceptions of danger and impurity arise. She contends that humans consider as dangerous all those that defy and threaten cognitive categories as well as those which don't fit into classificatory divisions, i.e. whatever is anomalous. She also analyses that people have perceptions of having 'higher purity' over nature. Hence at the social level whatever threatens to 'unmask' this image is sought to be controlled and so connotations of 'pollution' are attached to these natural phenomena. To put it simply: demonstrations of our natural 'impurity' (like ingestion of food, bodily emissions, sickness, decay and death) are viewed as threats to our social 'purity' and so taboos are attached to them. They are propitiated, ritualized or avoided. She looks at it as a conflict whereby humans avoid being identified with nature.

A strange but compelling belief of the efficacy of these precepts permeates the whole structure. Douglas points to two ways in which pollution ideas work in society – one largely instrumental and the other expressive. At the first - instrumental level - people try to influence one another's behavior by reinforcing social pressures. Transgression of strongly upheld notions of pure and impure is viewed as a threat to the ideal social order. Douglas makes connections between notions of pollution, danger and morality. Arguing that notions of purity and danger constitute a strong language of mutual exhortation, Douglas in her 1970 edition of *Purity and Danger* says:

These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man (sic) uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. At this level the laws of nature are dragged to sanction the moral code... The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that

certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion.⁹

At the second - expressive level - she points out that as one examines pollution beliefs one can discover that the type of contacts which are thought to be dangerous are weighed with a symbolic load:

This is a more interesting level at which pollution ideas relate to social life. I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order... what goes for sex pollution also goes for bodily pollution. The two sexes can serve as a model for the collaboration and distinctiveness of social units... Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolize an ideal theocracy.¹⁰

Douglas talks of a 'unity of experience' in any given culture where similar attitudes to boundaries prevail at three levels namely the bodily boundaries, the social boundaries and the cosmological boundaries. Any society which is 'anxious about what goes in and out of the orifices of the bodily boundary ... will probably also guard the social boundary carefully to protect who goes in and who goes out of their social group. Regarding the cosmological level of beliefs in such a society, one would expect to find a dualism with a distinct boundary separating the good from the evil, the holy from the unclean'.¹¹

In another schematic study, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 1973, Douglas delineates a 'concordance between symbolic and social experience'. She talks of symbolic systems as having specific social functions like the symbolics of hierarchy for defining and reproducing social power; the symbolics of danger and taboo for demarcating groups and maintaining social boundaries; and symbolics

⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, (new edn.), (London / New York: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 13.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1970, pp. 13,14.

¹¹ David Rhoads, 'Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries', in Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Mark and Method*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), (pp. 135-161), pp. 152,153.

of contagion for giving social meaning to the chaotic site of material things.¹² She talks of these symbolics as constituting the semiotics of social order. Nevertheless, she calls for critical perceptivity towards the codes of social semiotics:

The elaborated code challenges its users to turn round on themselves and inspect their values ...This would seem to be the only way to use our knowledge to free ourselves from the power of our own cosmology. No one would deliberately choose the elaborated code and the personal system who is aware of the seeds of alienation it contains.¹³

‘Order’ can only be gleaned from ‘disorder’. Pragmatically this process involves differentiation of certain things as pure and certain things as impure. Douglas herself is critically aware of the dangers of these social codes which seek to forge order. She points out how pollution beliefs can be employed in ‘a dialogue of claims and counter claims to status’.¹⁴ With this brief introduction to notions of purity and pollution, I now try to analyse how notions of purity and pollution are operative in the Indian Caste system and review how Dalits have been treated under the notions of purity and pollution. The main question that I will be dealing with is: Do notions of pure and impure provide us with a valid epistemological premise to understand the Indian caste context, especially in reference to the discrimination against the Dalits?

2 - Anthropological Research on the Indian Caste System

In this section I will consider the arguments of those anthropologists who have analysed the Indian caste system through the epistemological premise of purity and pollution. My selection of anthropologists serves a heuristic purpose in the sense that it will offer scope to explore and analyse a broad range of issues related

¹² Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 70.

¹³ Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 190.

¹⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966, p. 3.

to the caste system and notions of purity and pollution. Some of the debates that these anthropologists have stirred help us to gain a comprehensive idea of the complexities and problems involved in understanding caste as a homogenous entity. The ongoing inundation of arguments and counter-arguments accentuate the myriad complexity of the caste system. My interest here is to analyse the debate so as to put in proper perspective the remarkable polyvocality and subtly-nuanced complexity underlying the notions of purity and pollution as well as to understand their relevance for a contemporary discourse on caste.

a) Celestin Bougle

Celestin Bougle was the first social scientist to stress the importance of purity and pollution to understand caste in the Indian situation. According to Bougle the caste system arose 'from the occurrence of spontaneous and collective tendencies' which lay at the sociological heart of caste and accounted for its "spirit".¹⁵ They were 'repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization'. But the most critical aspect of these three tendencies was 'repulsion' - the word used to emphasize the importance of 'purity-pollution'. For Bougle when we speak of caste reigning in a society we mean '...that the different groups of which that society is composed, repel each other rather than attract, that each retires within itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relations with neighbours'. This is what Bougle calls the 'spirit of caste', which is instrumental for the empirical operation of caste which he describes as follows:

Horror of misalliance, fear of impure contacts and repulsion of all those who are unrelated, such are the characteristic signs of this spirit. It seems to us that it is, as it were, designed to atomize the societies into which it penetrates; it divides them not merely into superimposed levels but into a

¹⁵ Celestin Bougle, *Essays on the Caste System*, (trans. by D. F. Pocock), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 60.

multitude of opposed fragments; it brings each of their elementary groups face to face, separated by mutual repulsion.¹⁶

Hence, according to Bougle, the caste system is permeated by a ‘mysterious’ fear because of which it strives to maintain separation between groups through mutual opposition and protectionism. This protectionism can be analysed in the light of Douglas’ argument that notions of purity and pollution have an instrumentalist function. Here the function seems to revolve around maintaining cognitive groups in a hierarchy of hereditary occupation using the ‘process’ of mutual repulsion in day-to-day interaction. Blurring of these distinctions is perceived as dangerous and hence there is strict adherence to maintaining distinctions. Bougle sees the manifestation of this latent repulsion to be more pronounced in matters of food and marriage. Commensality and marriage are restricted.¹⁷

For Bougle the *Brahman* caste was at the apex of this hierarchy of purity because of the meticulous care the Brahmans took in abstaining from sources of impurity and primarily because the Brahman caste was the ‘guardian of the sacrifice’.¹⁸ Again Bougle’s theory holds much in common with Douglas’ argument that higher purity was sought through ritualization of, or abstention from, sources and actions of impurity. As the ‘guardian of the sacrifice’ the Brahman, in the theory of Bougle, is one who has control over the sources of danger and impurity and hence must be placed on a high scale of purity. For Bougle by offering sacrifices, the Brahmans participate in the very essence of the gods that they put in communication with other humans. Thus by virtue of their close proximity to the Gods and simultaneous estrangement from the mundane the Brahmans achieve the highest scale of purity. They imbibe a higher purity and so need to be placed on the highest level of the purity scale which is later passed hereditarily. ‘However slight may be this commingling of the divine and the human natures, the sacred character of the officiant attaches to his person not only for his whole life, it is

¹⁶ Bougle, *Essays*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Bougle, *Essays*, pp. 23 ff.

¹⁸ Bougle, *Essays*, pp. 58 ff.

transmitted after his death to his descendents; having passed 'into his blood', it becomes a property of his race'.¹⁹

Following Bougle two other anthropologists who picked up this theoretical framework of the repulsion between the castes on the basis of notions of purity and pollution, (however with differing emphases), were A. M. Hocart and Louis Dumont.

b) *A. M. Hocart*

Arthur Maurice Hocart's research is based on field studies in Southern Asia and Polynesia and so his observations are more empirical than Bougle's. He builds up his theory of caste on the basis of a sacrificial theory of caste.²⁰ According to Hocart there is a sacralisation of the social order and so the member of each caste is a ritual functionary. Each of the castes had a specific ritual function (including the ones which were considered to be ritually defiling like the barber and washerman).²¹

Hocart's conclusion is much in contrast to Bougle's. He says that it was the king or his equivalent that was in the highest rung of the hierarchy. According to Hocart 'the primary function of the king is to provide order'. The king 'continually regenerates the order of the universe' through 'the sacrifice, which he commands'.²² 'The king's purity at the moment of sacrifice guarantees that the world will be safe'. Therefore, 'the function of the *Brahman* and *sudra* alike is to ensure that the rulers are kept pure - free from the dangerous and polluting forces of nature - particularly at the moment of the sacrifice when order is ritually re-established'.²³ Therefore, the ultimate purpose of the rituals was to ensure the purity of the king at the time of the ritual.

¹⁹ Bougle, *Essays*, pp. 59,60.

²⁰ Arthur Maurice Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study*, (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 71.

²¹ Hocart, *Caste*, pp. 16 ff.

²² Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 139.

²³ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 139.

In the theory of Hocart the king was not to perform sacrifices but bear its expense and command others to perform it for the welfare of the state. Only through this could the welfare of the community be guaranteed by the king. As the 'sacrificer' the king was the patron of the sacrifice and thus commanded a higher ritual position than the other castes whose function was to uphold and ensure the purity of the king by performing the sacrifices for him. Hocart's conclusion is that 'the caste system is a sacrificial organization, that the aristocracy are feudal lords constantly involved in rites for which they require vassals or serfs, because some of these services involve pollution from which the lord must remain free'.²⁴ In Hocart's interpretation, what is absolutely paramount is that the king (the ksatriya) 'must be kept separate from everyone else'.²⁵

Theoretically Hocart manages to strike a balance between two theories of the nature of caste which endorse two different concepts of history namely a materialist conception and an idealist conception. Materialists claim caste to be 'simply a rationalization, and obfuscation, of more base inequalities'.²⁶ Taking into consideration the general notion that 'high' castes are wealthier than low castes, the materialists point out purity and impurity to be an expressive idiom which serves the function of 'legitimizing and obscuring the 'true' nature of social divisions'.²⁷ The idealists explain caste as a cultural construct which is founded on religious ideas which maintain that castes are ranked higher or lower in accordance with 'religiously conceived notions of purity and pollution'. The ideologists see caste as 'an ideological framework for explaining universal problems of social order',²⁸ and argue that caste ideology attempts to provide a transcendent foundation for the social order.

Hocart's contention is that caste ideology serves to and seeks to furnish a transcendent foundation for the social order. Nevertheless caste society as such is a historic reality. It is completely bereft of any transcendental element in the sense that its existence is possible only in a kind of a political system; and

²⁴ Hocart, *Caste*, p. 17.

²⁵ Quigley, *Interpretation*, pp. 138,139.

²⁶ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 2.

²⁷ Quigley, *Interpretation*, pp. 2,3.

²⁸ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 3.

political systems are the products of particular historical happenings and circumstances. Thus, Hocart provides clues to understand caste interaction as being sociologically and historically conditioned. Thus king as the locus of socio-political power was the main actor in caste, and priestly status subordinated to the king by carrying over his impurity. Hocart further points out that caste is a way of regulating inequality, but it doesn't do it in an obscure manner, rather on the contrary inequalities are 'deliberately highlighted, glorified and perpetuated'.²⁹

Analysing Hocart's theory in the light of Douglas' argument we can see that here too a danger or threat to society permeates the whole set up, which needs to be ritually controlled. There is the possibility of transfer of natural impurity (incurred through war or violence) through rituals to acquire ritual purity. We can gather a refutation of the conventional argument that priesthood is on top of the hierarchy. He states that even priesthood is not entirely concerned with the spiritual and it essentially entails carrying over the 'secular impurity' of the king acquired through war and violence. Though Hocart has a different emphasis on the king as the locus of sociopolitical power and ritual purity, his theory too nevertheless finds its epistemological premise in the conflict between the pure and the impure. In this case the function of the other castes was to ensure the purity of the highest caste by absolving it of all impurity.

c) *Louis Dumont*

The next theory I propose to analyse is a reductionist approach where the three tendencies of caste elucidated by Bougle are reduced to a 'single true principle'- the opposition of the pure and the impure. This is the ideological approach of Louis Dumont who has significantly influenced studies on the caste system. Dumont's work *Homo Hierarchicus* has continued to be a popular point of reference for theoretical analyses of caste ideology. In *Homo Hierarchicus* Dumont argues for understanding Hindu caste society in holistic or structural terms. For him the undergirding ideology of this hierarchically stratified society was fundamentally the opposition of the pure and the impure.

²⁹ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 3.

Caste, for Dumont, is little more than the working out of the complementary opposition between the pure and the impure on a substantive level.³⁰ 'Superiority and superior purity are identical: it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status'.³¹ Hierarchy for Dumont was virtually the superiority of the pure to the impure, which demands that the pure and the impure be segregated. Apart from being a hierarchy of value it was a hierarchy which needed to be perceived in a holistic sense. Thus, for him the important thing regarding caste was the nature of the relations between caste groups more than the nature of the caste group.³² Dumont defines hierarchy 'as *the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole*, it being understood that in the majority of societies it is religion which provides the view of the whole, and that the ranking will thus be religious in nature'.³³

For Dumont caste system is hierarchical 'not just in the sense of a system of superordination and subordination achieved by the exercise of power but also in the sense of a system ordered by an encompassing set of values'.³⁴ He recognises that there is a great polyvocality and variation in the manner in which the opposition of purity and pollution is expressed in caste relations. However, he maintains that this ideological opposition predominantly permeates the system. He argues that this fundamental opposition is the form of all the distinctions of caste in the sense that it is only an expressive idiom used to understand the Hindu society. He does not 'claim that the opposition between pure and impure is the 'foundation' of society except in the intellectual sense of the term'. Rather, 'it is by implicit reference to this opposition that the society of castes appears consistent and rational to those who live in it'.³⁵

³⁰ R. L. Stirrat, 'Caste Conundrums: Views of Caste in a Sinhalese Catholic Fishing Village', in Dennis B. Mc Gilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology*, No. 9, General Editor Jack Goody, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), (pp. 8-33), p. 12.

³¹ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, (London: Paladdin, 1972), p. 56.

³² Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 32.

³³ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 66. Emphasis in Original.

³⁴ Sharma, *Caste*, p. 21.

³⁵ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 44.

He argues later that this opposition governs the separation between the caste groups. People actually act with one another in conformity with an understanding of relative superiority and inferiority. Dumont's argument seems to be pointing out suggestively to the fact that notions of purity and pollution became referential for the behaviour and interaction of the caste groups. We find this clearly expressed by Mary Douglas, who, introducing *Homo Hierarchicus* writes:

..the idiom of purity is only too well known to us. It is liable to dominate our transactions with one another whenever other kinds of social distinction, based on authority and wealth are not clear. Purity and impurity are principles of evaluation and separation. The purer must be kept uncontaminated by the less pure.³⁶

Dumont points out that the hierarchical ordering of society is based upon an ideological opposition of the pure and the impure. The relative ranking of each group was on a scale of purity and impurity. In particular Dumont's work has been seminal in the magnitude of sustained intellectual debate it has evoked. His intention was to organise the myriad complexity of caste manifestations into a systemic set of structural principles. However Dumont's theory has evoked much criticism, knowledge of which is pertinent for a broader understanding caste. In the following section I briefly point to some aspects of the criticism that his theory has evoked.

3 - Post-Dumontian Criticism

a) Conflict with the Empirical Operation of Caste

Dumont's theory about the ideology of caste has been thought to be flawed by critics like Quigley who claim that this argument is soaked through with

³⁶ Mary Douglas, 'Introduction', in *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 16.

preconceptual notions of Hindu society.³⁷ Though it has been lauded as a ‘theory’ his arguments have been severely criticised on the basis of various ethnographic studies because of their alleged estrangement from the actual empirical operation of caste.

Berreman points out the methodological fallacy of Dumont as listening too much to the Brahmans at the expense of the views of other regions of the hierarchical structure. Dumont’s view is in close conformity, ‘to the high caste ideal of what the caste system of Hindu India ought to be like according to those who value it positively: it conforms well to the theory of caste purveyed by learned Brahmanical tracts’.³⁸ Berreman argues that Dumont’s theory ‘bears little relationship to the experience of caste in the lives of many millions who live it in India, or to the feeble reflections of those lives that have made their way into the ethnographical, biographical and novelistic literature’ and insists this to be a travesty, which could become clear upon a frank talk with an untouchable.³⁹

b) The ‘Fallacy’ of Priestly Purity

It has also been demonstrated, through field studies, how certain groups do not accept the principle of hierarchy which is delineated by Dumont.⁴⁰ According to Dumont the hierarchical principle of purity and pollution has its foundation in the contrast between Brahmans and ‘Untouchables’. ‘It is generally agreed that the opposition is manifested in some macroscopic form in the contrast between the two extreme categories: Brahmans and ‘Untouchables’. The Brahmans being in principle priests, occupy the supreme rank with respect to the whole set of castes’.⁴¹

³⁷ Quigely, *Interpretation*, p. 2.

³⁸ Gerald Berreman, ‘The Brahmanical View of Caste,’ in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.), Vol. 5, 1971, (pp. 16-23), p. 23.

³⁹ Gerald Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequalities*, (Meerut: Folklore Institute, 1979), p. 162.

⁴⁰ Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*, (London: Athlone Press, 1991).

⁴¹ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 47.

But anthropologists have found it problematic to accept the proposal that, through their function as priests, Brahmans were the highest *varna*. Parry's study of the Mahabrahmans or the funeral priests of Benares provides insights to understand priests as vessels of impurity and defilement, who through rituals and acceptance of ritual gifts carry on themselves the pollution of their patrons.⁴² Parry points out that 'the priest's status is highly equivocal; and he is seen not so much as the acme of purity as an absorber of sin. Just as the low caste specialists remove the biological impurities of their patrons, so the Brahman priest removes their spiritual impurity by taking their sins upon himself through the act of accepting their gifts'.⁴³

On a scale of 'decreasing ethereality' the Mahabrahmans rank very low. Their function as death priests renders them as intermediaries between this world and the forces of decay and destruction and thus as potential sources of defilement.⁴⁴ This is in conformity with Douglas' argument that higher proximity with the sources of 'organic impurity' (here death) renders one less pure. We can discern the impingement of 'organic impurity' into the social realm.

The arguments of a few more sociologists also are consistent with Douglas' argument that contact with sources of impurity lessens one's ritually pure status. Interestingly these sociologists see the gifts offered to priests as virtual sources of impurity because they carry the impurity of the sins of the sacrificer. When a priest accepts a gift from a sacrificer or patron he accepts the impurity of the patron (a Hocartian idea again). Raheja agrees with the idea of potential pollution through gift-acceptance.⁴⁵ Heesterman posits an argument that an ideal brahmin achieves purity not through priesthood but by abstention from priestly activity because priestly activity is a source of impurity, through the acceptance of *dakshina* which carries the impurity of the sins of the sacrificer. He says that it is the *dakshina* (payment) offered to the priests which makes good a sacrifice.

⁴² J. P. Parry, 'Ghosts, Greed and the Sin: The Occupational Identity of the Benares Funeral Priests', in *Man*, (n.s.), Vol. 15, 1980, (pp. 88-111), and J. P. Parry, 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"', in *Man*, (n.s.), Vol. 21, 1986, (pp. 453-73).

⁴³ Parry, 'Ghosts, Greed', p. 89.

⁴⁴ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 55.

⁴⁵ G. G. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Acceptance of this *dakshina*, though dangerous, is nevertheless obligatory to the priest and hence priestly work is defiling.⁴⁶ ‘The function of the Brahmin officiant is to take over the death impurity of the patron by eating from the offerings and by accepting *dakshinas*’. Moreover, ‘the Brahmin is not allowed to refuse the *dakshina*’.⁴⁷

c) *The Subordination of Priesthood to Kingship*

In the later part of his work Dumont argued that the basis of the hierarchical opposition in caste was based on the separation of spiritual power (priestly) and secular power (kingly).⁴⁸ What distinguishes Hindu caste is the ideological subordination of the secular power of the ruler to the ritual purity of the Brahman. Quigley points out that the mistake with Dumont’s idea is ‘to claim that the priest’s authority is somehow transcendent. The priest can *claim* that his authority is transcendent but in fact it depends on his position in a structure and, in particular, on his relation to the king or dominant caste’.⁴⁹ Scepticism about this ideological notion has been expressed in various studies.⁵⁰ They argue (along Hocartian lines) that by virtue of wielding economic and social power the ruler class or its local equivalent stands on top of the hierarchy. This kingly caste plays the leading role in organising rituals and the priests are subordinate to this caste.

⁴⁶ See J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, chapter on ‘Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer’, (pp. 26-44), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁴⁷ Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict*, p. 27. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, (Complete rev. English edn.), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 50 ff and pp. 70 ff.

⁴⁹ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 51.

⁵⁰ See G. G. Raheja, ‘India: Caste, Kingship and Dominance Reconsidered’, in *ARA*, Vol. 17, 1988, (pp. 497-522), p. 517. See also Mc Gilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, and Quigley, *Interpretation*.

d) Negligence of the Nuances of Removal of Inauspiciousness

Closely related to the previous two ideas is the aspect of removal of inauspiciousness. Dumont does not sufficiently note this aspect in the operation of caste, as well as the nuances of purity and pollution implicit in that function of priesthood. Raheja has explored different ideas about purity and pollution. To an extent she follows the line of thought of Douglas about the channelling and removal of sources of impurity and inauspiciousness. She follows the ‘organic’ line stating that natural impurity permeates human existence through birth, death or menstruation. There is a flow of inauspiciousness everywhere not necessarily only in the realm of inter-caste interaction, but also through the ‘connections of the body’, ‘between persons, and when these connections are transformed (at birth) or attenuated and created anew (at marriage)’. Inauspiciousness, which flows over, as it were, must be channelled or removed.⁵¹

On the basis of her study among the *Gujars* (dominant non-brahmannical caste) of Pahansu, she observes that generally though ideas of purity and pollution prevail, the idea of hierarchy is not always necessarily involved. The primary concern is to remove inauspiciousness through prestations and avoid danger. She says that Gujars don’t perceive ritual gift-giving as a matter of hierarchical status. ‘(T)hey give such prestations, in the course of a wedding, to the groom, to the barber, to the sweeper, and to the Brahman, and they do not interpret the gifts in terms of the relative superiority or inferiority of these recipients. It is, rather, the obligation of the recipients, as *patra* [vessels], to accept these prestations for the well being and auspiciousness of the *jajman*’.⁵²

Raheja’s primary point is that removal of auspiciousness is the main rationale behind the ritual of giving gifts and not the assertion of superiority. In fact according to her study all castes engage in prestations indiscriminately as a removal of inauspiciousness. However there is an implicit assertion of the hierarchical superiority of the *jajman* or the patron whose well being is sought to be upheld in the process of giving and accepting presents. Thus it is more the

⁵¹ Raheja, *The Poison*, p. 147.

⁵² Raheja, *The Poison*, p. 147.

question of the central (dominant caste) as opposed to the peripheral (other castes). According to Raheja, hierarchy is not the encompassing cultural value. Rather it is one contextually stressed way of construing caste in the village, and it exists alongside the values of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness that are associated with the central-peripheral.⁵³ It is difficult to accept Raheja *per se* on this view because she doesn't state that hierarchy is completely absent. She herself points out how she found the issue of hierarchy made manifest explicitly in matters of transaction of food, where the important question involved was 'who did the cooking?'⁵⁴ Nevertheless Raheja points our attention to another important way in which notions of purity and pollution function: that of removing inauspiciousness at the same time ensuring the welfare of the patron.

e) Summary

On the basis of our analysis of Bougle, Hocart and Dumont as well as of Post-Dumontian criticism we can delineate the following points at this stage about the notions of purity and pollution within the Indian caste system.

- a) Ideas of pollution are not centred around brahmannical purity always. Rather one's position in hierarchy depends on socio-political and economic standing as well (Hocart).
- b) Purity and pollution ideas are invoked to ensure removal of inauspiciousness and not for assertion of superiority explicitly (Raheja).
- c) They are invoked to avoid contacts which are perceived to pose danger and threat to society (Bougle).
- d) Seen from whichever angle, the one whose purity is considered most important is one who is at the apex of the social structure (Quigley).

⁵³ Raheja, 'India', p. 512.

⁵⁴ Raheja, *The Poison*, p. 241.

From this overview of the theoretical premises of these anthropologists I am inclined to accept the Dumontian theory that ideologically caste operation is an opposition of the pure and the impure. Though notions of purity and pollution are central to any discussion of caste their underlying ideologies are not always continuous or consistent, as these anthropologists have pointed out. This is one of the challenges which most researchers have to contend with when analysing caste. Now we will look at some of the problems that prevail in the operation of notions of purity and pollution before we move on to argue how, in spite of these inconsistencies, we can yet talk of notions of purity and pollution as being relevant to any discourse on caste.

C - Problems and Inconsistencies Prevalent in the Operation of Notions of Purity and Pollution

Having had a brief outline of some of the important theories of caste, we can say that notions of purity and pollution are pertinent to any discourse on caste. However this argument should be contested in the light of the inconsistencies which prevail in the empirical operation of the notions of purity and pollution. The Indian context is fraught with ambivalences and inconsistencies when it comes to the dynamics of caste operation. So this section will explore some of these inconsistencies and then argue for the relevance of the notions of purity and pollution as relevant theoretical categories for our debate in spite of these inconsistencies. We move from anthropological studies to the relevance of using the idiom of purity and pollution in day-to-day caste interaction in India.

M. N. Srinivas brings out how the notions of purity and pollution, though inconsistent, yet assume centrality in the caste society. According to Srinivas, 'Certain ideas regarding pollution and purity are cardinal to Hinduism'. Though differences exist *'between the various regions and castes in the strictness and elaborateness of the rules regarding pollution and purity'*, ideas of purity and

pollution 'cover a large sector of life. Inter-caste relations are governed at many points by ideas of pollution'.⁵⁵

Dennis B. Mc Gilvary also draws our attention to the 'pragmatic and historically contingent polyvocality' of caste interaction and points to the problem of ascertaining definite rank to each caste group within the society on a homogenous basis:

The constellation of behavioural traits commonly identified with the operation of local caste hierarchies, including asymmetrical inter-caste transactions in food and drink, asymmetrical removal of waste, caste endogamy or hypergamy, differential access to domestic and public space...can be surprisingly versatile and polyvocal markers of social rank. While they unambiguously convey assertions of relative superiority and inferiority – and this is clearly their intent – they do not unambiguously express the dimension or aspect of social rank which is being claimed.⁵⁶

The problem pointed above involves according definitive superior status for one particular caste over another on a common all India basis. Though, according to *varna* ideology, caste seems to be an immutable system where the place of each caste is definitively and clearly fixed for all time, in actual operation the position of several castes is far from clear.⁵⁷ This is because many caste groups interact on the basis of mutual rank. However as the caste system has always permitted a considerable amount of mobility within the castes 'mutual rank is ambiguous and therefore arguable'. Mutual ranking 'tends to be vague' in the middle sections of the caste hierarchy and 'not at either extremity' because at one extremity (the Brahmins) no mobility is possible while at the other extremity (the Dalits) it is extremely difficult.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, (London: J. K. Publishers, 1962), p. 151. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Mc Gilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, p. 5.

⁵⁷ Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 8. Emphasis Mine.

⁵⁸ Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 8.

One primary reason for the ease with which there is mobility among the middle castes is that although caste ranking is fixed in any particular village, it has never been nation-wide, especially for the middle castes. 'Ranking may even differ subtly as between villages in the same district. And between regions there may be great fluidity if only because so many of the middle castes do not extend beyond their own language area'.⁵⁹ South and central Indian caste groups like the *Mahrattas* (in Maharashtra), the *Reddis* (in Andhra Pradesh and parts of TamilNadu), the *Nairs* (in Kerala) and the *Godas* (in Karnataka) are 'powers in their own lands; they exist elsewhere only by recent immigration; a Punjab villager, say, cannot be expected to know quite where to put them'.⁶⁰ However, we need to recognise that all this 'theoretical confusion' and inconsistency is dispelled in the empirical operation of caste in a simple manner. 'In short, who pollutes, and when it pollutes are all highly variable; all that can be said is that the *people immediately concerned know the rules* through tradition and custom and they are too familiar with them to be bothered by their inconsistency'.⁶¹

The above arguments highlight the fact that there are definite ambiguities in the operation of caste. They also point out to the more important area of social mobility and fluidity of social ranking within the caste system. I have to admit that for purposes pertinent to my research I cannot be obsessed with a thorough going cultural particularism just because caste structuring and interaction has a polyvocality, which is geographically variant and fraught with complexities (a fact which I do not deny). Hence, I am convinced that my engagement with the cultural particularities of the localised caste structures ends with my pointing out to the complex and intricate patterning and operation of caste. However, I am not justifying my argument as an excuse to resort to naïve universalism: looking at caste as a homogenous entity as many Indian Christian Theologians have usually done. I seek to hold both these tendencies, i.e. cultural particularism and universalism, in a judiciously balanced dialectic tension because I am aware that a fair deal of generalisation is unavoidable for my research, for which I need not

⁵⁹ Taya Zankin, *Caste Today*, (London: Institute of Race Relations / Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 6.

⁶⁰ Zankin, *Caste Today*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Zankin, *Caste Today*, p. 18

necessarily pretend oblivion to the complexities of caste. It in this chapter I have, to the fairest extent possible, strived to maintain this tension.

Now having made the point that caste is different in its operation we move on to point to some of the central features of the operation of caste. We attempt to answer the question – ‘What are certain important things that can definitely be said about caste and the notions of purity and pollution in a general manner?’

1 - Notions of Purity and Pollution as the Encompassing Ideology of Caste Interaction: The Dialectical Tension

There has been considerable restraint and resistance in accepting notions of purity and pollution as having ascriptive social value. This has been reflected in the non-acceptance of notions of purity and pollution by ‘lower castes’. Gerald Berreman repeatedly draws attention to the fact that ‘low caste people’ do not accept the unclean and demeaning status assigned to them.⁶² According to Ursula Sharma’s summary of Berreman’s argument, people belonging to the ‘low castes’ had their own definitions for the caste situation and did not subscribe to Dumont’s ‘ideological celebration of hierarchy based on principles of purity and pollution’. The diverse notions of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the development of the caste system that prevail among the ‘low castes’ impinge more on reference to superior *power* of the high castes rather than superior *purity*. More often than not, having left with no other option than to risk being beaten up or face deprivation of their livelihood the ‘lower castes’ cope with their assigned inferior and unclean status. As coping mechanisms they elaborate their own myths and ideologies in which their own caste is portrayed as being displaced from the high status that it was ‘really’ entitled to. Usually this displacement is interpreted as resulting through the deceit of high castes or by way of quirk of fate or sheer misfortune.⁶³

⁶² See Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequalities*.

⁶³ Ursula M. Sharma, ‘Berreman Revisited; Caste and the Comparative Method’, in Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula M. Sharma (eds.), *Contextualising Caste: Post-Dumontian Approaches*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/ Sociological Review, 1994), (pp. 73-91), pp. 73 ff.

Berreman's main contention was that because the 'higher castes' wielded considerable economic power over the 'low castes' the latter couldn't openly resist or express their resentment towards the polluted position ascribed to them.⁶⁴ He however stressed the fact that ascriptive status on the basis of relative purity or pollution did not gain acceptance among the 'lower-castes' and was resented strongly. The 'low castes' did not subscribe to these ideological 'machinations'.

Though some 'low castes' do not often accept the impure status assigned to them this is not evidence by itself to prove that they don't believe in notions of purity and pollution at all. In fact such people who resent being considered 'impure' themselves often resort to claiming superiority over other 'lower-castes' using the ideology of purity and pollution. Taya Zinkin reports the following observations:

One Untouchable caste may well apply to the Untouchable caste below it much the same restrictions that are applied by the Touchable castes above. I was mobbed by Chamars when I persuaded a Dom to draw water from their well – my first contact with untouchability within Untouchability.⁶⁵

Moffat's ethnographic study in the South Indian village of *Endavur* contains echoings along similar lines.⁶⁶ Moffat points out to an interesting 'Harijan'⁶⁷ sub-system' among the Dalits, which is a reciprocation of the hierarchical ranking found in the caste system. These groups practice exclusion based on notions of purity and pollution especially when it comes to marriage and commensality. He finds a striking emulation of caste practices in 'intra-untouchable' separations complemented by the necessity to maintain rank. According to Moffat, 'at the deeper level of Indian village culture so conceptualized, Untouchables and higher-caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs...in nearly total conceptual and evaluative consensus with one another'.⁶⁸ Moffat's interpretation is that

⁶⁴ Gerald Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 224 ff.

⁶⁵ Zinkin, *Caste Today*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ M. Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 290 ff.

⁶⁷ This is a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi as a substitute for 'untouchables'. It literally means people (*Jan*) of God (*Hari*). However Dalits have not accepted the word.

⁶⁸ Moffat, *An Untouchable Community*, p. 291.

Dalits and other 'low castes' have recreated the functions and relations from which they themselves have been excluded in the macro-caste system.

Gerald Berreman's studies in his self-named '*Sirkanda*' village in the erstwhile Uttar Pradesh state⁶⁹ contains reports of blacksmiths resenting being treated as 'untouchables' on par with the others because unlike the others they refrain from eating the flesh of buffaloes and cattle.⁷⁰ There have been instances of 'low castes' claiming superior status over other 'low-castes' citing 'purer' dietary habits. Unnithan-Kumar's study in Rajasthan among the *Girasia* tribe reports how the *Girasia* claim superior status over the 'tribal' Bhils citing one of the reasons for the latter's impure status as involving eating the flesh of the domestic buffalo.⁷¹ Moffat's study in South India also contains such reports where pork and beef-eating groups claimed superior status over frog-eating groups.⁷² Sharma also points out that citing of impure occupations like tanning and scavenging to justify the low status of certain castes is very much a probability. These evidences suggest that 'lower caste' people do use the notions of purity and pollution to differentiate themselves from the other 'lower castes'.

On the basis of the analysis of the above-mentioned factors I conclude that the operation of notions of purity and pollution among the 'lower-castes' is premised in the context of a dialectic tension between 'resistance to' and 'utilisation of' these notions in a fascinating interplay of claims and counterclaims to status. This ideology is employed by caste groups when they claim superior status over other parallel groups and vehemently resisted when used to emphasise their own inferiority on the perpendicular level. However the point that is important is that notions of purity and pollution are an important idiom employed in caste interactions especially in negotiating status.

⁶⁹ Because Berreman uses a pseudonym Sirkhanda for the village it is difficult to ascertain whether the village is still a part of the state of Uttar Pradesh because Uttar Pradesh was bifurcated leading to the formation of the present Uttarakhand state which predominantly covers the mountainous Himalayan range regions.

⁷⁰ Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, p. 221.

⁷¹ M. Unnithan-Kumar, *Identity, Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan*, (Oxford: Bergahn, 1997), p. 87.

⁷² Moffat, *An Untouchable Community*, p. 130.

Certain processes of achieving upward social mobility, like the process of 'sanskritisation' conceptualised by Srinivas, also borrow heavily from the distinctions between the pure and impure. Through the process of sanskritisation a 'lower caste' 'was able, in a generation of two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins'.⁷³ We can understand sanskritisation as a process of emulation whereby a caste community seeks to shrug off an inferior identity by adopting practices considered more pure or superior. Therefore, in sanskritisation there is a greater proclivity towards Brahmannical practices (though not always necessarily), even in places where the other castes were dominant, because the Brahminical mode of life did command a certain amount of prestige even in areas where non-Brahmin castes enjoyed a monopoly of secular power.⁷⁴

Therefore, we see that the idiom of purity and pollution is not only used by the 'lower castes' to assert superior status over other 'lower castes'; rather it is also used in renegotiating one's social status and to achieve upward social mobility by adhering to practices and rituals considered superior or relatively pure.⁷⁵ Thus we can state with conviction that notions of purity and pollution and assertion of superiority are intrinsically interlinked to a large extent in India's caste interaction and operation. Notions of pure and impure are employed in claims and counterclaims for superior status either via specific processes of social change like sanskritisation or through the semiotics of day-to-day social interaction between castes.

⁷³ M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1952), p. 32.

⁷⁴ Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 11.

⁷⁵ However it needs to be mentioned that there is no evidence of the sanskritisation process being effective in changing the status of the Dalit communities.

2 - Notions of Purity and Pollution and the Irony of Conformity to Social Conventions

One also needs to acknowledge the role of social-conditioning in the influencing of human attitudes to notions of purity and pollution. According to K. Kapadia interest in notions of purity is more to stake a claim to social status than anything 'fundamental'. Based on her field work in *Aruloor* in Tamil Nadu, Kapadia argues that 'upper caste' people in *Aruloor* conformed to purity regulations in the interests of maintaining collective caste status whereas there was a great deal of personal cynicism towards the strictures demanded by the rules of purity and pollution. Kapadia interprets this cynicism as being best reflected, (though secretly), in their meat eating and indulging in affairs with 'low caste women'. The upper caste men of *Aruloor* claimed ritual purity in public though their actual behaviour conflicted with the conventional social behaviour prescribed for them.

Kapadia also points to the cynical attitude of the *Pallars* ('low caste' group) of *Aruloor* towards 'upper caste' claims to ritual superiority. They firmly rejected the ritual impurity imposed on them by the 'upper castes'. However the *Pallars* treated other 'low castes' like barbers and washermen as being ritually inferior to them. She argues, however, that this 'is not evidence of any fundamental interest in ritual purity. On the contrary, this has much to do with making a claim to social status. The *Pallars* are merely treating their service castes in exactly the same way as other castes treat theirs. They are following conventional social behavior'.⁷⁶

Though there may be no fundamental interest in ritual purity, as Kapadia claims, yet we can see that all claims to social status as well as adherence to social conventions center around purity and the maintenance of separation and hierarchy. Ultimately the language employed is that which has connotations of pure and impure.

⁷⁶ K. Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 117,118.

3 - Weakening of Notions of Purity and Pollution and their Contemporary Relevance

Notions of purity and pollution have an enigmatic presence in Indian society. At certain levels we see a declining influence of notions of purity and pollution whereas at another level we still find 'lower castes' being refused entry into the household of 'upper-castes' and denied use of 'upper-caste' wells or streets. As early as 1962 Srinivas pointed to the weakening of ideas of purity and pollution which effected changes in the caste system. Even villages 'experienced a certain amount of liberalization. This process has, however, been accompanied by the greater activity of caste in administration and politics. Adult franchise and Panchayat Raj have provided new opportunities for castes. In the course of exploitation of new opportunities, the caste system has undergone a certain amount of change'.⁷⁷

However the prevailing fear of contagion and segregation of the living spaces of the 'Dalits' point to the fact that notions of purity and pollution persist. Thus in the wake of this enigmatic presence of notions of purity and pollution it makes sense to talk of notions of purity and pollution when discussing the caste situation in India. Sharma is not wrong when she points out that despite the recognisable weakening of the notions of purity and pollution, those notions persist as important idioms of sociological interaction. According to Sharma:

It is widely recognized that among many groups the force of some ritual prohibitions has now weakened ...and some restrictions proved very difficult to maintain in the crowded urban context where the caste of the person who sits in the next seat in train or bus or who serves in the tea shop may be impossible to ascertain. However, it does appear that in spite of the decline in practice of ritual restrictions, the vocabulary of ritual purity and pollution still provides one language for talking about caste –

⁷⁷ Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 5.

less for justifying the entire caste system, it would seem, than for discussing the relative status of specific local castes.⁷⁸

Sharma's main point however is that 'it would seem that the concepts of ritual purity and pollution are still current, but are appealed to in the discussion of specific castes rather than as a general ideological principle underlying and justifying the schema of things'.⁷⁹ What I seek to point out at this juncture is that in India the situation is one in which weakening of notions of purity and pollution and the reinforcement of notions of purity and pollution co-exist parallelly. Thus notions of purity and pollution are still relevant categories to analyse caste.

4 - Separation of Castes and the Maintenance of a Meta-cosmic Harmony

This is one important feature of the caste system which is responsible for much of the rigidity and aggression associated with maintaining segregation between various castes as well as the reluctance of caste groups to transcend the boundaries of caste interaction.

One can see a correspondence between social and cosmological concerns in the operation of caste. There is an inextricable, though complex, intertwining of the notions of caste separation and the maintenance of a meta-cosmic harmony based on the idea that the caste divisions at the social level are in fact meant to uphold a more transcendent foundation which encompasses the whole universe. According to Quigley:

There is a general agreement that the *varnas* must be kept apart because the functions they represent are so different in kind that to confuse them

⁷⁸ Sharma, *Caste*, pp. 36,37.

⁷⁹ Sharma, *Caste*, p. 37.

would be to imperil both the social order and the very safety of the universe.⁸⁰

This correspondence between the social and the cosmic becomes clear when one takes a closer look at one of the indigenous concepts used for caste namely *varna*. The basic idea of *varna* is that of a function which is necessary to ensure maintenance of cosmic stability. It was used by the Aryan settlers who were predominantly a vedic group. Vedic literature and rituals were centred around sacrifice necessary for the maintenance of the continuity of the universe. In consistence and conformity with this central vedic idea the concept of *varna* emerges from a sacrificial theory of human society.⁸¹ According to the mythical theory known as the 'Purusha myth' the four *varnas* emanated from particular parts of the body of the primeval being - the *Purusha* - who was sacrificed at the beginning of time. The narrative goes as follows:

With Purusha as offering, the Devas performed a sacrifice...On the grass they besprinkled him, the Sacrifice Purusha, the first born ...

When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called?

His mouth became the Brahman; his two arms were made into the rajanya; his two thighs the vaishyas ; from his two feet the shudra was born

(Rigveda x, 90: 11-12).⁸²

According to Harold A. Gould, 'the entire passage bespeaks of the permeation of the sentient world with divine essence through religious sacrifice. Society itself (*varna*) is sacralized and becomes an instrumentality of the sacrifice'.⁸³ This varnaic division carries within it the doctrine that mortal life is just an episode in an almost endless quest for life transcendence.

⁸⁰ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 138.

⁸¹ Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 6.

⁸² Abinash Chandra Bose, *Hymns From the Vedas*, (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 287.

⁸³ Harold A. Gould, *The Hindu Caste System: The Sacralization of a Social Order*, (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1987), p. 14.

The *Purusha* myth identifies the structure of the society with the all encompassing supernatural essence of the *Purusha* while at the same time stressing the fact that everything is born and sustained through sacrificial ritual. The sacrifice of the *Purusha* for the formation of society only means that further sacrifices were necessary to maintain and sustain the meta-cosmic harmony or the order of the universe. Thus it was necessary for each *varna* to perform certain functions as divinely ordered responsibilities. This meant that the different caste groups had different functions. The fundamentally different functional responsibility of each *varna* is delineated clearly in the Code of Manu (200 BC-AD 200) which is a Hindu law book. 'Manu lays down that the duty of the brahman is to study and teach, to sacrifice, and to give and receive gifts; the ksatriya must protect the people, sacrifice, and study; the vaishya also sacrifices and studies, but his chief function is to breed cattle, to till the earth, to pursue trade and to lend money; the sudra's duty is only to serve the three higher classes'.⁸⁴

However, major contradictions exist when it comes to the empirical operation of *varna*. Caste in India does not rigidly follow the fourfold *varna* hierarchy. The fact in Indian reality remains that this fourfold functional stratification is seldom the operational unit in India. 'The caste system of even a small region is extraordinarily complex and it does not fit into the *varna* – frame except at one or two points'.⁸⁵ Nevertheless one cannot say that the *purusha* myth (which is the basis of the *varna* based division of castes) with its transcendental foundation of maintaining a meta-cosmic unity can be negated as being irrelevant to the caste operation in India. The ideology of separation which is related to 'function' in the above mentioned *purusha* myth is revoked and acted out in a different manner empirically in the *jati* set up using the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*.

⁸⁴ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Sub- continent Before the Coming of the Muslims*, (Calcutta: Fontana/ Rupa and Co, 1971), p. 139.

⁸⁵ According to Srinivas, 'For instance, the local caste-group claiming to be Kshatriya may be a tribal or near-tribal group or a low caste which acquired political power as recently as a hundred years ago. The local trading caste again might be similar in its culture to one in the 'Shudra' category, and far removed from the Sanskritized Vaishya of the *varna* system. Finally, castes included in the shudra category might not only not be servants, but landowners wielding a lot of power over everyone including local Brahmins'. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, pp. 7, 8.

The concepts of *karma* and *Dharma* constitute a doctrine of theodicy which sacralises the social order in the *jati* set up. According to this doctrine each caste has a *dharma* (preordained occupational or ritual function) which needs to be upheld by one's day to day *karma* (action, behaviour). Fidelity to this *dharma* results in a better rebirth whereas trespass of *dharma* means that one could be born as an animal or an outcaste in the next birth. As S. C. Dube points out 'the concepts of sin, merit, and pollution are fundamental to the concept of *dharma*. *Dharma*, which means 'that which is right', covers all the phases of the human life cycle and fixes several details of intra and inter-group life'.⁸⁶ Commenting on the influential potential of this phenomenon, Hocart says the theodicy implicit in the doctrine of *karma* combined with 'the empirical social order through the promise of rebirth' and 'gave this social order the irresistible power over thought and hope of men (*sic*) embedded in this order and furnished the fixed schema for the religious and social integration of the various professional groups and pariah people'.⁸⁷

There is an infiltration of this predominantly *vedic* ideology into the empirical operation of caste, which has resulted in serious repercussions especially with regard to the violence committed against the Dalit communities. This doctrine is one of the primary reasons why people of the higher castes thwart any attempts by the 'lower castes' to transcend prescribed levels of social, economic, religious and political status. The way the 'upper castes' understand and act out this ideal of *dharma* is probed and elucidated by Sathianathan Clarke as follows:

Violation of the basic rights of the Dalit communities is the prerogative claimed by the caste communities. Convention – rooted in the hazy idea of socially enacting some version of the Hindu world vision - directs the mechanics of human identity formation in India...

Ideologically, caste communities function as cosmic facilitators and overseers of a Hindu world vision, which attempts to order human society according to the original pattern embodied by the Divine One. The

⁸⁶ S. C. Dube, *Indian Village*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 92,93.

⁸⁷ Hocart, *Caste*, p. 131.

foundational myth for this is found in Rig veda. This key vedic text sanctions the establishment and maintenance of a comprehensive, systemic, hierarchical and unequal structuring of human society on the basis of *varna* (caste)... any liberty given to Dalits to reconstruct their identity would jeopardize the duties placed by the Hindu vision of society on the caste communities.⁸⁸

The idea of caste stratification as mandatory ritual operation, which is essential for the maintenance of a transcendental order or meta-cosmic harmony, provides clues as to why a rigid stringency is observed with regard to maintaining boundaries between castes especially when it comes to marriage, commensality and to a considerable extent proximity and casual interaction even in today's 'modern' setting. This is a form of 'ideological captivity' in which people of various castes are made to believe that separation as well as maintenance of hierarchy amount to performing a religious function.

Along with the cumulative entitlements that a hierarchical ordering of society can offer, it is this whole conception of maintaining the transcendental foundations of caste which hinders people from transcending caste barriers and relating with people from the 'lower castes'. Maintenance of separation and hierarchy are important for the maintenance of a meta cosmic harmony. This separation can be maintained only by strictures with regard to food, marriage and interaction. Hence the idiom of purity is employed. This doctrine influences the maintenance of separateness between groups on the premise that it is one's divinely-ordered responsibility to maintain the status quo. Separation is maintained using the idiom of purity and pollution as well as the concept of danger through misalliance or dangerous interaction because any trespass of one's *dharma* is feared to affect the cosmos. Thus, connotations of pollution are connected with the maintenance of a meta-cosmic harmony through the ideal of *dharma*. This makes renunciation of caste all the more difficult because such renunciation would imply failure to do one's divinely ordained tasks.

⁸⁸ Sathianathan Clarke, 'Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence: A Contest between Overpowering and Empowering Identities in Changing India', in *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 54. No. 3, 2002, (pp. 278-293), pp. 281.

5 - Summary

Having had an overview of the various aspects of the operation of the notions of purity and pollution, we can sum up our observations as follows and argue for the relevance of notions of purity and pollution as important theoretical categories in any discourse on caste:

- a) The empirical operation of notions of purity and pollution is premised in a dialectical tension between 'resistance to' and 'utilization of' such notions by caste groups as they seek to appropriate their relative position to each other. The idiom of purity and pollution is employed in claims and counter-claims for status.
- b) Notions of purity and pollution constitute both the idiom and form of achieving upward social mobility. Emulative processes like sanskritization are centred on renegotiating status by adopting the 'pure' and shedding the 'impure'. Also the link between notions of purity and hierarchy becomes more pronounced through such processes.
- c) Even in contexts which are cynical towards and deny the fundamental nature of the opposition between pure and impure these notions continue to prevail in the form of adherence to conventional social behaviour.
- d) Weakening of notions of purity and the reinforcement of this ideological opposition in various ways occur parallel to each other in India.
- e) Notions of purity and pollution are linked to the idea of maintaining a meta-cosmic harmony through the concept of *Karma* which is a doctrine of theodicy. This inhibits caste groups from transcending the boundaries of caste.

On the basis of the above arguments we can conclude that notions of purity and pollution continue to be pertinent to any discourse on caste. They

constitute the epistemological framework within which the caste-system, especially the relationship between different castes, can be premised and understood. They continue to be a relevant theoretical category in the analysis of caste.

D - Theorising Dalit Communities under the Notions of Purity and Pollution

There is wide and implicit acknowledgement of the foundational influence of the notions of purity and pollution in the oppression of Dalit communities. G. S. Ghurye in his *Caste, Class and Occupation* points to the centrality of ideas of purity when analysing the situation of the Dalits. For Ghurye 'ideas of purity, whether occupational or ceremonial, which are found to have been a factor in the genesis of caste are the very soul of the idea and practice of untouchability'.⁸⁹ Notions of purity and pollution assume various operative hues while permeating the life situation of the Dalit communities. In this section we attempt to analyse the life situation of the Dalit communities under the notions of purity and pollution and examine how these notions operate to negate the dignity of the Dalits and relegate them to a sub-human existence.

1 - Dalits: The Embodiment of Pollution

The Dalit communities are considered capable of polluting everything within the range of 74 feet. Their shadow is believed to pollute well water. So they are denied access to the village wells. They had to cover their mouth with a little pot when speaking with 'caste people'.⁹⁰ To avoid physical contagion usually the

⁸⁹ G. S. Ghurye, *Caste, Class and Occupation*, (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1961), p. 214.

⁹⁰ James Elisha, 'Liberative Motifs in the Dalit Religion', in *BTF*, Vol. 34, No. 2, December, 2002, (pp. 78-88), pp. 78 ff.

Dalits live in segregated areas outside the main villages. In Tamil Nadu their living areas are called '*para cheris*'. This situatedness of the *para cheris* away from the main village (*oor*) accentuate the social exclusion of the Dalit communities rather than their social identity with the village.⁹¹ Fah-hian writing about the *Candalas* (a Dalit *jati* of North India) states:

They live segregated from the rest of the society, and when they enter a city, they must sound an alarm by striking a piece of wood to warn everyone of their presence and enable the citizens to avoid running into them.⁹²

The Dharmasutras make it clear that direct or indirect contact with the Dalits can cause pollution. Pollution would occur if the Dalits are touched, conversed with or even looked upon. Rites of purification become mandatory after such pollution. The *Jatakas* (ancient Indian fables) contain tales of the daughters of a *Brahmin* and a *Vysya* washing their eyes after having looked at a *Candala*; and a starved *Brahmin* who dies from the embarrassment after having eaten food left by a *Candala*.⁹³

Not only were the Dalits deemed polluting but the people who came into 'contact' with them were considered to be polluting as well. One account has it that a female slave belonging to a *Sudhra jati* worked in a family of a *Prabhu* (upper-caste *jati*). The woman was found to have committed adultery with a Dalit (*Antyaj jati*) and thus was regarded as having become polluted. But as she had been working in the *Prabhu* household smearing the floor with cow dung, washing utensils, cutting vegetables and cooking their food she had transmitted her own 'acquired' impurity to the household through her indirect contact (*samsarg*). As a result of this the whole *Prabhu* household had to undergo a purification ceremony. Further the house land had to be dug up and purified by

⁹¹ Andre Beteille, *Castes: Old and New, Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification*, (London: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. 36.

⁹² S. Beal, *The Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-yum*, (trans. 2nd edn.), (London, 1964), p. 55. Quoted by Gen'ichi Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination in Ancient India and Its transition to the Medieval Period', in Hiroyuki Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), (Paper back edn.), (pp. 3-19), pp. 14.

⁹³ Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', pp. 12 ff.

letting a cow walk on it, the earthen ware and utensils were to be purified by fire and the wooden floor and door had to be destroyed because they could not be purified through fire. The other type of contact was the *spars or sparsaspars* which meant direct physical contact with the Dalits. Another tale goes that a barber who belonged to a *Shudra* caste (*Nhavi Jati*) unknowingly cut the hair of a Dalit. This bodily contact rendered the barber impure; leading to his excommunication which was annulled only after an 'appropriate' purification ceremony.⁹⁴

2 - Naming and Marginalisation

It is interesting to note that most of the terms used to denote the Dalits are fecund with implications of marginalisation and oppression. In most of the 'popular' terms used to denote the Dalits the concept of a 'boundary' is very much inherent. They are clearly demarcated from the caste-groups. Some of these terms are '*Varna-sankara*' (meaning people who are 'outside the caste system'); '*Avarnas*' (casteless people); '*Panchamas*' (fifth caste); '*Candalas*' (the worst people of the earth, during the Gupta period); 'Depressed Classes' in the British colonial days; 'Exterior Castes' by the census superintendent of Assam.⁹⁵ One should not ignore the most notorious term used for the Dalits – 'Untouchables'. This term vituperatively condenses the notion of purity and pollution which governed the social interaction and inter-relationships between the various caste groupings and Dalits in India.

The Indian constitution recognises the Dalits as the 'Scheduled Castes'. The Marathi word 'Dalit' which is derived from Sanskrit is now the most common term identifying the Scheduled Castes as a whole. The word is defined as

⁹⁴ Hiroyki Kotani, 'Ati Sudra Castes in the Medieval Deccan', in Kotani (ed.), *Caste System*, (pp. 55-75), p. 55 ff.

⁹⁵ V. Devasahayam, 'Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective', in Nirmal, (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 1-22), p. 1.

‘ground’ or ‘broken’ or reduced to pieces generally.⁹⁶ In its Sanskritic usage the term ‘Dal’ means ‘broken’ and ‘down-trodden’. These words really bring out ‘the effects of oppression’, which the Dalits have undergone over the years and are much in conformity with the Dalit life situation.⁹⁷ The one reason why this term has achieved dignified coinage is that it has been widely accepted by the Dalits. The word also maintains the dialectic tension between Dalit historicity as well as their own aspirations for emancipation, which is fuelled by their historical consciousness. Hence this term is considered as being affirmative in their striving towards dignity and equality. My intention in this section was to point out how the names given for the Dalit communities themselves are a reflection of their marginalised status.

3 - ‘Polluted’ & ‘Polluting’ through Origins

On the basis of notions of purity and pollution the origins of Dalits are identified as being ‘debased’ and ‘disruptive’, thus justifying their exclusion from the contours of society. An examination of the theories of origin of some of the Dalit *jatis* would definitely help us to theorize the Dalits under the notions of purity and pollution. As examples we will take into consideration two *jatis* - the *Candalas* found in North India and the *Paraiyars* found in South India. The Hindu law codes (meaning the *Dharmasutras* and their later systematisations the *Manu-smrithi*) postulate that the *Candala* was the progeny of the most condemned *Pratiloma* (hypogamous) marriage having a *Sudra* father and a *Brahmana* mother.⁹⁸ Allegedly this theory however is the ‘product of the *varna* conception of the orthodox *Brahmanas*’.⁹⁹ The same theory operates regarding the origins of the *Paraiyars*; that they are the communities who were born as a result of sexual

⁹⁶ In the words of A. P. Nirmal who pioneered Dalit Theology in India, the Dalits are 1) The broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split, 2) the opened, the expanded, 3) the bisected, 4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered, 5) the down trodden, the crushed the destroyed and 6) the manifested, the displayed. ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology’, in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 214-230), p. 214.

⁹⁷ Prabhakar, (ed.), *Towards*, p. 1.

⁹⁸ John C. B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*, (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2002), (2nd edn.), pp. 11,12.

⁹⁹ Yamazaki, ‘Social Discrimination’, pp. 10,11.

transgression of social boundaries fabricated by caste and thus ostracised. They are considered the progeny of hypogamous marriages where a 'lower caste' male married a 'higher caste' female.¹⁰⁰ But why are the progeny of people belonging to the four fold *varnas* ostracised?

The 'dividual-particle' theory postulated by McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden helps us with possible answers.¹⁰¹ The Hindu view of caste has as its basis the belief that human beings are born with a corresponding coded substance which is made up of particles capable of detachment and attachment to different human beings. Members of different castes constitute different coded particles the intermingling of which is considered to be unnatural, disruptive and disorderly for the Hindu social order. Considering the dividual-potential of the encoded-particles, physical interaction between human beings needs external social control to maintain auspiciousness and order.¹⁰² This is the function of the caste ordering. When intermingling of these particles takes place like for example through sexual relations it is considered unnatural and disruptive. There is a serious breach and rupture of the symmetrical social order. Thus, how else can order be restored than through the ejection of the 'products of this disharmonious and disruptive conjoining' (the Dalits) from within the contours of the society. Hence we have the Dalit communities who are relegated a place outside 'society' and contact with whom is cautioned to be potentially 'dangerous'. This can be comparatively analysed with Douglas' arguments about maintaining cognitive categories. Aberrations of cognitive categories can be regarded as anomalies, which pose a threat to society, and so need to be avoided.

¹⁰⁰ Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, (trans. by Henry K. Beauchamp), (3rd edn.), (Oxford: Calrendon Press, 1906), pp. 38 ff.

¹⁰¹ For more on this theory see McKim Marriott and Ronald B. Inden, 'Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems', in Kenneth David (ed.), *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*, (Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, Chicago: Aldine Publishers, 1977), (pp. 227-238), pp. 232,233.

¹⁰² Dipankar Gupta, *Social Stratification*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 25.

4 - 'Polluted' & 'Polluting' through Professions

'Pollution and maintenance of social distance are specific forms of segregation and inequality bred within the Indian caste system'.¹⁰³ The permanently polluted status of the Dalits is said to arise from the work they perform which involves contact with sources of impurity such as death and human excreta. Their occupations such as skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather and making shoes; playing in musical bands; butchery of animals; fishing; removal of human waste (excreta); attendance at cremation grounds; washing clothes; coconut harvesting and the brewing of toddy are considered the principal grounds of permanent pollution.¹⁰⁴ This is in conformity with Douglas' theory that the scale of purity and pollution was conversely proportional to one's proximity to potential sources of impurity like death, bodily refuse, leather and fermented produce.

The above mentioned points referring to the origins and professions of Dalits should logically make us question whether the Dalits are rendered impure because of their occupation (or) because of their origins? Are their menial occupations like scavenging, handling corpses and carcasses, drum beating in funeral processions and tending cremation grounds enforced on them as a form of punishment because of their disruptive origins? (or) Are they branded as being impure and polluting because they perform these works? Final answers to these questions continue to be elusive. One can make partial sense of it only by understanding the history of the evolution of socio-political hierarchy based on caste which Gen'ichi Yamazaki explains as follows:

The Later Vedic Era was also a time when the brahmanas secured the top position in society by virtue of their monopoly of the priesthood. A rough, primitive ideological distinction between purity and pollution developed to the point of fanaticism among the brahmanas, who used such ideas to legitimise their supreme position by stressing their own purity and sanctity.

¹⁰³ Tripathy, *Dalits*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7.

The kshatriyas ... saw the advantages of incorporating the ideas propounded by the brahmanas into their policies, thus contributing the political ingredient to the development of untouchability. That is to say, the existence of untouchables functioned to displace the dissatisfaction of the direct producers, vaisyas and sudras, within the varna-based society, thus ensuring a stable social order.¹⁰⁵

Thus, when the intentions of the dominant groups are clear is not often difficult to postulate reasons to achieve the end. What emerges is that the Dalits are reckoned to be in a state of permanent pollution, which is 'feared' to be contagious, and thus are denied access to many areas of social and religious life.¹⁰⁶ Andre Beteille sums up the results of the cumulative inequalities in the economic, religious and political systems which ultimately degraded the nature of Dalit existence (though he uses the term 'Harijans'):

To complete the social degradation of the Harijans, real and symbolic disabilities were also imposed on them by the locally dominant castes and the political authority (king or chief) of the region. Thus Harijans were supposed to supply free labour (*begar*) whenever the officials wanted them to do so and they were not allowed to wear the clothes or jewellery worn by the high castes. They had to live in huts with thatched roofs, and show proper deference in manners and speech to the upper castes.¹⁰⁷

At the end of this section we can conclude that notions of purity and pollution are the primary criteria employed to discriminate the Dalits. They have severe social, political and economic connotations. The Dalits are the victims of a social system, which sought (and still seeks) to maintain a feigned notion of auspiciousness, purity and order with the intention of self-perpetuation through constantly sustaining the status quo. In short, the caste system thrived (and thrives) as a result of these asymmetries fabricated by the underlying notions of purity and pollution.

¹⁰⁵ Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Beteille, *Castes*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁷ Beteille, *Castes*, p. 92.

E - Casteism and Christianity

Discrimination against Dalits on the grounds of purity and pollution is not a reality which prevails in Hinduism alone. Despite all claims of being egalitarian, Christianity is not free from caste discrimination. After dividing Indian Christianity as comprising of four segments of people namely, the *shudra* sub-castes, the out-caste untouchables, the hill tribal population and upper classes, Masilamani Azariah (without attempting to obfuscate the anathema of a caste-ridden Indian Christianity) candidly points a sordid picture of their inter-relationships as follows:

The inter-relationships between and among these four segments confessing the one Lord, one baptism and one faith seem to be incapable of achieving or witnessing to one fellowship as members of the same Body of Christ. This incapacity for fellowship clearly arises from the attitude to caste held by the different segments. Each segment seems to be affirming and holding on to the same old attitudes of caste that they had carried or brought into the Church, changing not even an iota from their former attitudes. The same unconscious structure of beliefs regarding caste that continue to dominate the different segments of the population outside the Church in society at large are continued also inside the Church.¹⁰⁸

James Massey quotes Archbishop George Zur, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to India, to point to the caste discrimination which prevails among the Catholic churches in India. According to Archbishop Zur:

Though Catholics of the lower caste and tribes form 60 percent of Church membership they have no place in decision-making. Scheduled caste converts are treated as lower caste not only by high caste Hindus but by high caste Christians too. In rural areas they cannot own or rent houses, however well-placed they may be. Separate places are marked out for them in parish

¹⁰⁸ Masilamani Azariah, 'The Church's Healing Ministry of the Dalits', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 316-323), p. 319.

churches and burial grounds. Inter-caste marriages are frowned upon and caste tags are still appended to the Christian names of high caste people. Casteism is rampant among the clergy and the religious. Though Dalit Christians make 65 percent of the 10 million Christians in the South, less than 4 percent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests.¹⁰⁹

The Protestant churches fare no better than the Catholic churches apart from the fact that some predominantly Dalit dioceses have got Dalit Bishops. The other ways in which casteism continues among the Indian churches are through:

- a) Non-acceptance of a Dalit priest by a caste congregation.
- b) Reluctance of 'upper caste' priests to pay pastoral visits to Dalit homes.
- c) Use of a separate chalice during the 'sharing' of the Eucharist.
- d) Preference to caste communities to partake in the Eucharist ahead of the Dalits in order to avoid pollution.
- e) Denial of access through the main door for the Dalits. Maintaining a separate entrance for the Dalits in churches where Dalits and the Caste communities worship together, separate seating and separate burial grounds.

These along with the strong discouragement of inter-caste marriages, help us to recognise how notions of purity and pollution are strongly entrenched in the 'caste-Christian' psyche.¹¹⁰ In Tamil Nadu only upper caste Christians have their feet washed by priests on Holy Thursday. During the parish festival the decorated car is not permitted to pass through the streets of Dalit Christians.¹¹¹ Researches in places where both the 'upper-castes' and Dalits are predominantly Christian have shown that notions of purity and pollution play an influential role in determining social-discrimination and social relations between these two groups

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), p. 82.

¹¹⁰ Edward Matthias, 'Identity Dilemmas Confronting the Dalits', in *VJTR*, Vol. 64, 2000, (pp. 131-138), p. 133.

¹¹¹ Lancy Lobo, 'Dalit Religious Movements and Dalit Identity', in Walter Fernandes (ed.), *The Emerging Dalit Identities: The Reassertion of the Subalterns*, (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1996), (pp. 166-183), p. 174.

of Christians.¹¹² One reason for the prevailing casteism in the Indian Churches is that in spite of being born as Christians, many ‘professing’ Christians seldom renounce their affiliation to their *jatis*.

George Soares-Prabhu deplors the infiltration of caste-discrimination into the celebration of the Eucharist and condemns it as ‘sacrilege’. He also attacks the breaking up of participants in the Eucharistic celebration into caste-groups, and the practice of treating ‘fellow members of the one Eucharistic community’ (the true “body of Christ”) as outcasts, by consigning them to special parts of the church or to separate places in a communion queue, and accuses such attempts of seeking to parody the Eucharist.¹¹³

Thus we can conclude that notions of purity and pollution are strongly held even among Christians. This is symptomised by the fact that ‘caste even in its most virulent form of “untouchability” is rife in the Christian communities’.¹¹⁴ ‘There can be no clearer indication of the massive failure of Christian teaching in India (and specifically of the immense and costly system of education it has built up) than the fact that large sections of the Indian church can still assume condescending caste attitudes, without even being conscious of the fact that they are guilty of serious sin’.¹¹⁵

¹¹² See S. Japhet, ‘Christian Dalits: A Sociological Study on the Problem of Gaining a New Identity’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXIV, September, 1987, (pp. 59-87), George Koilparampil, *Caste in the Catholic Community in Kerala*, (Kochin: CISRS, 1982), pp. 154 -68.

¹¹³ George M. Soares-Prabhu, ‘The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today’, in George Soares-Prabhu (Posthumous), *The Dharma of Jesus* (ed. by Francis Xavier D’sa), (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), (pp. 117-132), p. 128.

¹¹⁴ Soares-Prabhu, ‘The Table Fellowship of Jesus’, pp. 127,128.

¹¹⁵ Soares-Prabhu, ‘The Table Fellowship of Jesus’, p. 128.

F - Conclusion

Anthropological research has made it clear that the impingement of the specific ideology of opposition of the pure against the impure in the actual pattern of caste group interaction and interrelationship cannot be discounted. This is the basis for hierarchy and for regulating the interaction between various caste groups. Everything else remaining fluid the only constant that can be discerned among differing ideologies is this fundamental conflict between the pure and the impure which takes place either overtly or covertly. This ideological opposition (as we have seen) reaches its brutal manifestation and becomes the fundamental concept when one considers the discrimination against the Dalit communities in India both within and outside the Church. Moreover many recent atrocities against the Dalits have been following stereotypical 'modes' of abuse: rape of Dalit women and enforced consumption of human excreta. One should note the connotations of pollution that are intrinsic in both these acts. Thus, at the end of this chapter we can conclude that 'notions of purity and pollution' are relevant to any discourse on caste. They become important theological categories, which need ethical analysis when seen in the light of their latent manifestation in the marginalisation of the Dalit communities in India.

(Part - Two : A Critical Assessment of Dalit Theology)

Chapter - III

An Overview of Dalit Theology

Introduction

This chapter attempts to furnish a background for Dalit theology. It looks into the reasons which led to the emergence of Dalit theology and analyses the theological content of Dalit theology. I will engage with the following questions:

- a) What are the reasons for the emergence of Dalit theology?
- b) What is the praxiological framework of Dalit theology?
- c) How is the theological content of Dalit theology related to this praxiological framework?

A - The Background for the Emergence of Dalit Theology

According to Dalit theologian M. E. Prabhakar the main reason for the emergence of a Christian Dalit theology, was 'the insensitivity of the Church and Indian Christian theology to Dalit concerns and the deeper dimensions of their struggle and aspirations for fuller humanity, despite the majority of Christians being of Dalit origin'.¹

¹ Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 203.

This statement by Prabhakar brings to focus two important points. The first concerns the attitude of the 'Indian Church' (or, to be more precise, 'Christianity in India') to Dalit concerns. The second concerns Indian Christian theology, which encompasses the modes and types of theological articulation which emerged in Indian theological circles. In this section I will briefly analyse Christianity in India and Indian Christian theology, *from a Dalit perspective*, so as to evaluate how the impact of what was happening in both these realms affected the Dalits, and led to the emergence of Dalit theology.

1 - Christianity in India and its Attitude to Caste and Dalits

In this section I will analyse how casteism entered the Christian Church, and present the attitudes to caste that prevailed, and continue to prevail, among some broad 'main-stream' church traditions – the Syrian Christians, the Roman Catholic Missions and the Protestant Missions which can be further divided broadly on a denominational basis into the Lutherans, the Baptists and the Anglo-Saxons.

a) Syrian Christians

The Syrian Christians who trace their origins to apostle Thomas, have been, 'for centuries encapsulated within the caste society. They have been regarded by Hindus as a caste society, occupying a recognized (and high) place within the caste hierarchy'.² The reasons for this are not clear. According to Massey around 1020 AD the Syrian Christians along with the Jewish community were accorded the status

² Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: USA: Humanities Press Inc, 1980), p. 14, also pp. 98-101.

of caste Hindus. They were given a list of 72 privileges including the right to ride an elephant, to be preceded by drums and trumpets and to have criers announcing their approach so that the people from 'lower' castes could withdraw from the streets. Gradually it became inevitable for them to internalise caste influences by which they sought to provide legitimisation for their status.³ They have functioned as a caste community in Kerala,⁴ and, even today, to a large extent, remain as a 'close endogamous upper-caste group'.⁵ Along with the Roman Catholics the Syrian Orthodox Churches have largely adopted an 'organic view' of caste which treats the caste system as a system of social classification.⁶ In comparison with other Christian denominations, the Churches with Syrian Christian background are generally considered to be more rigid in observing caste discrimination.

b) Roman Catholic Missions: The Portuguese and Jesuit Missionaries

The Portuguese, who were the first Roman Catholic missionaries, experienced success of 'caste-conversions' with the mass conversions of two fishing *jatis* - the *Paravars* (of the south-eastern tip of India) in 1535-37, and the *Mukkuvars* (of the south-western tip of India) in 1544.⁷ The two communities resorted to conversions as an avenue of protection from local oppression.⁸ Francis Xavier a Roman Catholic Jesuit, is believed to have baptized several thousand people belonging to different caste groups, the majority however being the 'outcaste' *Pariahs* in south-east India. This 'caste-conversion' method strongly influenced later Roman Catholic missionary

³ James Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, (Geneva: WCC, 1997), pp. 28 ff.

⁴ Ninan Koshy, *Caste in Kerala Churches*, (Bangalore: CISRS, 1968).

⁵ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity: A Historical Review and Present Challenges', in Alan Gadd and D. C. Premraj (eds.), *New Lamps: Fresh Insights into Mission*, (London: All Saint's Church, 2001), (pp. 99-116), p. 105.

⁶ John C. B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit', in S. M. Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Visions and Values*, (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), (pp. 68-79), p. 75.

⁷ Dionysius Rasquinha, 'A Brief Historical Analysis of the Emergence of Dalit Christian Theology', in *VJTR*, Vol. 66, May, 2002, (pp. 353-370), p. 354.

⁸ John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 35.

thinking.⁹ These conversions triggered problems regarding the incorporation of the converts into the so far 'upper-caste' Church, which resulted in separatism. The 'new Christians' (who also included the Dalit converts apart from the two 'low caste' *jatis*) followed the Latin rite used by the Portuguese. They were thus segregated from the 'upper-caste' Thomas Christian descendents who followed the Syrian rite.¹⁰ The difficulty of handling the entry of different castes into the Christian faith was one of the reasons which led to caste divisions.

Robert de Nobili, who started the Madurai Mission in 1606, recognised the success of Christianity among the 'low castes' and was resolved to change this. Hence, declaring themselves as 'new Brahmins', de Nobili and his associates addressed their mission predominantly to the 'high castes'.¹¹ They sought the permission of the Church to accommodate caste practices and the Bull of Pope Gregory xv, '*Bulla Romanae Sedis Antistes*' acceded to their requests. They were allowed the use of traditional customs and usages under the consideration that certain external rites like the use of the sacred thread, sandal and ablutis by the Brahmin converts could be interpreted as denoting nobility and function and hence tolerable.¹² This accommodation of caste on 'social' lines also resulted in policies of discrimination. De Nobili's Madurai Mission did not merely allow caste-based distinctions to continue in the church. Rather, the Mission itself was divided. While Brahman *sanyasis* exclusively ministered to the 'high castes', there were *pandaraswamis* who ministered to the 'low castes'.¹³ In general the Catholics followed a policy of adaptation and 'chose to work within the caste system'.¹⁴ Right from the beginning they regarded the caste system 'as the given and religiously neutral structure of Indian Society within which evangelization, understood as the conversion of individuals without detaching them from their social context, and also the conversion

⁹ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 35.

¹¹ James Massey, *Towards a Dalit Hermeneutics*, (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2001), pp. 26 ff.

¹² S. Lourduwamy, *Equal Rights to all Dalits: With Special Reference to Dalit Christians*, (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2001), pp. 13 ff.

¹³ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 35.

¹⁴ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 35.

of whole caste groups, might proceed'.¹⁵

c) *The Protestant Missions: Lutheran Pietists*

The first Protestant Missionaries to India, Ziegenbalg and Plutschau, were the pioneers of the Tranquebar Lutheran Mission (1706). Their theological rootedness in evangelistic pietism (they both studied in the University of Halle) led them to focus on individualistic Lutheran pietism, and on spiritual rebirth (*weidergeburt*).¹⁶ Their emphasis on the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, made politics and culture irrelevant to faith.¹⁷ For them addressing the issue of caste was secular work which did not fall under their gamut of 'spiritual work', but was subordinate to it.¹⁸

According to Duncan B. Forrester, the Lutherans fluctuated between two possibilities in treating caste:

On the one hand, they could treat caste as being irrelevant to their efforts, seeking to convert individuals, whose keeping or breaking of caste would have no relation to their religious profession ... The other possibility was that India might be evangelized through the conversion of caste groups – roughly the position of Xavier and de Nobili.¹⁹

Thus, caste was accommodated within the Lutheran Missions.

¹⁵ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Massey, *Dalit Hermeneutics*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 17

¹⁸ Massey, *Dalit Hermeneutics*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 18.

d) *The Protestant Missions: The Anglo-Saxons*

The Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions were different from the other missions because they were the most outspoken in their critique of caste. Along with the Baptists they reached a consensus about the incompatibility of caste with Christianity by the mid-19th century.²⁰ Argument, however, existed over the tactical question of how to deal with caste as an institution, which 'as it stood, virtually all Christians found offensive to a greater or a lesser degree'.²¹ The Protestants resorted to different ways of dealing with caste, like the enforcement of strict discipline which made churches 'communities of the economically and socially underprivileged'.²² Though the Protestant missions were naïve, unrealistic and unsuccessful (in terms of their stated objectives) in their attacks on caste in the society at large, they achieved in some instances 'protection against indignities and oppression of low-caste people'.²³ The most significant achievement of the Protestant critique of caste was the major contribution it made in the radical transformation of the opinion of the educated in India.²⁴

The Protestant Missions were popular with Dalits and witnessed many mass movements in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. This altered the face of Indian Christianity by bringing converts from many Dalit communities like the *Chuhras* in Punjab, the *Mazhabi* Sikhs, the *Bhangis* or *Lalbegis*, and to a lesser extent the *Chamars* in Uttar Pradesh, the *Dheds* in Gujarat, the *Mangs* and *Mahars* in Maharashtra, the *Malas* and *Madigas* in various parts of Andhra Pradesh, the *Paraiyars* as well as *Madharis* (*Chakkiliyar*) in Tamil Nadu, the *Paraiyars* and *Pullayars* in Kerala.²⁵ By the mid-20th century, the Dalit proportion among Indian Christians

²⁰ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, pp. 23-43.

²¹ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 199.

²² Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 199.

²³ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 200.

²⁴ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 201.

²⁵ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 39 ff.

escalated and almost two-thirds of Indian Christians were Dalit.²⁶ Disillusionment with the Hindu caste-system combined with the hope of a new and enhanced identity²⁷ was one undergirding rationale for the majority of these conversions. The general consensus regarding the underlying motivation for these conversion is that the Dalits were searching for '*a greater sense of personal dignity and self respect, improved socio-economic status, education for their children, healing from sickness, solidarity in times of suffering and death, protection from oppression and an end to exploitation*'.²⁸ The Dalits felt cared for by someone. Not only did the Gospel message kindle hope and solace in their hearts, but the missionaries' 'accessibility to and considerable influence with the rulers also assured them of a much-needed protection'.²⁹ Christianity also enabled the converts to alter their perceptions of self and the world, change their life-style as well as to acquire 'enhanced resources for self-improvement and self-empowerment'.³⁰

Inspite of all this, the Protestant missions couldn't eradicate caste influence completely from the Churches. On a social basis also it was difficult for the missionaries to accept mass conversions because many missions and missionaries were highly conscious of being branded as promoters of 'Rice Christianity'.³¹ Nora and Godwin Shiri argue that even the Protestant missionaries adopted the 'infiltration policy' which made the Dalits marginal.³² Webster differs from accepting the

²⁶ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 103.

²⁷ Forrester says that one should never neglect 'that a conversion movement is like a kind of group identity crisis, in which the group passes through a negative rejection of their lowly place in Hindu society to a positive affirmation of a new social and religious identity. The new identity does not depend on its acceptance and recognition by the higher castes; indeed it has been chosen and is sustained despite their refusal to accept it'. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 77.

²⁸ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 355. Emphasis in original.

²⁹ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 103.

³⁰ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 57, 70.

³¹ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', pp. 106,107.

³² This infiltration policy upheld the notion that upper-caste conversions would precede and set the tone for lower caste conversions. According to Godwin and Nora Shiri the infiltration policy culminated in the formation of a fractured Christian community where Dalits remained largely a marginalized group:

This resulted in a dualism manifested in many ways: ... Upper caste converts were being given places of prominence, offered opportunities including leadership positions. True, missionaries were very critical of Brahmins and their way of life but like the 'natives' of this country, missionaries too often esteemed Brahmins as the apex of the Indian society and the Dalits as the lowest. Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', pp. 105,106.

infiltration theory,³³ with the sole exception being the example of Alexander Duff the great Scottish missionary educator.³⁴ The attempts of the missionaries to eliminate caste from the churches was more successful in North India than in the South where missionaries became divided over whether the best strategy for eliminating caste was a hard line prohibition or a more conciliatory approach.³⁵ Though a consensus had evolved among the Protestant churches opposing caste and its myriad manifestations in the Indian Church, it was always very hard to uproot caste from the churches because of the deep-rooted and all pervasive nature of the caste system,³⁶ as well as the amazing resilience and adaptability of caste to new challenges and opportunities.³⁷ This meant that the hope of the Dalits for ‘a better life free from stigma and humiliation’ was not fulfilled for the bulk of them within the churches.³⁸ This was one of the reasons for the emergence of Dalit theology.

e) Impact on the Emergence of Dalit Theology

The mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity from 1870 -1960 influenced the emergence of Dalit theology as a confessional reality in the Indian context.³⁹ Another reason for the emergence of Dalit theology was the increasing discrimination against

³³ He maintains that the Protestant missionaries, in a manner inconsistent with the Roman Catholics, identified the caste system as the defining feature of Hinduism when juxtaposing their own claims for the true nature of an egalitarian Christianity against, and in contrast to, the alleged falsity of a hierarchical Hinduism. Webster argues that the general evangelistic activities of the Protestant missionaries encompassed a broad range of activities none of which were caste specific. The Protestant missionary approach to evangelism was sporadic, ubiquitous and indiscriminate, a fact which was aptly testified by the membership of the early Protestant mission churches which reflected widely diverse social backgrounds. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 36-37.

³⁴ Duff whose mission was centred in Calcutta, established high quality English medium schools which imparted western education to the Bengali elite with the undergirding intention being the winning of converts from the Bengali elite, who would in turn gradually influence the masses. Webster contends that Duff's work was highly specialised and though an attractive model for others was seldom emulated nor could be emulated. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 35 ff.

³⁵ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 37 ff.

³⁶ Nora and Godwin Shiri, ‘Dalits and Christianity’, p. 106.

³⁷ Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 201.

³⁸ Chatterjee, ‘Why’, p. 184.

³⁹ Rasquinha, ‘A Brief’, p. 355.

the Dalits within the Indian Church and the society.⁴⁰ Some of the Indian theologians have tried to relate the discrimination against the Dalits in the churches to the past. According to Chatterjee:

The mass movements into the Indian Church were a time laden with great possibilities for an upsurge towards a powerful movement for social change. If a part of the reason for conversion was to escape the inhuman existence under the caste system, the converted community could have become at least a paradigmatic fellowship, for all the oppressed in the land. What followed did not turn out this way. The independent, courageous, steps of burning all bridges to the past on the part of the outcastes were soon turned into subservient dependency on the alien missionary structure of Church ideology and religious pietism.⁴¹

Chatterjee is particularly critical that the missionaries exercised minimal restraints on the upper caste converts who chose to adhere to their caste affiliation and mindset and were least inclined to conform to the new egalitarian dispensations implicit in the Christian faith.⁴² Chatterjee opines that the missionaries were not strict in enforcing their objection to caste practices, which led to the perpetuation of casteism within Christianity. But it would be best to assess that the caste system continued within the Churches as the restraints on caste-practices within Christianity were not effective.

⁴⁰ Chatterjee points out that Christian Dalits are "twice-alienated": not only are they discriminated by the non-Dalits on the basis of their Dalit identity but they are also marginalized within the Church. It was particularly unfortunate that their aspirations for a better life, devoid of the stigma and humiliation of impure status remained unfulfilled within the church. Chatterjee, 'Why?', pp. 182 ff.

Prabhakar calls casteism within the Indian church a theological contradiction and a spiritual problem and talks about the four-fold alienation of the Christian Dalits which involves:

- a) Discrimination from the state when it comes to rendering economic assistance, educational benefits or political representation on the basis of their Christian identity.
- b) Disfavour from fellow Dalits, when Christian Dalits seek governmental assistance, on the common presumption that Christian Dalits have already been uplifted by missionary patronage.
- c) Contemptuous treatment from 'upper-caste' Christians, and
- d) Internal conflicts between Christian Dalits on sub-caste, regional or linguistic basis.

See Prabhakar, 'The Search', pp. 205,206.

⁴¹ Chatterjee, 'Why', p. 198.

⁴² Chatterjee, 'Why', pp. 182 ff.

The prevalence of casteism soon manifested as apathy towards the Dalits. Various reasons have been identified for the growing apathy towards the Dalits. Some are as follows - a) deterioration of the Church's initial concern for Dalits over the decades b) concentration of church leadership in the hands of urban-based/urban-oriented upper caste or elite Christian Dalits c) the inadequacy of the western as well as Sanskritic moorings (or captivity?) of the Church to help effectively in the liberative concerns of the Dalits d) the increasingly institutionalised and hierarchical ministry of the church which 'pre-occupied itself with many unproductive priorities and issues'.⁴³ All this led to the collapse of the pastoral ministry to the Dalits. In a complex socio-political situation where the growing need was for a well integrated ministry that would empower the Dalits holistically the Indian Church remained inaccessible and unresponsive to their situations as Dalits continued to be marginalized even within the churches. There was denial of opportunities and just sharing of church resources and leadership that Christian Dalits became the 'unwanted children' of the church.⁴⁴ This discrimination against the Dalit Christians within the churches was one of the factors which influenced the emergence of Dalit theology.⁴⁵

f) Summary

On the basis of our analysis of four mainstream church traditions we can see that the Protestant Anglo-Saxon missionaries attacked caste and considered it incompatible with Christianity whereas the Syrian Christians, the Roman Catholic Missionaries and the Lutheran Pietists were content to understand it as a form of social stratification. In spite of all the efforts by the Anglo-Saxon Protestant missionaries caste-system perpetuated itself within Indian Christianity. Because of the prevalence

⁴³ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 113.

⁴⁴ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 112.

⁴⁵ Chatterjee, 'Why?', pp. 182 ff.

of caste feelings as well as the lack of adequate pastoral ministry to the Dalits, the Dalits felt discriminated against. This gradually led to the development of Dalit theology.

2 - Indian Christian Theology and the Dalits

a) Indian Christian Theological Articulation using Hindu Philosophy and Vedantic Categories

What is today known as Indian Christian theology emerged because Indian theologians felt that theological articulation originating outside India was 'ineffective and had little relevance' for the Indian context and hence felt the need for a change in approach.⁴⁶

In the late 18th century under the influence of Raja Ram Mohun Roy's *Brahmo Samaj* the initial attempts at a contextual indigenous theology were made.⁴⁷ The *Brahma Samajists* were the first to attempt indigenous interpretations of Christ.⁴⁸ Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813-85), in his *The Arian Witness*⁴⁹ attempted an intertextual

⁴⁶ Hubert Manohar Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology for India Today: An Appraisal of the Christologies of John Hick, Jurgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 52.

⁴⁷ A. M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998), p. 9. The *Brahma Samaj* was a reform movement within Hinduism, which, under the influence of liberal English education and Christian ideals, sought to reform Hinduism.

⁴⁸ Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indian Christianity*, (Madras: CLS & Bangalore: CISRS, 1969), p. 12.

⁴⁹ Popularly known as *The Arian Witness*, the full title of the book is *The Arian Witness: or the Testimony of Arian Scriptures in Collaboration of Biblical History and the Rudiments of Christian Doctrine, Including Dissertations on the Original and Early Adventures of Indo-Aryans*. (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1875). Banerjea interpreted Jesus Christ as the true *Prajapathi* the Vedic 'Lord of the Creatures' whose self-sacrifice makes possible deliverance. See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 92-94 and Sathianathan Clarke, 'The Jesus of 19th Century Indian Christian Theology', in James P. Mockery (ed.), *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 5, Part.1 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), (pp. 32-49).

reading of biblical narratives and *Vedic* texts⁵⁰ to posit not only the theological continuity between the bible and *Vedas* but also the historical continuity of Christianity with *Vedic* Hinduism by demonstrating the correspondence between biblical teachings and the *Vedas*.⁵¹

Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884), another Bengali Brahmasamajist, argued that Christ should be presented in India in his Hindu character, not like a civilized European, but as an Asiatic ascetic.⁵² He was the first to use the category of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (being, intelligence, bliss) to interpret the godhead and was highly influential on a number of other theologians like Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and Palani Andi.⁵³ His theology can be called a 'Christo-centric Trinitarian theology'.⁵⁴ Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907) another Bengali theologian, used the *Advaita* (philosophy of non-Dualism)⁵⁵ and premised his articulation of Christology within the overall Vedantic Trinitarian framework of God as *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. He considered Christ as the perfect fulfilment of centuries of Hindu longings.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 90. Banerjea's intention was 'a) to show that the *Vedas* come closer to the spirit of Christianity than the Hebrew scriptures; b) to demonstrate that the pristine form of Hinduism found in the *Vedas* is identical with the Christian scriptures; c) to reposition contemporary Indian Christians as the spiritual heirs of the Aryan Hindus; and d) to project Vedic Hinduism as a preparation for biblical faith'. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Post-colonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 5.

⁵¹ For more see T. V. Philip, (ed.), *Krishna Mohan Banerjea: Christian Apologist*, Confessing the Faith in India, Series, No. 15, (Bangalore: CISRS, 1982), p. 121. Banerjea discerned parallelism between the creation, the fall and flood narrative and the 10th *Mandala* of the *Rig-Veda* Hymn 129, the serpent section of the Mahabahratha and the *Satapatha Brahmann*.

⁵² Keshub Chandra Sen, 'India Asks: Who is Christ?', in *Lectures in India*, (Calcutta: Navavidhan Publications, 1954), (pp. 351-376) p. 375.

⁵³ Sen, 'That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity', in *Lectures in India*, (pp. 467-482).

⁵⁴ Sen, 'India Asks', p. 375.

⁵⁵ Baago, *Pioneers*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, 'The Hymn of the Incarnation', in *The Twentieth Century I/II* (1901), pp. 7-8. English translation in Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Madras: CLS, 1994), pp. 77-78. Quoted in Clarke, 'Jesus'.

b) *Theology in Response to Western Christianity*

The next phase of Indian Christian Theology focused on positing an upfront to western Christianity's theological triumphalism and expansionism. The dominant focus of the historic International Missionary Conference at Tambaram (Madras, 1938), which was the denouncement of Christian claims to exclusivism by exploring possibilities for harmonious relationship between Christian and Hindu religious themes, also characterised Indian Christian theological thought. A group of 'upper caste' thinkers popularly known as the Madras Re-thinking Group dominated the theological arena. Bishop Aiyadurai Jesudason Appasamy (1891-1975) attempted to present Christianity as a *Bhakti* religion with mystical elements.⁵⁷ He used *Ramanuja's* philosophical system - the *visistadvaita* or modified non-dualism, in his exposition of the *Bhakti* tradition.⁵⁸ Theologians like Pandipedi Chenchiah (1886-1959)⁵⁹ and Vengal Chakkarai (1880-1958)⁶⁰ made significant contributions

⁵⁷ *Bhakti* - The *Bhakti* movement advocated *Bhakti* (devotion) as a way to Salvation. It was a counter-movement, which questioned the 'upper caste' Hindu belief that *Gnana* (knowledge), *Karma* (good deeds) and *Dhyana* (reflection) were the only ways to salvation. Though many of the prominent *Bhakti* saints were from the non-*brahmin* and 'lower-castes', some of the *Bhakti* saints like Chokhamela, Kanaka, Namdev and Ravidas were from the Dalit communities.

⁵⁸ Aiyadurai Jesudason Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study of the Johannine Doctrine of Love*, (Madras: CLS, 1991), (3rd edn.), pp. 39-43. It is the idea of God's immanence in the cosmos as Logos (*antharyamin*) which permeates Appasamy's exposition of the *visistadvaita* philosophy. Focussing specifically on the fourth Gospel, Appasamy understood Christ the Logos as the *antharyamin* (the indweller) whose immanence preceded the incarnation.

⁵⁹ Chenchiah's theology can be called as the theology of the new creation. His theology revolves around a fulcrum which he calls 'the raw fact of Christ'. The raw fact of Christ is, for Chenchiah, the historical Christ who still lives today. It is the '*anubhava*' or direct experience of this living Christ which is the central fact of the Christian life. Chenchiah's Christology had an emphasis on the newness of Christ who was the 'Godman' not God-Man, the first fruits of a new creation and in him God and humanity merge. He emphasises the 'permanent humanity of Christ' as the *Adi-purusha* or the cosmic Christ who inaugurates the new creation and from whom a new race in creation emanates. '*Anubhava*' or direct experience of the living Christ is pivotal for Christian faith. Pandipedi Chenchiah, 'Christian Message in a Non-Christian World', in D. M. Devasahayam and A. N. Sudarisanam, (eds.), *Rethinking Christianity*, (Madras: A. N. Sudarisanam, 1938), (pp. 47-56), p. 53. See also Mundadan, *Paths*, pp. 15,16.

⁶⁰ It is the 'Christhood of God' which is the starting point of Chakkarai's theology. This Christhood of God is the manifestation of God through Jesus who gives colour, light and form to God. For Chakkarai the foundation of our knowledge of God is *our experience and consciousness* of Jesus. This is *Bhakti* which is the result of a mystical experience and at the centre of which is the cross. Chakkarai focuses on what he thinks are the two religious longings of Indian Christians: namely to be in direct contact with Jesus and to have a rebirth i.e. to be born in the image of Jesus. He gives central importance to the cross. Vengal Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, (Madras: CLS, 1927), and Chakkarai, *The Cross and Indian Thought*, (Madras: CLS, 1932), p. 143.

towards the emergence of a new Indian Christian consciousness on a Christo-centric basis as they engaged in a pursuit to harmonize Hindu philosophical thought and Christian theology in their quest for an authentically indigenous theological expression.⁶¹ Raimundo Panikkar a Roman Catholic theologian attempted a cross fertilisation of Hinduism and Christianity using an inclusive approach.⁶² In his '*The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*', Panikkar argues for Christ as the meeting point of various religions and 'calls the living presence of Christ in Hinduism as the Unknown Christ'.⁶³

c) *Theologising in the Socio-Political Context of India*

On the other side of the theological spectrum, the spirit of national independence which vitiated the early part of the 20th century led to a theology of Indian renaissance which was characterised by positive Christian response to the national renaissance.⁶⁴ The post-Independence era saw theologians like P. D. Devanandan,⁶⁵ (who focussed on nation building as well as inter-faith relationships), and M. M. Thomas who in his *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance* developed his theme of a "living theology", which must emerge out of a dialogical situation with

⁶¹ Mundadan, *Paths*, p. 15.

⁶² Raimundo Panikkar, 'The Myth of Pluralism: 'The Tower of Babel – A Meditation on Non-Violence' in *Cross Currents*, Vol. 29, 1979, (pp. 197-230); *The Unknown Christ: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, (New York: Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1981); *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man, Icon-Person-Mystery*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), pp. XV-XVI.

⁶³ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964).

⁶⁴ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 38.

⁶⁵ Devanandan pioneered the setting up of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) which promoted the engagement of Christianity in issues related to the various dimensions of human life. His theology was a Christian theology of nation building and inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue. Certain important features of the theology of the institute were the recognition of Christ as the centre of the world, recognition of the interrelatedness of the Church with other-faith communities, understanding the theology of mission of the church as extending beyond the institutional church, recognising national reconstruction and commitment to a fuller human life as imperatives of Christian mission. M. M. Thomas and P. T. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology: Life and Thought of Some Pioneers* (Tiruvalla: New Day Publications, 1992), p. 188.

the philosophy and theology of neo-Hinduism.⁶⁶

d) Critique of Indian Christian Theology from a Dalit Perspective

Theologians who critically viewed Indian Christian theology from the Dalit perspective found the theological thinking which was articulated using Hindu philosophical ideas to be alienated from the reality of Indian Christianity because it was non-representational of the Dalits who constituted the majority of the Christian community in India. Indian Christian Theology both in the past and in the present predominantly followed the Brahminic tradition treading the *jnana marga*, the *bhakti marga* and the *karma marga*. Theologians like Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya had attempted a synthesis of Sankara's *Advaita Vedanta* and Christian theology. Bishop A. J. Appasamy, a *bhakti marga* theologian, tried to synthesise Ramanuja's *Vashishtha Advaita* with Christian theology. M. M. Thomas contributed to theological anthropology at the international level and laid the foundations for a more active theological involvement in India on the basis of the *karma marga*. Chenchiah, attempted to synthesize Christian theology with Sri Aurobindo's 'Internal Yoga'.

However, Dalit theologians like A.P. Nirmal found this to be problematic as both the traditional Indian Christian theology or the more recent third world theology 'failed to see in the struggle of the Indian Dalits for liberation a subject matter appropriate

⁶⁶ Thomas understood salvation as humanisation and his understanding of Christianity can be premised under '*karma marga*' or the way of action. He adopts an empathetic approach to Hindu Christian encounter. Thomas affirms that the core of Christian faith is the message that God has acted in a unique way in a secular historic event. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, (Madras: CLS, 1970), p. 187. Also central to Thomas' theology is the 'Cosmic Lordship of Christ', which provides the theological impulse to work for human development and social transformation. He considered Christian faith and worship as 'a response to the movement of the Spirit of God in history who in the Risen Christ has given a foretaste of the overcoming of all personal and collective evil, and victory over death, and who will lead history to its consummation in the coming again of Christ and the conversion of the Kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God and His Christ'. M. M. Thomas, 'The Pattern of Christian Spirituality', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1969. Cited in Godwin Shiri, *Christian Social Thought in India: 1962-1977*, (Madras: CLS, 1982), p. 142.

for doing theology in India'. It was this obliviousness towards the struggles of the Dalits that warranted the need for articulating a Dalit Theology. According to Nirmal:

What is amazing is the fact that Indian theologians ignored the reality of the Indian church. While estimates vary, between 50% and 80% of all the Christians in India today are of scheduled caste origin... If our theologians failed to see this in the past, there is all the more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the task of doing Dalit theology.⁶⁷

Thus, the fact that no attention was paid to the oppression, sufferings, aspirations and cultural expressions of Dalits as ingredients of a truly indigenous theology was an important contributory factor to the emergence of Dalit theology.⁶⁸

We have to understand that the primary concern of the 'upper caste' and brahminical theologians was to interpret their faith experiences in 'Indian' thought form (which again was predominantly based on their own upper caste upbringing). So, it is understandable that the caste-Christian interpreters used brahmannical philosophical concepts such as *advaita* (Uphadhyaya) and *vishistadvaita* (Appasamy) to explicate Indian Christian theology.⁶⁹ Since most of the early Indian Christian theologians were Brahman converts there was the inherent desire among theologians to express their own caste Hindu-situatedness.

Moreover, Indian Christian theology was characterised by an apologetic quest to establish the Christian truth against Brahmoism and the theorizing of neo-vedantism. Thus, it had a strong apologetic element.⁷⁰ Christianity also had the challenge of

⁶⁷ Nirmal, 'Towards', pp. 215, 217.

⁶⁸ Chatterji, 'Why', pp. 196,197.

⁶⁹ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, pp. 230,231. Watson also acknowledges this tendency. See also, Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology*, p. 59.

⁷⁰ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 38,39.

incarnating itself as part of the national community.⁷¹ Thus, in order to prove that Indian Christian theology was an integral part of an emerging national community a concerted effort was made to positively respond to the Brahmo demand for national Christianity which ultimately led to the incorporation of concepts and symbols from the Brahmannic tradition.⁷² The nationalistic strivings of this era meant that emphasis was placed on the Hindu Christian characteristic of the Christian community's identity in India. Thus, what emerged at the end of the 19th century was 'the vision of a national Christian Church which would be a haven for Hindu-Christians, with the Hindu component seen primarily along Brahmannic lines'.⁷³ Thus, the efforts of these upper caste theologians brought together the cross fertilization of caste Hindu and caste Christian theological efforts which produced a Brahmannic based Hindu-Christian theology. Dalit theologians felt that such theology did not address itself to or reflect the issues faced by the majority of Christians (whom Massey calls average Christians), especially the Dalits.⁷⁴

The 'caste-Christians' took the lead in the hermeneutical appropriation of the bible. Specific emphasis was placed on inter-textuality as significant attempts were made to reconcile the Hindu scriptures with the Christian scriptures. This predilection for the written texts, both *Vedas* and Bible should be noted. The early Indian Christian hermeneutes perceived the *Vedas* (holy books) and Bible as part of a textual continuum, and so they made significant hermeneutical purchase out of it.⁷⁵ However there were several problems with these interpretations. The Dalit experience of the *Vedas* was one of severe punishment for attempting to read the *Vedas*, or, for even inadvertently listening to their recital. Now when the Christian scriptures were interpreted using the same categories, and Jesus and God were re-presented in 'Vedic' categories, Dalit theologians perceived that the interpretations were irrelevant,

⁷¹ Thomas and Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology*, p. 4.

⁷² Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 37 ff.

⁷³ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 38,39.

⁷⁴ James Massey, 'Ingredients for a Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 338-343), p. 339. Some among the examples Massey points out are those we have already discussed 'Upadhyaya, from a Bengali Brahmin family, A. J. Appasamy from a high caste Saivite family, P. Chenchaiyah from a Chetty, non-Brahmin upper caste in Tamilnadu'.

⁷⁵ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, pp. 230 ff.

oppressive and insensitive to the Dalits.⁷⁶ They were also uneasy over the articulation of theology using *vedic* philosophical categories, which were considered oppressive towards the Dalits.

Though post-independent theologians like Thomas and Devanandan had strong liberative underpinnings to their theology they did not pay specific attention to the plight of the Dalits and made broad categories like inter-faith dialogue and nation building their focus.⁷⁷ Thus, inspite of the tremendous theological insight they offered, they were not able to represent and articulate the voice of the Dalits. What was propagated as the appropriate discourse for a 'just nation' was a secular and class based discourse which meant that the caste-Hindu agenda was neither unveiled nor confronted.⁷⁸ Moreover, the premises within which these post-Independence theologians operated were the dominant Hindu traditions, traditions which exclusively served the elites, who for centuries have been responsible for rendering the Dalits subservient.⁷⁹

In a critical denouncement of Indian Christian Theology Sathianathan Clarke not only scathingly critiques Indian Christian theology's hegemonic espousal of upper caste interest but also accuses Indian Christian theology of functioning as an instrument of ideological co-option. His cogent analysis of Indian Christian Theology analyses its hegemonic influences on both Dalits and non-Dalits. He points out that the meta-narrative that has been woven combining the Christian story with the tradition of caste Hindus 'has tended to serve hegemonic purposes'.⁸⁰ What is inherent in the process of 'combining' these two was the elevation of the cultural and religious traditions of one dominant group of Christians to serve as the overall frame work within which Christian theology was articulated. One has to be critically perceptive about the purposes and interests which this theology served. Within the realm of

⁷⁶ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, pp. 230 ff.

⁷⁷ Masilamani Azariah, 'Doing Theology in India Today', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 85-92), pp. 85,86.

⁷⁸ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 39-40.

⁷⁹ Massey, *Down Trodden*, pp. 62 ff.

Indian-Christian theology one cannot doubt that this did not serve the hegemonic interests of the caste communities. From the perspective of the caste communities, they were presented with an opportunity 'to configure a normative master-narrative' which combined the heritage of their Hindu ancestors and the Christian story together.⁸¹ However there were temporal and 'short-term benefits' to the Christian Dalits. Having experienced oppression and discrimination because of their previous identity they were now 'given an opening to mask their real identity and live with illusory conviction that they were truly part of the overall Hindu society and heritage'.⁸² The problem with this was a subtle reinforcement that Dalits were inferior because of their Dalitness and caste communities were superior and hence their world view should be acceptable as the normative world view. Also the issue of caste discrimination was not tackled with seriousness. There was an obliviousness towards the struggles of the Dalits.

The fact that 50% and 80% of all Christians in India were of Dalit origin was 'the most important commonality cutting across the various diversities of the Indian Church, which would have provided an authentic liberation *motif* for Indian Christian theology'.⁸³ The fact that this was ignored had to be confronted and subverted. It was in this context that the need for a new form of theology having the Dalit struggles as its locus was perceived.

3 - Conclusion

At the end of this section one can conclude that some of the important reasons which can be identified as leading to the development of Dalit theology are:

- 1) the growing numbers of Dalits within the Indian Church.
- 2) the feeling of discrimination against the Dalits within the churches.

⁸⁰ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 43.

⁸¹ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 43.

⁸² Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 43.

⁸³ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 217. See also A. P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations*, (Madras: CLS,

- 3) the consciousness of being marginalised, overlooked and excluded in the process of indigenous theological articulation, because of the perpetuation of Indian Christian Theology in dominant Hindu categories as well as neglect of Dalit issues.

B - Important Events Leading to the Development of Dalit Theology

The critical consciousness of a few theologically educated Dalits acted as a catalyst for triggering a series of initiatives in the early eighties to systematically articulate Christian faith in interaction with the emerging Dalit aspiration for liberation and culminated in the birth of Dalit theology. We have seen that with the mass conversions of Dalits to Christianity during 1870-1960, Dalit Christian theology emerged as a confessional reality.⁸⁴ But it was in no way considered as the dominant theological trend. There was an increasing perceptivity of the Dalit situation from 1975-1986 which were formative years where much reflection was carried on in relation to the Dalits.⁸⁵ These years were foundational as they tried to integrate theological thinking and articulation with the struggles of the Dalits. A glance at a few important stages in this theological journey will help us to identify the important areas that theologians focussed upon during this formative period.

1990).

⁸⁴ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 354.

⁸⁵ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', pp. 353 ff. See also Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 230 ff.

1 - Important Events in the Development of Dalit Theology

Date & Place	Event/ Seminar/consultation	Theme
March 1975 – Punjab	Consultation organised by The Christian Institute of Sikh Studies	The Gospel for Punjab
June 1978 – Bangalore	First National Consultation	Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin
1981- Bangalore, The United Theological College	John Webster’s Paper Presentation at the Faculty Research Seminar	From Indian Church to Indian Christian Theology: An Attempt at theological Construction
April 1981- Bangalore The United Theological College	A.P. Nirmal’s Valedictory Address to the Carey Society	Towards a Shudra Theology
1982	Kothapalli Wilson’s important book published	The Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians

8 th December 1984 – Madras	Emergence of the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement (CDLM)	--
March 25-27, 1985 - New Delhi	First National Convention of the CDLM	In the Struggle of the Least of My Brothers and Sisters
April 1985 – Madras	Dalit Liberation Education Trust started (DLET)	--
March 1986 – Bangalore	Second National Convention of CDLM	Ideology and Vision for the Movement
December 1986 - Guntur	CISRS-CDLM Joint Workshop	Dalit Theology
December 1986 - Madras	CISRS-CDLM Conference	Towards a Dalit Theology
November 1987 - Madras	Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute starts Department of Dalit Theology (GLTCRI)	--

In 1978 there was a joint National consultation of Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians in Bangalore on the theme 'Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin'.⁸⁶ A significant aspect of this consultation was a presentation by Masilamani Azariah to enlist the Church in the Dalits' struggle for justice. Azariah emphasised that the central concern of the God of the bible is for the prevalence of justice and righteousness and Jesus' ministry was 'essentially for the victims of injustice and oppression'.⁸⁷ The Christian Institute for Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) organised a consultation in 1979 on 'Theology of the People' and called for theological reflection from and for the oppressed. The focus of this consultation wasn't specifically on the Dalits, but still it contributed in stimulating the emergence of Dalit theology.⁸⁸ Webster's paper 'From Indian Church to Indian Christian Theology: An Attempt at Theological Construction' in April 1981 at the United Theological College, Bangalore, pointed out the need to develop theologies which contained good news for Dalits because the social base of Indian Church was overwhelmingly Dalit.⁸⁹ This was an indication of the momentum that Christian theologising in the Indian context was becoming more perceptive to its contextuality and thus paying attention to all those who had been relegated to the margins by previous modes of theologising.

The watershed event was Arvind P. Nirmal's address at the United Theological College, Bangalore in March 1981. Titled 'Towards a Sudra Theology', Nirmal's address was a clarion call to the Dalits 'to shun theological passivity and sociological camouflage' so as to pick up the gauntlet of 'reclaiming the liberative ends of theology. The tacit inclination towards theological sanskritization was confronted and a new way that put the motif of liberation at the centre was opened'.⁹⁰ Though Nirmal didn't use the word 'Dalit' in the paper, this paper has been a strong

⁸⁶ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 357.

⁸⁷ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 231-232.

⁸⁸ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 361, Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 232.

⁸⁹ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 233.

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 45.

foundation to the Dalit theology which emerged subsequently. Kothapalli Wilson's work, *The Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians* (1982), marked a clear shift in the direction of Indian Christian theology in the line of Dalit theology.⁹¹ Wilson was especially critical of the 'salvation theology' of the Christian missions which he argued promoted 'psychological dependency, political passivity and communal exclusiveness among Dalit Christians'.⁹² Calling Christianity a cultural renaissance movement committed to humanization, Wilson called for a shift from its supernatural and heavenly concern to involvement in humanizing struggles.⁹³ Though Wilson did not construct a Dalit theology, his critic of the salvation theological model of the existing theologies from a Dalit liberative perspective is very relevant for Dalit theologians.⁹⁴

Slowly the emergence of the organisations like CDLM (Christian Dalit Liberation Movement), DLET (Dalit Liberation Education Trust) and other conferences facilitated the change in theological orientation, which led to the emergence of Dalit theology as an important theology. One has to acknowledge that though there is a dynamism in which Christian Dalit theology has developed, much of the core principles of Dalit theology can be discerned from a few important collections of essays which have been published so far: '*Towards a Dalit Theology*' (1988),⁹⁵ *Emerging Dalit Theology* (1990),⁹⁶ *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (1991),⁹⁷ and *Indigenous People: Dalits – Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, (1994).⁹⁸

On the basis of our analysis of the development of Dalit theology we can point to a few issues which were considered pertinent by theologians during the formative period:

⁹¹ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 362, Webster *The Dalit Christians*, p. 235.

⁹² Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 235.

⁹³ Kothapalli Wilson, *The Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians*, (Hyderabad: Booklinks Cooperation, 1982), p. 59.

⁹⁴ Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 363.

⁹⁵ Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards*.

⁹⁶ Xavier Irudayaraj (ed.), *Emerging Dalit Theology*, (Madras: Jesuit Theological Secretariat, 1990).

⁹⁷ Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*.

⁹⁸ Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*.

- 2) Critique of Brahmannic modes of Indian Christian Theology and call for Dalit concerns, experiences and struggles to become the foundation for theology (Nirmal).
- 3) Develop a theology which contained good news to the Dalits (Webster).
- 4) Call for a theology concerned with human struggles (Wilson).

The primary conclusion that we can draw is that the paradigm shift that Dalit theology envisaged for the theological task was to decisively make Dalit issues the locus of theologising in India.

C - The Praxiological Framework of Dalit Theology

Our intention in this thesis is to deal critically and constructively with the question of Christian praxis in relation to the Dalit situation in India. It involves questioning to what extent Christian theological articulations have practical viability in effecting a change. Having identified Dalit theology as the theology best suited to address the Dalit cause, this section will attempt to identify the 'praxiological framework' of Dalit theology.

To speak of a praxiological framework here means primarily identifying the primary aim of Dalit theology and the ways through which one hopes to reach the aim. After identifying the praxiological framework we will evaluate how the content of Dalit theology brings out the dialectic between theory and praxis.

1 - The Aim of Dalit Theology

If one is to talk about the aim or goal of Dalit theology, one needs to use the umbrella concept of 'liberation' and say that the priority for liberation of the Dalits is the specific goal of Dalit theology.⁹⁹ This is because not all theologians have confined Dalit theology to encompass Dalit issues alone. Prabhakar points to the imperative for 'universal appeal'.¹⁰⁰ Chatterjee and Wilson¹⁰¹ have also pointed out the possibility of Dalit theology encompassing the concerns of other oppressed groups like women and tribals.¹⁰² But the priority for Dalit liberation has been recognised.¹⁰³ There seems to be a broad consensus among theologians that the primary aim of Dalit Christian theology is the *liberation* of Dalits. For Massey, 'when Dalit theologians speak of Dalit theology, they are in fact making an affirmation about the need for a theological expression which will help them in their search for daily bread and their struggle to overcome a situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy and denial of human dignity and identity. It is these realities of Dalit life which require the formulation of a Dalit theology'.¹⁰⁴ For Prabhakar liberation of the Dalits from their socio-economic and political bondage is the point of departure for Dalit theology. Dalit theology 'is not only a prophetic theology for identification with the oppression of Dalit and their struggles for equality and justice, but also it is a political theology for social action towards the transformation of injustice, undemocratic and oppressive structures. It is *doing theology* in community within the context of the sufferings and struggles of Dalits through dialogue, critical reflection and committed

⁹⁹ See Dionysius Rasquinha, 'A Critical Reflection on the Meaning of Dalit Christian Theology', in *VJTR*, Vol. 66, April, 2002, (pp. 251-269).

¹⁰⁰ According to Prabhakar:

Also as some thinkers see it, dalit theology has to widen its concern to take account of the experiences of other oppressed groups like the tribals, women and other weaker sections of people; all these groups are linked in a chain of oppression created by the same set of theological-ideological presumptions of the dominant sections of society. Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 203.

¹⁰¹ For Wilson Dalit refers more to the broken human condition, on the basis of which unity and solidarity can be fostered with other oppressed sections. See Rasquinha, 'A Critical', p. 256. See also Wilson, 'An Approach to Christian Dalit Theology', in Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards*, (pp. 48-56).

¹⁰² Rasquinha 'A Critical', (pp. 251-269).

¹⁰³ Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle', pp. 89,90.

¹⁰⁴ Massey, *Down Trodden*, p. 63.

action for building a new life-order'.¹⁰⁵ The emphasis on the 'doing' aspect of Dalit theology needs to be recognised here. Both Massey and Prabhakar understand the praxis of Dalit theology in terms of socio-political and economic transformation.

For Nirmal the ultimate goal of Dalit theology is not 'simply gaining of the rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is the realisation of (our) full humanness or conversely, (our) full divinity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in us'.¹⁰⁶ This involves affirmation of Dalit identity. Therefore he defines Dalit theology as a theology of Dalit identity.¹⁰⁷ At the same time he also maintains that 'Dalit theology must also be informed by a social vision which is liberative in character'.¹⁰⁸ Balasundaram understands 'identity' as a theological category and also identifies Dalit theology as 'basically a theology of identity'. For Balasundaram 'the goal of Dalit theology is the liberation of the Dalits and their empowerment, i.e., strengthening Dalits, providing comfort to them, the good news that God is with them in their struggle, that they are God's children and that they have their own God-given identity and that they are people with worth and dignity. That is, human dignity is more important than the question of economic emancipation'. But he maintains that Dalit theology should be informed by a transforming social vision based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.¹⁰⁹

One can say at this point that two categories that constitute the content of liberation in Dalit theology are *liberative social vision* and *identity affirmation*. Though theologians like Nirmal and Balasundaram have placed emphasis on identity affirmation over economic emancipation and rights and privileges they have affirmed and acknowledged the importance and primacy of a 'liberative social vision'. The proper understanding of the liberation motif in Dalit theology is one in which a dialectic between identity affirmation and liberative social vision is envisaged. One

¹⁰⁵ Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 211.

¹⁰⁶ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 222. De-emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁷ A. P. Nirmal, 'Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 139-144), p. 143.

¹⁰⁸ Nirmal, 'Doing', p. 144.

¹⁰⁹ Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle', pp. 89-90.

can also infer that praxis assumes a foundational primacy in their definition of Dalit theology, because the objectives that the theologians delineate for this theology unite faith to existential struggles. What is envisaged is a unity between theology and transformation.

2 - Agency for Liberation in Dalit Theology

We have seen that liberation of the Dalits is the overall goal of Dalit theology. Who are the agents for that liberation? Massey recognises that solidarity among Dalits (both Christian and non-Christian) is essential for Dalit struggle because 'only through a commitment to solidarity...they (Dalits) can generate power among themselves to face the challenge of their opponents'. This, he says, is the subject of theology.¹¹⁰ In his article 'Missions in a Dalit Perspective', Prabhakar calls for an approach of mutuality. While the middle and the upper strata of the Church have the obligation 'for extending their solidarity and actions with Dalits in achieving their liberation', there was need for the Dalits too 'to seek for alliances with and solidarity of the non-Dalits in trust, friendliness and on an equal basis, maintaining their own leadership and initiatives'.¹¹¹ Wilson says that the Church in India should be open to 'join hands and work in cooperation with secular humanising forces'.¹¹² Nirmal also states that Dalits should be willing to accept help from 'all possible sources'.¹¹³ Godwin Shiri also stresses the need for 'all possible alliances with other like minded movements and groups irrespective of whether they are religious or secular; Dalit or non-Dalit'.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Massey, *Down Trodden*, p. 78.

¹¹¹ M. E. Prabhakar, 'Missions in a Dalit Perspective', in V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, (Madras: GLTCRI, 1992), (pp. 71-89), pp. 86-87.

¹¹² Kothapalli Wilson, 'A Dalit Theology of Human Self Development', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 263-276), p. 269. See also Kothapalli Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 151-168), p. 161.

¹¹³ Nirmal, 'Doing', pp. 142,143.

¹¹⁴ Godwin Shiri, 'People's Movements – An Introspection as We Enter the 21st Century', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 43, Nos. 1 & 2, March & June, 1996, (pp. 119-138), p. 129.

The question concerning the agency of liberation also determines, to a certain extent, the content of Dalit theology because it is also a question of the audience of Dalit theology. If Dalit theology 'hints at' a partnership of Christian Dalits with non-Dalits and non-Christian Dalits does its theological articulation also give space for discussing the nature of the partnership? This direction of thought has not been totally neglected in Dalit theology and has received some if not exhaustive attention. Dhyanchand Carr in his efforts to arrive at a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology has attempted to systematize a paradigm which is dialogical both with the Dalits and the non-Dalits. Carr proposes the need for incorporation of both 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical' concerns if the gospel is to become relevant to the oppressed groups. According to Carr:

Contextual theologies which seek to confront situations of oppression can at the same time hold together the ecumenical concern for one human community as well as the evangelical concern that God accepts everyone on the basis of genuine repentance. In other words by being open to Dalit theology, the non-Dalits also can feel included within the pale of salvation through conscious repentance of their past participation either directly or indirectly in the unjust structures, practices and attitudes produced and nurtured by the caste system.¹¹⁵

Carr in his quest to construct a biblical basis for Dalit theology points to three practical features against which the relevance and validity of any theological paradigm can be tested. The features are:

- a) Whether the paradigm provides for a challenge to the non-Dalits.
- b) Whether it provides place for non-Dalits within the overall ambit of Dalit theology.
- c) Whether it provides for an articulation of the messianic consciousness of the

¹¹⁵ Dhyanchand Carr, 'A Biblical Basis for Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 231-249), p. 231.

Dalits as the community chosen to take the gospel to the nations.¹¹⁶

As Massey elucidates the role of Dalit theology, he points to five features of Dalit theology:

- a) Dalit theology has to address the Dalits about their state and consciousness.
- b) It has to address non-Dalits both within and outside the Church.
- c) It has to raise the consciousness of the Church and the Christian community as a whole and enable the church to become an instrument of change.
- d) It has to enable ordinary people to actively participate in the struggles of the Dalits.
- e) It needs to create the possibility of fuller liberation or salvation, which also models liberating their oppressors as they become instruments of establishing a just society.

The role of Dalit theology is, thus, an enabling role, a role which facilitates transformation within both Dalits and non-Dalits. It seems almost imperative for Dalit theology to impinge upon the behaviour of both Christian Dalits and non-Dalit Christians, and enlist and nurture all potential partnerships which will pave the way for the establishment of a just and egalitarian society. Thus, one can conclude that the praxis envisaged in Dalit theology is transformative and liberative for both Dalits and non Dalits. Moreover, it is a praxis of liberative partnerships.

3 - Conclusion

The above analysis makes it clear that liberation is the goal of Dalit theology. This liberation is envisaged in Dalit theology in terms of the dialectic between identity affirmation and liberative social vision. Dalit theology recognises the primacy of

¹¹⁶ Carr, 'A Biblical Basis', p. 235.

liberative partnerships, between Dalit and non-Dalits, Dalit Christians and non-Dalit Christians to achieve this goal. Identity affirmation, liberative social vision and the agency for liberation (partnership of Dalit and non-Dalit Christians) constitute the praxiological framework of Dalit theology.

It is now pertinent to explore the nature of the relationship between the theological content of Dalit theology and this praxiological framework. To what extent has Dalit theological articulation integrated identity affirmation, liberative social vision and agency for liberation (liberative partnerships) to its theological content? This question entails a closer examination of some of the salient features of Christian Dalit theology using these three constituents of the Dalit praxiological framework as a prism.

D - The Content of Dalit Theology

Dalit theological articulation has, in general, focussed upon Dalit Christology and theology, Dalit history, Dalit hermeneutics,¹¹⁷ the Church and Dalits, Dalit culture and theology. Identity affirmation, liberative social vision and agency for liberation have been integrally interconnected to all these aspects of theological articulation. In this section we will identify and analyse the salient theological features of Dalit theology which are connected to this praxiological framework in order to evaluate the nature of the praxis of Dalit theology.

¹¹⁷ Massey and Prabhakar (eds.), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*. See also V. Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key*, (Delhi/Madras: ISPCK, GLTCRI, 1997); P. A. Sampathkumar, 'Reading the Bible with Indian Eyes', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 3, September, 1997, (pp. 98-111); A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Assertion of Periphery: Some Biblical Paradigms' in *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 27, No. 157, 1997, (pp. 25-35); 'Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Reflections', in *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 26, No. 151, 1996, (pp. 29-34); 'The Authority of Jesus: A Dalit Reading of Mark 11: 27-33', in *Jeevadhara, A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 25, 1995, (pp. 123-138); M. Gnanvaram, '“Dalit Theology” and the Parable of the Good Samaritan', in *JSNT*, Vol. 50, 1993, (pp. 59-83); Carr, 'A Biblical Basis', (pp. 231-249).

1 - Dalit Theology and Identity Affirmation

Dalit theology has been identified as a theology of identity. Its emergence needs to be perceived in relation to the Dalits' search for identity.¹¹⁸ The subversive act of Dalit theology is to recognize 'the oppressed people as subjects of theology'.¹¹⁹ Nirmal's answer to the self-imposed question 'what is Dalit theology?' helps us to recognise the important foci of the content Dalit theology. For Nirmal Dalit theology is a theology from the Dalits, which will be produced by the Dalits. He says:

It will be based on their own Dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations and their own hopes. It will narrate the story of their pathos and their protest against the socio-economic injustices they have been subjected to throughout history. It will anticipate liberation which is meaningful to them. It will represent a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian theology of the Brahminic tradition.¹²⁰

This definition of Dalit theology brings out the centrality of Dalit identity for the theological task. It is a theology which takes Dalit story and Dalit struggles as important theological categories. Also significant is the component of representing a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian theology which perpetuated the Brahminic tradition. One of the characteristic features of Dalit theology was to critically confront the existing theological models from the perspective of the Dalits and reformulate and re-vision theology.¹²¹ The implications of this meant that new sources of theology needed to be identified, and the progress of Dalit theology has shown that these sources were found in the culture, history and struggles of the Dalits. So it is not surprising that some perceived the very act of doing Dalit

¹¹⁸ Devasahayam, *Doing*, p. 14.

¹¹⁹ Devasahayam, *Doing*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 219.

¹²¹ George Oommen, 'The Emerging Dalit Theology: A Historical Appraisal', in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, June, 2000, (pp. 19-37).

theology as a form of praxis. According to Prabhakar:

To speak of Dalit theology is a liberative action in itself, considering that theology has been for long the preserve of the elite, an academic discipline and an intellectual activity with little or no direct contact with realities experienced by people. It is a people's self affirmation of doing their own theology from within their own situation, for transforming them, with an alternative consciousness of the economics of equality, politics of justice, and religion of God's freedom.¹²²

One of the areas in which reiteration of identity has been made is in the wider acceptance of the term Dalit by the Dalits themselves as a sign of self-affirmation of their subjecthood and a commitment to take control of their own history.¹²³ The affirmation of Dalit identity in Dalit theological articulation takes place in relation to the areas of history, culture and theology, which we will be dealing with in the following sections.

a) Dalit History

The importance of history for the Dalits has been recognised by Dalit theologians. But the area of Dalit history, though integrally related to the question of identity, has often been a problematic one. This is because the histories of Dalits are predominantly based on oral traditions and are considered to be subjugated. Therefore theologians have pointed out the need for 'historical scholarship that is "interested" in Dalit issues and which will look at oral traditions more sympathetically and consider them as "alternative" historical sources'.¹²⁴ The 'difficulty of nurturing and

¹²² Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 213.

¹²³ Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 13,14.

¹²⁴ Nirmal, 'Doing', p. 144.

strengthening Dalit identity and their struggle for liberation', while being estranged from any understanding of their history has been pointed out.¹²⁵ James Massey has brought out the history of the Dalits right from the time of Aryan invasions. He has drawn attention to the various aspects of Dalit history in his *Roots: A Concise History of Dalits*¹²⁶ and in his article 'Historical Roots'.¹²⁷ He has analysed the plight of the Dalits right from the *Vedic* period under the *Aryan* rule. His research has also covered the Muslim period, the British period and the Post-Independence era. This also meant an in-depth analysis of society and the plight of the Dalits within Indian Church circles as well as the various governmental policies which have been brought up in relation to the Dalits and critical historical review of the theological articulation related to Dalits.

Various theologians have dealt with the history of Dalits in recent times, especially the history of Dalit Christians. George Oommen has analysed the history of Dalits in Kerala and the developments in their Dalit consciousness.¹²⁸ Godwin Shiri has recorded the liberation struggles of the Christian Dalits of Karnataka,¹²⁹ as well as the plight of Christian Dalits in general.¹³⁰ John Webster initiated the attempts to write Dalit Christian history within the context of the modern Dalit movement. He portrayed the history of Christian theological reflection on the Dalit situation in his work *The Dalit Christians: A History*.¹³¹ Dionysius Rasquinha has also analysed the development of Dalit theology from a historical perspective in two of his articles.¹³² This interest in the documentation of Dalit histories can be argued to be the result of

¹²⁵ Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 'Dalits Move Towards the Ideology of Nationality', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 169-180), p. 170.

¹²⁶ James Massey, *Roots: A Concise History of Dalits*, (2nd edn.), (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994).

¹²⁷ James Massey, 'Historical Roots', in James Massey, (ed.) *Indigenous People*, (pp. 3-55).

¹²⁸ George Oommen, 'Pulaya Christians of Kerala: A Community in a Dilemma', in George Oommen and John C. B. Webster (eds.), *Local Dalit Christian History*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), (pp. 92-96); 'Dalits' Socio-Religious Aspirations and Christianity', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 140-151); 'Majoritarian Nationalism and the Identity Politics of Dalits in Post-Independent India', in Joseph George (ed.), *The God of All Grace: Essays in Honour of Origen Vasantha Jathanna*, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation and United Theological College, 2005), (pp. 338-350).

¹²⁹ Godwin Shiri, 'In Search of Roots: Christian Dalits in Karnataka and their Struggles for Liberation', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XL, No. 4, December, 1993, (pp. 28-35).

¹³⁰ Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', (pp. 99-116).

¹³¹ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*.

lessons learned from past experiences and also the purpose behind the documentation of Dalit situation and struggles is to grant visibility to the often unacknowledged vicissitudes of the Dalit situation.

b) Identity Affirmation via Theologising With Dalit Culture

As a theology committed to forging a radical discontinuity with the Brahminic mode of theological articulation, it is incumbent upon Dalit theology to articulate its theology using alternative sources. This is one area of Dalit theology where much creative work has been done. Theologians have looked into various sources like Dalit literature,¹³³ folk religion and folklore,¹³⁴ the religiosity of the Dalits¹³⁵ and stories of Dalit struggles¹³⁶ to articulate Dalit theology. Two theologians, A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel¹³⁷ and Sathianathan Clarke have consistently affirmed the need to take Dalit culture seriously. Ayrookuzhiel views Dalit theology as ‘the sum of Dalit

¹³² See ‘A Critical’, (pp. 251-269) and ‘A Brief’, (pp. 353-370).

¹³³ Some theologians and writers have also used the poems of Telugu Dalit Christian poet Gurram Jashuva. See P. Swarnalatha Ranjan, ‘Christian Dalit Aspirations as Expressed by Jashuva Kavi in Gabbilam (The Bat)’, in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 324-330); M. E. Prabhakar, ‘In Search of Roots – Dalit Aspirations and the Christian Dalit Question (Perceptions of the Andhra Poet Laureate, Joshua)’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 41, No. 1 March, 1994, (pp. 2-20); ‘Women and Gender Equality: Towards an Authentic Spirituality-Theologizing with Poet Jashuva’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1, March, 1995, (pp. 29-48). Prabhakar uses different spellings for the author’s name.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Joy, ‘Folklore: A New Hermeneutical Key for Dalit Womanist Theology’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, September, 1998, (pp. 101-114).

¹³⁵ James Theophilus Appavoo, ‘Dalit Religion’, in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 111-121); Elisha, ‘Liberative Motifs’, (pp. 78-88).

¹³⁶ Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, ‘Skin, Body and Blood: Explorations for Dalit Hermeneutics’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 106 -120).

¹³⁷ See Godwin Shiri, ‘Study of Religion: Ayrookuzhiel’s Search for a New Approach in the Context of Dalit Struggle’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 43, No. 3, September, 1998, (pp. 39-53). See also A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, ‘Distinctive Characteristics of Folk Traditions (A Proposal for the Study of the Religious Heritage of the Dalits: Some Methodological Considerations)’, in Gnana Robinson (ed.), *Religions of the Marginalised: Towards a Phenomenology and the Methodology of Study*, (Bangalore / Delhi: The United Theological College / ISPCK, 1998), (pp. 1-17). This article was a modified version the article ‘A Proposal for the Study of Religious Heritage of the Dalits: Some Methodological Considerations’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1, March, 1995, (pp. 17-28); See also other writings of Ayrookuzhiel: ‘Chinna Pulayan: The Dalit Teacher of Sankaracharya’, in Robinson (ed.), *Religions of the Marginalised*, (pp. 18-34); ‘Religious Legitimations and Delegitimations of Social Relations of Power (Of Caste): The Case of Dalits in Historical Perspective’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XL, No. 4, December, 1993, (pp. 3-15); ‘Dalit Theology: A Movement of Counter-Culture’, in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 250-266).

meanings, expectations and understandings in relation to their experience of social reality and their perception of what it is to lead an authentic human existence'.¹³⁸ He critiques the tendency of Christian theology to relate to the dominant stream and says that Dalit theology should play a cultural role through which the dominant religious traditions and their dehumanising potential should be denounced through critical analysis and the counter-cultural models be lifted up as useful and relevant.¹³⁹

Ayrookuzhiel makes it clear that the way forward for the Church to engage in ministry with the Dalits is to search 'for roots in terms of theological-ideological resources'. This involves 'gathering the positive cultural traditions and values counter to the Brahminic hierarchal values of legitimation of the old power relations' which can be found in the scattered popular traditions of the powerless.¹⁴⁰ Ayrookuzhiel analyses how relations of power have been legitimised on the basis of Brahmannical or Hindu religio-cultural tradition. He points out how the coalescence between these traditions and political power led to the enforcement of the religious discrimination.¹⁴¹ After drawing attention to the counter-cultural movements which emerged in opposition to Brahmannical religion, Ayrookuzhiel delves into the regional culture of various Dalit communities and identifies certain resistive features in their religion and culture. He points out that in the Dalit culture there are a) gods and goddesses who condemn caste and preach a religion of common human values, b) rituals denouncing caste c) many anti-brahmanical proverbs d) evidences to show that Dalit communities 'had proprietary rights and priestly privileges associated with gods and temples which are now under caste control'.¹⁴² His intention is to point to the 'anti-caste cultural ethos' among popular cultural traditions of the Dalits.

¹³⁸ Ayrookuzhiel, 'Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 250-266), p. 250.

¹³⁹ Ayrookuzhiel, 'Dalit Theology', (pp. 265-266).

¹⁴⁰ Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', p. 15.

¹⁴¹ Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', p. 5.

¹⁴² Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', pp. 12-15.

Sathianathan Clarke has made a substantial contribution to the development of Christian Dalit theology which took into serious consideration the religious and cultural world of the Dalits.¹⁴³ Clarke advocates that engagement with ‘the already internalised religious world-picture of the marginalised people’ is an important constitutive liberational element which needs to be taken seriously. He is of the opinion that thorough emancipation for Dalits cannot be achieved without direct encounter and reconciliation with Dalit history, religion and culture.¹⁴⁴

He is critical of the two ways in which Dalits have responded to the course of Indian Christian Theology ‘Sanskritization’ and Liberationism. He critiques that the approach of liberationism is not suitable for Dalit theology because the focus is on the one hand parochially limited to the social and economic realms of life, while on the other hand it ignores contextual complexities and tries to interpret liberation in universalist terms which find commonality with the various oppressed communities throughout the globe.¹⁴⁵ He also critiques the failure of liberationism to pay adequate attention to utilize traditional representations of the knowledge of God. He states his objection to the epistemology of liberationism on the basis that, ‘while it affirms that the experience of pain-pathos is the source of knowledge about God, it fails to take seriously the symbolization of this experience of pain pathos that is manifested in Dalit religion. Therefore there is an unwillingness to work under the directives of its own epistemological presuppositions’.¹⁴⁶

As a corrective Clarke in his work *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* uses the Dalit symbolic world to apprehend Jesus

¹⁴³ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*. See also ‘Reviewing the Religion of the Paraiyars: Ellaiyamman as an Iconic Symbol of Collective Resistance and Emancipatory Mythography’, in Robinson (ed.), *Religions of the Marginalised*, (pp. 35-53); ‘Subaltern Culture as Resource for People’s Liberation: A Critical Inquiry into Dalit Culture Theory’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4, December, 1997, (pp. 84 -105); ‘Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain: A Critical Review of Theories of Religion and a Constructive Proposition to Glean the Richness of Dalit Subjectivity’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 30-48).

¹⁴⁴ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁵ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁶ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 46-47.

Christ. He seeks to correct the misapprehension and misconception that Dalit religion is demonic by exposing the Christic presence in the religious tradition of the Dalits. He creatively interprets the resistive and the constructive dimensions of Dalit religion by analysing two important symbols of Dalit religion - the goddess *Ellaiyamman* and the Dalit drum. Considering the fact that the Dalit drum is a symbolic representation of the Dalits' collective expression and experience of the divine, Clarke explicates a christology of the Dalit drum and interprets Christ as drum. He also subverts the traditional models of working out christology by opting to begin his articulation from what he calls 'the expansive pole of Christology...which testifies to the presence of Christ in creation even if quite apart from Jesus'.¹⁴⁷ He works out his christology according to the 'dictates of those who have been silenced in theological discourse' and by doing so valorises 'a particularly slighted and scorned perspective of interpreting Jesus'.¹⁴⁸

The focus of Clarke's theology is the liberation of subaltern theology itself by incorporating the symbolic representations of the Dalit understanding of the divine. The praxis is the theology itself in the sense that it recognises and affirms the resistive nature of Dalits and utilises them for the explication of a christology. His approach affirms Dalit culture and religion. I agree with Clarke about the usefulness of his theological expositions at various levels: that it will start the process of justifying the search for subjugated knowledge among marginalised communities, a process which can be linked to the identity affirmation of Dalits. It reinscribes what constitutes acceptable or appropriate knowledge. It enriches the process and content of theology by systematically recalling and creatively remembering the silenced voices within the contours of social discourse.¹⁴⁹ It provides a critique to Christian theology's biblicalism and culture and orality which appear to aid the colonising and the demonising of the working of God within the religions of orality.¹⁵⁰ 'It furnishes a whole array of resources concerning aspects of God which have not come from

¹⁴⁷ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 184,185.

¹⁴⁸ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 185.

¹⁴⁹ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁰ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 13.

literary sources'.¹⁵¹ However given the ambiguity associated with symbols as well as the estrangement of religious symbols to acts of socio-political transformation there are issues to be dealt with, which will be one of our foci in the next chapter.

c) Theological Motifs and Paradigms Relating to Dalit Identity Affirmation

We have already seen that many theologians have recognised Dalit identity as an important theological category.¹⁵² The focus on Dalit identity implied that attention had to be paid on the subjugated Dalit history,¹⁵³ the pathos experience of Dalits and on Dalit culture which were identified as signifiers of the Dalit identity. Some of the significant features of Dalit theology which impinge upon Dalit identity are as follows.

c. i) Historical Dalit Consciousness

Historical Dalit consciousness is recognised by Nirmal as the primary datum for a Christian Dalit theology because it is related to the question of Dalit identity and implies recognition of Dalit roots. Only by grappling with the question of roots, can one understand Dalit identity in its entirety, which is inseparably bound up with the sense of belonging to a community. Nirmal feels that the historical Dalit consciousness helps in achieving a community-consciousness, which further facilitates the formulation of a communitive vision. If Dalit theology has to be authentic it has to be informed by this historical Dalit consciousness.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 13.

¹⁵² See K. P. Aleaz, 'In Quest of a Dalit Theology', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 75-97), p. 77, Nirmal, 'Doing Theology', p. 143.

¹⁵³ According to Nirmal, 'The question of identity is the question of the concerned people's roots and their historical consciousness', in 'Doing', p. 143.

¹⁵⁴ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 220.

c. ii) Deuteronomic Creed as an Appropriate Biblical Paradigm

Because the question of Dalit identity is central for historical Dalit consciousness the historic Deuteronomic creed, found in Deuteronomy 26: 5-12 is considered as having paradigmatic value for Dalit theology. The Deuteronomic creed is mentioned in conjunction with the 'exodus experience' which is important for Latin American and Black Liberation theologies. The Deuteronomic creed is expounded in full drawing out its implications for Dalit theology. As Nirmal draws out the paradigmatic nature of the Deuteronomic creed for Dalit theology he also goes on to passionately bring out the distinctiveness of the Dalit situation:

The historical Dalit consciousness in India depicts even greater and deeper *pathos* than is found in the deuteronomic creed. My Dalit ancestor did not enjoy the nomadic freedom of the wandering Aramean. As an outcaste, he was also cast out of his/her village. The Dalit *bastis* (localities), were always and are always on the outskirts of the Indian village. When my Dalit ancestor walked the dusty roads of his village, the *Sa Varnas* tied a tree-branch around his waist so that he would not leave any unclean foot-prints and pollute the roads. The *Sa Varnas* tied an earthen pot around my dalit ancestor's neck to serve as a spittle. If ever my Dalit ancestor tried to learn Sanskrit or any sophisticated language, the oppressors gagged him permanently by pouring molten lead down his throat. My dalit mother and sisters were forbidden to wear any blouses and the *Sa Varnas* feasted their eyes on their bare bosoms. The *Sa Varnas* denied my Dalit ancestor any access to public wells and reservoirs. They denied him the entry to their temples and places of worship... My Dalit consciousness therefore, has an unparalleled depth of *pathos* and misery and it is this historical dalit consciousness, this dalit identity that should inform my attempt at a Christian Dalit theology.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Nirmal, 'Towards', pp. 221-222.

Certain important features which are identified and their concomitant implications are as follows:

The importance of *calling to memory the roots* of the people who have experienced the Exodus liberation is recognized as a primary category for Dalit theology, because Dalit theology, being a truly confessional theology, has to deal with the question of roots, identity and consciousness.¹⁵⁶

The *representative nature* of the wandering Aramean, (who is described as 'few in number'), is also explicated in terms of 'the sense of belonging to a community'. The Aramean ancestor stands for the entire community. The implications of this mean the affirmation of community-consciousness and recognition that the vision of a Dalit theology ought to be a communitive vision.¹⁵⁷

The importance of *recalling their affliction* and story of bondage is pointed out. The implication of this for Dalit theology is that 'a genuinely Dalit theology will be characterised by pathos, by suffering'.

The Exodus liberation is symbolized by '*a mighty hand*', 'an outstretched arm' and by terror. This implies that a certain measure of 'terror' is necessary to achieve liberation. This means a subversion of any fatalistic attitude to life and involving in protest and agitation and transformation.

c. iii) Pathos as the Epistemological Starting Point

Nirmal's contention is that historical Dalit consciousness depicts the unparalleled depth of pain and pathos of the Dalits. For Dalit theology pain or 'pathos' is the beginning of knowledge because, for the sufferers their pain is 'more certain than' any principle,

¹⁵⁶ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 220.

¹⁵⁷ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 221.

proposition, thought or action.¹⁵⁸ Because 'it is in this pain-pathos that the sufferer knows God,' this experience of pain or pathos should become the epistemological starting point for the Dalits' knowledge of God. However what is important to note is that Nirmal is not actually advocating passive acceptance of pathos. He emphasizes that this pathos should give birth to protest which is so loud as to break down the walls of Brahmanism. Though Dalit theology will be full of pathos it will not be a passive theology.¹⁵⁹

c. iv) Dalit Christology

The area of Christology is one area where the dialectic between identity affirmation and liberative social vision is sought to be made. One of the most important contributions of Dalit theology is Dalit Christology. The articulation of Dalit Christology is inextricably interlinked with Dalitness. According to Prabhakar, 'What the Dalits think of Jesus Christ and God's saving act in and through him is integrally linked with their dehumanised social existence and their hope for a future in Christ, freed from all inhumanity and justice'.¹⁶⁰

When we talk of Dalit Christology or Christology in a Dalit perspective, we are talking of a Christology that can create within the Dalits a realization, a 'consciousness' of their own intrinsic worth, 'their full humanness' through Christ. This 'new found consciousness' can in turn instil in the minds of the Dalits a new sense of dignity.¹⁶¹ What is implicit in Dalit Christology is the attempt to make the Dalits realize their own humanness and dignity through the Dalitness of Jesus Christ.¹⁶² Nirmal emphasises on Jesus' Dalitness as 'the key to the mystery of his

¹⁵⁸ Nirmal, 'Doing', p. 141.

¹⁵⁹ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 222.

¹⁶⁰ Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 405.

¹⁶¹ See Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 420-424.

¹⁶² See Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 402-432.

divine human unity'.¹⁶³ There is an emphasis on the affirmation that Jesus Christ himself was a Dalit.¹⁶⁴ Jesus' Dalitness is emphasised through references to his socio-cultural and economic locatedness. Attention is paid to his 'mixed ancestry' through reference to the Matthean genealogy, where, among Jesus' ancestors, the names of Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Rahab the harlot, King Solomon an illegitimate child of David are mentioned as being suggestive of Jesus' Dalit conditions.¹⁶⁵ The pejorative references to Jesus as a carpenter's son are also pointed out. The Son of Man sayings, which speak of the Son of Man as encountering rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering and finally death, are also used to emphasise Jesus' Dalitness.¹⁶⁶

Nirmal's attempt is to make the image of the Dalit Christ acceptable in its quintessence if not in its reality by pointing to Jesus' taking on himself the 'pain' and 'pathos' of the oppressed while suffering on the cross.¹⁶⁷ The cross and the resurrection become metaphors for the victory of Jesus over the shackles that suppress and discriminate against the suffering ones. They also become metaphors of Jesus' own identification with the outcastes and thus symbols of liberation.

The other important features which have informed Dalit Christology so far are Jesus' identification with the Dalits of his day through his open commensality, the Nazareth manifesto in the gospel according to Luke which brings out Jesus' preferential option for the poor. The Nazareth manifesto is used to emphasise the point that 'the gospel Jesus brought was the gospel for 'Dalits' and not for non-Dalits'.¹⁶⁸ References are also made to Jesus' cleansing of the temple which is interpreted as 'a prefiguration of the vindication of the Indian Dalit struggle for their prayer and worship rights'.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 225.

¹⁶⁴ See also Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 414-420.

¹⁶⁵ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 226.

¹⁶⁶ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 226.

¹⁶⁷ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 225.

¹⁶⁸ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 227.

Dalit Christology cannot be understood in isolation from the way in which God in Christ is understood as the suffering servant. The God whom Jesus revealed is identified as a servant God by Nirmal.¹⁷⁰ This is the image which is acknowledged by Prabhakar as the most radical of Nirmal's statements on Dalit theology, which has a direct bearing on Dalit Christology.¹⁷¹ Let us look at the way Nirmal explicates the Dalit God:

But the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He is a servant God - a God who serves. Services to others have always been the privilege of Dalit communities in India. The passages from Manu *Dharma Sastra* say that the Shudra was created by the self-existent (*Svayambhu*) to do servile work and that servitude is innate in him. Service is the *Sva-dharma* of the Shudra. Let us remember the fact that in Dalits we have peoples who are *avarnas* - those below the Shudras. Their servitude is even more pathetic than that of the Shudras. Against this background the amazing claim of a Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the *Svayambhu* does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. *Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the sva-dharma of the God; and since we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege.*¹⁷²

The attempts of Nirmal to identify God by using servant language is to recognize and identify God as 'a truly Dalit deity'. This is an act of affirming the humanity of the Dalits even in their own servanthood. Nirmal says that by taking up the traditionally impure jobs Dalits have 'participated in this servant-God's ministries'.¹⁷³ He goes on to identify Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah. The language used for this servant

¹⁶⁹ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 229.

¹⁷⁰ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.

¹⁷¹ Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 224.

¹⁷² Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.

¹⁷³ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.

God is the language of pathos, the language which mirrors the pathos of the Dalits.¹⁷⁴ Nirmal makes hermeneutical purchase of this servant image to affirm the Dalitness of the Dalits through this commonality of pathos and servanthood.

Devasahayam also accords messianic value to the Dalits because they manifest messianic values which counter caste values. According to him Jesus 'focuses more sharply on the poor, meek, the sorrowful and the persecuted as the agents of God's redemptive activity'.¹⁷⁵ The implicit reference to the beatitudes is made clearer as Devasahayam delves into the depth of the meanings of the words poor, meek and sorrowful and persecuted. According to Devasahayam the poor, the meek, the sorrowful and the persecuted are 'the ones made powerless' and 'those who have been domesticated to serve the purposes of their oppressors'.¹⁷⁶ 'Jesus identifies the 'servant' as a messianic category'. The Dalits become a messianic community because they embody servanthood in their daily lives.¹⁷⁷

Another image of the Dalit Christ is based on Christ's feeling of being 'God-forsaken' in the midst of his intense agony on the cross. This is also related to Dalit pathos. Jesus' Dalitness is best symbolised by the cross. Jesus becomes Dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term as 'the broken, the crushed, the split the torn, the driven asunder man'.¹⁷⁸ The feeling of God forsakenness is reflected in Jesus' cry, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me'. The feeling of being God-forsaken is the core of Dalit experience and consciousness.¹⁷⁹ By sharing in this experience, Jesus becomes a Dalit and this is another example of Dalit Christology based on the epistemological premise of pain and pathos.

¹⁷⁴ Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 225.

¹⁷⁵ Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 24,25.

¹⁷⁶ Devasahayam, *Doing*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁷ Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 25,26.

¹⁷⁸ Nirmal uses these words in the essay to define the Dalits, hence they are to be understood as indicators of Dalit identity. See Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 214.

¹⁷⁹ Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 229.

Dalit Christology has consistently identified Jesus as a Dalit and as a suffering servant in terms of Jesus' brokenness, which mirrors the brokenness of the Dalits. It is through this brokenness that God's glory will be made manifest. Prabhakar makes theological purchase out of the etymological understanding of the word Dalit as 'manifested or displayed' as follows:

(Another) group of meanings associated with the term 'Dalit' is "manifested or displayed". It is through us that God will manifest and display His salvation. It is precisely in and through the weaker, the downtrodden, the crushed, the oppressed and the marginalised that God's saving glory is manifested or displayed. This is because brokenness belongs to the very being of God. God's divinity and humanity are both characterised by His Dalitness'.¹⁸⁰

There is a heavy reliance on James Cone's articulation of a theology of Black liberation as Prabhakar goes on to characterise Dalit suffering as redemptive suffering.¹⁸¹ Prabhakar argues for Dalit suffering as a conscious and representative suffering on the behalf of a frail humanity, as he draws its implications for the Indian Church as follows:

There is a tremendous thought that the Indian untouchables (Dalits) suffer on behalf of the frail Indian humanity. It becomes then a Dalit vocation for "redemptive suffering", to renew and liberate a new humanity out of the rigid oppressive caste society! This insight can be potentially followed up within the Church to renew the entire Christian community, pervaded by the Hindu caste-ethos.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 222.

¹⁸¹ See Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 415 (n.25 and 26), 417 (n.29), 422-423 (n.30-33).

¹⁸² Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 223.



This area of 'the representative and redemptive suffering of Dalits' is a problematic area, because, there is a tacit inclination to 'glorify' Dalit suffering. There is potential to ideologically abuse this area to strategically thwart the resistive upsurge of Dalits seeking to move beyond their suffering. If the consequence of oppression is suffering and Dalits want to be liberated from this suffering, how would a theological validation of this suffering (which explicitly affirms that God's glory will be made manifest in this suffering) provide a liberative thrust to the Dalits?

At the end of our analysis of Dalit Christology, we can conclude that Dalit Christology is predominantly articulated by accentuating the convergence of pathos experience of Jesus and the Dalits. There is a thoroughgoing emphasis on Jesus' Dalitness. An integral link between Dalit Christology and Dalit theological anthropology can also be discerned. The language of agency is also implicit whenever Dalits are accorded a messianic identity, by virtue of their brokenness through which God's salvation and glory will be made manifest. The primary intention of all those theologians who have dealt with Dalit Christology is to identify Jesus Christ as a God who participates in Dalitness.

2 - Dalit Theology and Liberative Social Vision and Agency

The liberative social vision of Dalit theology can be discerned in all those articulations which have called for a socio-political involvement in the Dalit issue. With regard to this some of the issues which have received attention were the struggles for securing protective discrimination in the form of Scheduled Caste benefits to Christian Dalits,¹⁸³ as well as the challenge of overcoming caste discrimination within the Churches. But Dalit theology has just *mentioned* these two issues consistently. Not much theological reflection has done upon these issues.

¹⁸³ M. E. Prabhakar, 'The Politics of Religious Discrimination and the Christian Dalit Question', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, September, 1998, (pp. 54-83).

The theological content of Dalit theology with regard to its liberative social vision, however, has been predominantly concerned with the praxis of the Indian Church. In this section we will analyse the praxiological thrust of some theologians, who have specifically articulated a Dalit theology which focuses on the practical responsibility of the Church in order to have an overview of Dalit theology's liberative social vision.

a) *Masilamani Azariah*

Masilamani Azariah recognised the importance of the Church to engage in Dalit issues. For Azariah solidarity with the people is basic to theology. Hence for him a theology relevant to the cause of the Dalits emerges from those Christian thinkers and activists 'who, in loyalty to Jesus have inserted themselves in the life of the people and as partners in their struggle for justice'.¹⁸⁴ Azariah defines Christianity as a scheme of life in society, whose circumference, radius and centre are Christ.¹⁸⁵ He envisages a pastoral role for the Church in relation to the Dalits, which involves the ministry of healing the 'wounded psyche' of the Dalits which is the result of an inferiority-consciousness imposed upon the Dalits. Only through solidarity with Dalits can the church in India work towards the emancipation of the Dalits.¹⁸⁶

b) *Samuel Rayan*

Rayan has used Hebrews 13:11-13, as a biblical paradigm for the Church to engage in

¹⁸⁴ Azariah, 'Doing Theology', p. 88.

¹⁸⁵ See, M. Azariah, *The Unchristian Side of the Indian Church*, (Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1989).

¹⁸⁶ M. Azariah, 'The Church's Healing Ministry to the Dalits', in *Indigenous People: Dalits*, (pp. 316-323) also see *Towards a Dalit Theology*, (pp. 113-121).

the Dalit issue.¹⁸⁷ The biblical passage is as follows:

The bodies of the animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for the atonement of sin are burnt outside the camp; and so Jesus too suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood. Let us go to him, then, outside the camp and share his degradation /shame.

According to Rayan the biblical passage talks about the praxis of Jesus, suffering outside the camp. It is the story of Jesus, and in him God, immersing themselves in 'the Dalitness of the oppressed in order to rescue its victims and plant them in the realm of freedom, dignity and creative living'.¹⁸⁸ The uncompromising and radical invitation to join Jesus outside the camp and share Jesus' degradation and death in the outcast place is 'what stamps us and our Church with the Christian character'.¹⁸⁹ The praxis of Jesus makes it clear that 'discipleship and churchhood did not consist in sharing his throne of glory, but in sharing his cup of suffering, the baptism of his humiliation and the distress of his passion in an act of befriending and participating in their condition and giving our life for their liberation'.¹⁹⁰

The praxis that Rayan delineates is also the praxis of solidarity and identification with the Dalits by the Church. He also makes references to Jesus' open commensality, Jesus' transcendence of racial and gender prejudices in his interaction with the Samaritan woman and Jesus' servant leadership when delineating the role of the church.¹⁹¹ Appropriating the invitation to follow Jesus in Hebrews to the Dalit

¹⁸⁷ This paradigm was used by Rayan in the article 'Outside the Gate: Sharing the Insult', in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. 11, No. 63, May & June, 1981, (pp. 216-228). Rasquinha doesn't consider Rayan's theology as Dalit Christian theology but places it among 'important steps towards the concept and practice of Dalit Christian Theology'. See Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 362. However a later article by Rayan used the same biblical paradigm and was part of a collection of essays which was published after the 'emergence and establishment' of Dalit Theology as a distinct theology. See Samuel Rayan, 'The Challenge of the Dalit Issue', in Devasahayam (ed.), *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, Madras: GLTCRI, 1992, (pp. 117-137).

¹⁸⁸ Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 121.

¹⁸⁹ Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 121.

¹⁹⁰ Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 121.

¹⁹¹ Rayan, 'The Challenge', pp. 122,123.

situation Rayan says:

Hebrews 13 urges us and the church to go outside the camp and share the degradation of Jesus and his friends, the Jobs and the suffering servants of our times. Not in order to romanticize Dalitness, but to subvert it by loving the oppressed, rebuilding their pride, and enable them to struggle to equality and freedom.¹⁹²

According to Rayan relating liberationally to Dalits is an essential component of faith. The Church is Christian to the extent in which Christ's option for Dalits and Christ's actions for liberation are relived.¹⁹³ 'The invitation of Hebrews to share Jesus' degradation outside the gate implies a socio-cultural revolution, however tiny or fragmentary, that would liberate the Dalits and make them heirs to a world of new relationships where everyone's dignity and rights are honoured and upheld'.¹⁹⁴

c) *William Madtha*

Madtha identifies the core of Dalit theology as 'not *logos* but *praxis* that is liberative'.¹⁹⁵ Jesus victimhood as well as priesthood are identified by Madtha as a peak experience of the consequence of Jesus' option for the poor, and discipleship entails learning to encounter God in their commitment to the Dalits.¹⁹⁶ Some of the principles of praxis identified by Madtha are being poor for the poor (voluntary poverty), protest for honesty, cultural revolution,¹⁹⁷ good news to the poor.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 131.

¹⁹³ Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 132.

¹⁹⁴ Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 123.

¹⁹⁵ William Madtha, 'Dalit Theology: Voice of the Oppressed', in Massey, (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 277-294), p. 278.

¹⁹⁶ Madtha, 'Dalit Theology', p. 285.

¹⁹⁷ According to Madtha Dalit theology generates a cultural revolution which stresses the equality of all. Madtha takes a giant, unconvincing and ambiguous leap to say that this 'cultural revolution is shaped authentically by the dalits themselves in an ongoing fashion through political

d) James Massey

Massey also addresses the issue of the liberative social vision for Dalit theology in his article - 'The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue'.¹⁹⁹ He addresses the issue of the discrimination of Dalits within the Church.²⁰⁰ He considers the Dalit problem to be more theological than social and argues for attention to be paid to biblical models to deal with the issue.²⁰¹ The complete model which covers all aspects of Dalits according to him is the 'incarnational model', the best summary of which could be found in John 1:1,2,14. Massey along with Azariah and Rayan also emphasises identification with the Dalits and engaging alongside them in their struggles. For Massey:

In the incarnational model we meet a real 'Dalit' who became himself the Poorest of the poor as a human being (a Dalit) to make all the Dalits of this world rich (II Corinthians 8:9). This model challenges us (and this includes the churches) to re-discover the lost identity of God which he took upon Himself...

Re-discovering or agreeing with this model means taking part in the struggle of Dalits. It also means taking a risk, losing our own identity and also shunning our inherited understanding of the Christian faith. This also means accepting and recognising the problem of Dalits, both within the church as well as in society, both spiritually and socially.²⁰²

commitment'. The question how Dalit theology has generated this cultural revolution in the first place and how the agency of Dalits is assumed is left unanswered. Madtha, 'Dalit Theology', p. 290.

¹⁹⁸ Madtha, 'Dalit Theology', pp. 286-292.

¹⁹⁹ James Massey, 'The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 41, No. 1, March, 1994, (pp. 44 -50).

²⁰⁰ Massey, 'The Role', pp. 48,49.

²⁰¹ With regard to this Massey makes references to the stories of Gideon (Judges: Chapters 6,7,8), Hannah (I Samuel: Chapters 1,2) and the story of Mary (Luke: Chapter 1).

²⁰² Massey, 'The Role', p. 50.

e) *Dhyanchand Carr*

Carr, on the basis of his interpretation of God's election of Israel and the Matthean portrayal of the Galilean option of Jesus, concludes that Mathew provides the most comprehensive biblical paradigm for Dalit theology, because 'it affirms God's bias towards the socially ostracized and stigmatized groups'.²⁰³ It also proclaims that the scattered and harassed people constituted the messianic community. It also posits the possibility of the privileged getting God's approval through deliberate and willing acceptance of a secondary position.²⁰⁴

f) *T. Victor*

Victor also stresses the example of Jesus' preferential option for the poor when he deals with the question of Christian commitment to the subalterns.²⁰⁵ The term 'subaltern' is identified by Victor as being 'synonymous with the modern usage of Dalit in a wider sense'.²⁰⁶ Victor's understanding of Jesus' praxis is that 'Jesus comes heavily on those who exploit the poor, displace the weak and deny their humanity'. Recognising the main suffering of the subalterns as 'unbearable humiliation, dehumanization, loss of self respect, self-esteem and human dignity inflicted by the elite, the exploiters', Victor points out that Jesus' life was 'a life of option for the poor and oppressed who found their thirst for recognition and identity as human persons fulfilled by him and in him'.²⁰⁷ In the same way in the present context, which is characterised by the subaltern 'search for their true identity and

²⁰³ Dhyanchand Carr, 'Dalit Theology is Biblical and it Makes the Gospel Relevant', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 71-83), p. 82. See also 'A Biblical Basis', (pp. 231-249).

²⁰⁴ Carr, 'A Biblical Basis', pp. 83.

²⁰⁵ T. Victor, 'Christian Commitment and Subaltern Perspectives', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 98-105).

²⁰⁶ Victor, 'Christian Commitment', p. 101.

²⁰⁷ Victor, 'Christian Commitment', p. 103.

thirst for the recognition of their human dignity', Victor identifies four important characteristics for Christian commitment and mission to the subalterns. They are:²⁰⁸

- 1) 'Promoting solidarity with the subalterns as Jesus did'. This involves breaking all barriers.
- 2) Redefining the mission to subalterns which involves not giving priority to numerical addition but to the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the kingdom values.
- 3) Assuring non-Christian communities that our philanthropic activity is not intended to proselytise.
- 4) Become involved in translating the recent awakening and upsurge of the various subaltern groups into one mighty national movement, through political education.

On the basis of our survey of Dalit theologians who have dealt with liberative social vision for Dalit theology we can conclude with the following points:

- 1) The liberative social vision of Dalit theology has so far been inextricably linked with the praxis of Jesus and the praxis of the Church.
- 2) There is no mention of the role of the Dalits in liberation.
- 3) The model of praxis for the Church is analogically derived from the praxis of Jesus and is a praxis of solidarity with the marginalised and oppressed.

²⁰⁸ Victor, 'Christian Commitment', pp. 104-105.

E - Concluding Analysis

In this chapter we analysed the reasons for the development of Dalit theology. Dalit theology emerged as a confessional reality of the Church due to the influx of Dalit converts to Christianity in the 19th century. However it was the increasing consciousness of the discrimination of Dalits within the Church as well as the exclusive perpetuation of Indian Christian theology in the Brahmannic tradition without any attention being paid to the experiences and struggles of the Dalit majority within the Indian Church which led to the attempts to articulate Dalit theology. Dalit theology in its formative years was characterised by its discontinuity with the Brahmannic tradition. It made Dalit experiences the subject matter of theology and also sought to enlist the Church in the Dalit's struggle for liberation. We also identified the praxiological framework for Dalit theology. Dalit liberation is the goal of Dalit theology and this liberation was envisaged in terms of a dialectic between identity affirmation and a liberative social vision. The agency for this liberation lay in the partnership of both Dalits and non-Dalits.

We also looked into the theological content of the Dalit theology articulated in relation to the praxiological framework. The following findings have emerged:

In connection with the aspect of identity affirmation Dalit theologians have affirmed the importance of knowing Dalit history. They have recognised that Dalit history has been subjugated and so have pointed to the need for a reconstruction of Dalit history from oral and alternative sources. It has also been reiterated that integral to the question of the identity affirmation of Dalits is the need to recognise the importance of Dalit culture and utilise Dalit culture in theological articulation. Theologians have subversively utilised Dalit culture in a methodological affirmation of Dalit identity. The significant aspects of Dalit culture which have been identified are those which promote counter-cultural values different from Brahminic values (Ayrookuzhiel) as well as aspects of Dalit religiosity and culture where symbolic configurations of Dalit

resistance and pathos are implicit.

Various salient theological motifs of Dalit theology have identity affirmation at their core. The emphasis on historical Dalit consciousness and on the Deuteronomic creed as the theological paradigm of Dalit theology, recognition of pathos as the basic epistemological premise for theology, and the affirmation of Jesus's Dalitness in Dalit Christology have brought out 'Dalitness', understood as the broken and oppressed condition of Dalit, as a core signifier of Dalit identity. With regard to Dalit christology the identity of Jesus is also worked out in relation to this Dalitness. One has to understand that the very methodology of Dalit theological articulation is oriented towards identity affirmation.

The theological content of Dalit theology which has implications for liberative social vision and agency for liberation has been articulated primarily in relation to the praxis of the Church. It is articulated in very general terms. The praxis of the Indian Church is analogical to the praxis of Jesus, whose praxis is a praxis of solidarity. The Church is understood mainly in terms of the 'non-Dalit' Church and hence the recourse to the language of solidarity and identification with the 'them' – the Dalits. This is significant considering the fact that the majority of the Christians are Dalits. Though the praxiological framework of Dalit theology brings out the importance of partnerships between Dalits and non-Dalits, there is not much theological content relating to the issue of Dalit engagement in liberation. Though the messianic identity of the Dalits is recognised because of their brokenness, Dalit theology hasn't identified a clear cut role for Dalits in the struggle for liberation as it has done for the Church. The primary praxis for them is to self-affirm their identity through the christological image of the Dalit Christ. With this understanding of Dalit theology we move on to a critical analysis of its content in order to identify reasons for the lacuna between theology and the Church's practice.

Chapter - IV

A Critical Analysis of Dalit Theology

Introduction

In the introductory chapter it has been pointed out that inspite of making a mark as a significant contextual theology Dalit theology has not led to pragmatic and practical action for the liberation of Dalits. The Indian Church hasn't made much significant attempt to engage in struggles for Dalit emancipation, except 'defending the right to convert and looking after Christian communal minority rights'.¹ The persistence of caste discrimination within the Indian Church is a well documented issue.² Though one cannot make Dalit theology entirely responsible for the slow progress with regard to Dalit emancipation, one should not refrain from critically evaluating the pertinence of Dalit theology in enabling a change in Christian attitude towards the caste-discrimination.

In this chapter, I will attempt to engage critically with the *theological content* of Dalit theology in the light of the central problem of this thesis, which is the failure of Dalit theology to influence the Church to end discrimination against Dalits within Christianity as well as to play an active role in Dalit liberation. Because much of the theological content of Dalit theology which sought to facilitate praxis has been in the form of biblical paradigms, I will largely confine myself to a critical analysis of the predominant biblical paradigms which have been utilised by Dalit theology. The main line of argument followed in this chapter is that Dalit theology has not been praxiologically effective because certain important features of its theology do not

¹ Oommen, 'Majoritarian Nationalism', pp. 339,340.

² Oommen, 'Dalits' Socio-Religious Aspirations', p. 150.

have adequate praxis-potential. The focus of this chapter, when analysing the *failure* of the Church, will be on two main issues namely:

- 1) Discrimination against Dalits within churches, and
- 2) the Indian Church's ineffective and inactive engagement in Dalit liberation struggles.

When analysed in the light of these two factors I consider the following to be some of the important reasons for the lacunae between Dalit theology and practical action.

A - Lack of Adequate Theological Engagement with the Core of Discrimination

The glaring discrimination of Dalits within the churches is one major area which Dalit theology has not addressed effectively. For discrimination to end there is need for critical theological engagement with the foundations on which discrimination is based and validated. Theologians who are engaged in exploring ways of understanding and communicating liberation should pay attention to the nature of the oppression.³ The basis on which the oppression is legitimised should be scrutinized. A pertinent question which needs to be analysed is - how do the oppressors acquire the power to discriminate?⁴ Dayanandan, pointing out the need for liberation theology to focus on the 'elusive forces that promote discrimination and oppression', says:

³ Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

⁴ Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

Theologians (and social scientists as well) must expose and reveal the nexus that exists between two major demonic forces that give power to oppression and discrimination, namely: prejudice and elitism. Power itself cannot be properly understood without comprehending the role of prejudice and elitism in providing religious and institutional sanctions for all forms of discrimination. Prejudice and elitism also lead to pride a vice that adds to the power of the oppressor.⁵

My contention in this thesis is that the nexus between prejudice and elitism in the Indian caste situation can be best understood through the notions of purity and pollution. We have already argued that it is pertinent to talk about the notions of purity and pollution as being relevant and foundational for the discrimination against the Dalits. But, one of the failures of Dalit theology is that no sufficient study has been conducted so far on the far reaching consequences of the notions of purity and pollution and the influence they wield on the 'caste psyche' with regard to the Indian caste system.

Social analysis of the notions of purity and pollution are important because these notions connect concepts of order, danger and morality all of which are further connected to the maintenance of a meta-cosmic harmony, which impinges on the behavior of human beings. Communities seldom dare trespass caste boundaries because they believe in the efficacy of the concept of maintaining meta-cosmic order through such demarcation. The connotations of danger are further strengthened by the collective social resonance which renders it a religious duty to maintain the boundaries. Indian Christian communities though cognizant of the evil dimension of casteism hesitate to challenge it. Considering the fact that notions of purity and pollution wield significant influence on behavior, there is a need for a biblical paradigm which offers an ethical basis to engage with the undergirding factors which sustain discrimination. Without such a framework to guide Christian thinking and action a liberative Christian response to caste discrimination cannot be evolved.

⁵ Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

So far Dalit theology has not taken up the pedagogic function of pointing to Christian ethical principles on the basis of which casteism can be morally assessed. Rather there has been a simplistic 'causal linkage' that notions of purity and pollution form the bulwark of caste discrimination. The result of this has been that the Indian Church has neither engaged with the root cause of the discrimination nor come up with a relevant theological or ethical basis to evaluate it and respond to it. In the light of this lack of Christian moral restraints on discrimination, it is easy to understand why the Church has been ineffective in addressing the cause of Dalits. On this basis it can be claimed that one of the reasons for the failure of Dalit theology to impact Christian attitudes towards Dalit discrimination is due to lack of ethical guidelines to direct people's response to caste. The lacuna between theology and action can effectively be bridged through an ethical framework, which will help Christians to rethink their attitudes to caste from a Christian perspective. So it becomes imperative for Dalit theology to offer an ethical framework to engage with caste.

B - Failure to Recognise the Agency of Dalits in Liberation

From the previous chapter it is clear that the theologians who have focused on the liberative social vision of Dalit theology have focused on the praxis of the 'Church'. The implied identity of the Church is exclusively 'non-dalit'. Dalit theologians have constantly identified the 'Church' (in these particular instances) as one which is *to stand in solidarity with* the Dalits. The very fact that Dalits constitute the majority of the Indian Church, which makes their role in the Church's praxis crucial, is not adequately recognized. Thus, nothing much has been said about the role of the Dalits in their own liberation. One needs to take only a cursory glance at Christian Dalit theology to recognise that no paradigm for praxis has been delineated, which will enthuse the Dalits to work towards liberation along with the non-Dalits. It is this

failure to recognise and articulate relevantly the agency of Dalits for liberation which needs to be subverted if praxis has to become pragmatic. Webster, concluding his book *The Dalit Christians: A History* says:

God calls Christian Dalits to participate actively and even lead in the grass roots political struggle of all Dalits for the liberation God intends. In that struggle the church has proven to be weak, ineffective and often an instrument of caste oppression, even though it is predominantly Dalit in composition.⁶

My thesis will differ from other articulations of Dalit theology, which have focused on praxis, on one major aspect. I will seriously consider the fact that Dalits constitute the vast majority of the Indian Church, and, in contrast to other theologians,⁷ make that fact foundational in arguing that the praxis of the Indian Church invariably entails the agency of the Dalits in working towards transformation. One cannot talk about the Church's praxis without understanding that it is also the praxis of the Dalits. The condescending view of Dalits as mere 'recipients of charitable liberation' needs to be rethought. For change to happen the agency of Dalits must be theologically affirmed. Dalits should be enthused to work towards the change.

It is here that one needs to question the extent to which Dalit theology has explored and provided biblical ethical paradigms to guide the engagement of Dalit Christians in their (Dalit-theologically ascribed) 'messianic task' of engaging in liberation. This is not an easy task, considering the fact that it cannot be always indisputably assumed that Dalit Christians themselves are liberated. Therefore what is pertinent when thinking of paradigms for Dalit Christians to engage in liberation is to think of biblical paradigms where the ones engaged as agents of liberation are simultaneously also being liberated. The present biblical paradigms of Dalit theology do not offer space to articulate paradigms which enthuse the Dalits to engage in liberation.

⁶ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 245.

⁷ Azariah, 'Doing Theology', p. 90.

C - The Ethical and Praxiological Inefficacy of Dalit Christology and the Epistemology of Pathos

The primacy of christology is important for Christian ethics because the defining and normative symbol of Christian living is Jesus. We have already analysed the methodological significance of the category of Christ when considering the liberative social vision of Dalit theology. Christology is essentially paradigmatic for Dalit theology. While Dalits find meaning and identity in Christ, the Indian Church finds its model for praxis in Christ. Dalit christology functions as the theological category through which change is envisioned. An important observation to be made is that in secular and social thought Christianity implies *following Jesus*. Dalits like Ambedkar have specifically christological reasons for the failure of the Indian Church to address casteism, when they recognise this as failure to follow Christ.⁸

Having grasped the gravity of the situation of the sub-human social existence of the Dalits, Dalit theology is a creatively and constructively envisaged theology, which is premised on the epistemological paradigm of 'pathos' and 'suffering' of the Dalits. Its attempt as in most liberation theologies has been christological and based on the 'Dalit Christ'. Jesus is understood as being a Dalit. His Dalitness becomes the key to his identity and is reiterated in the image of the 'suffering servant' which is given prototypical value. Through this paradigm of the suffering Christ Dalit theology has sought to usher in liberation and empowerment. What we find here clearly is that much emphasis is placed on the suffering aspect of Christ. I understand that the emphasis on Jesus as one with the suffering Dalits is meant to enhance their self-understanding of themselves. Moreover, with 'pathos' being the epistemic key to their identity the suffering aspect of God is assumed to help the Dalits to be open and

⁸ See Anthoniraj Thumma, *Dalit Liberation Theology: Ambedkarian Perspective*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000).

receptive to a 'pathos-filled christology'. But is this aspect alone enough? I feel that there is a need for rethinking Dalit christology along more liberative lines as I discern in this pathos-based christological articulation a negativity, which could pose problems for effective transformation.

My argument is that Dalits live in a situation of oppression and telling them that Christ is one who suffers with them will imply the danger of making them masochistic in their attitude towards suffering. There is this danger that a christology which predominantly concentrates on suffering, will promote self-negation and a negative form of acceptance of their own state and make them content and satisfied with the fact that Christ will be with them as long as they suffer. Liberation theologian, George Casalis' reflection upon the christological image of Jesus as the 'abject Lord' among the persecuted communities of South America makes this link with masochistic resignation clear. According to Casalis:

When the faithful people pray before these images or venerate them, when their spirit is seared all through life by a pedagogy of submission and passivity, evidently it is their own destiny that they encounter here – and worship, and accept with masochistic resignation.⁹

The link between a pathos-based christology and masochistic resignation is not one which can be ignored or glossed over. Pathos-based christologies help people to accept their present as one in which God shares but not as one which needs to be challenged and transformed. The rationale for this is simple - why challenge something in which God is passionately involved? Thus, God is recruited as an ally in suffering. In such instances, it would be fair to argue that christology merely operates as a palliative, inuring the suffering people to the existing suffering (caused by systematized and structural oppression, institutionalized discrimination and

⁹ George Casalis, 'Jesus: Neither Abject Lord nor Heavenly Monarch', in J. M. Bonino (ed.), *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, (trans. by R. R. Barr), (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977), (pp. 72-76), p. 73.

religion-validated hierarchy), where the suffering Jesus is inordinately romanticised. Critical attention needs to be paid to the question whether that is a truly liberating christological image.

The fact that the primacy ascertained to pathos in Dalit theology was based on the hope that it would lead to protest is not emphasised. Nirmal who argues that pathos leads to protest doesn't explain how pathos leads to protest.¹⁰ Moreover Nirmal's identification of dalit pathos is one *only* of misery, and 'Dalit misery alone has often resulted in a passive acceptance of oppression and has not necessarily led to protest'.¹¹ In the light of the ongoing discrimination of the Dalits within Christianity as well as the failure of the Church to engage actively in liberation, a fresh question which needs to be posed to Dalit christology should necessarily concern the *liberative nature* of christology, the liberative nature here implying christology which will actually inspire the Dalits to engage in concrete forms of liberation. My contention is that for the Dalits to become active agents of liberation a truly liberative christological articulation should be more of an 'energizer' than a 'pacifier' image so that the Christic presence becomes the new power of the powerless to prevail over the strategies of the dominant.

Though attention to the praxis of Jesus, as understood through the web of his social situatedness and his social interaction, is not entirely neglected in Dalit theology, it has not been adequately appropriated in terms of its ethical and praxiological significance for the Dalits. The primacy of a conscious and ethically premised engagement in liberation is compromised. Priority is given to an understanding of praxis as identity-affirmation, whereby the culmination of the praxis envisaged is one where Dalits positively understand and affirm themselves as Dalits. There is evidence to suggest that though Dalits have made interesting use of their past which has resulted in pride and often a sense of identity this recourse to the past hasn't

¹⁰ Rasquinha, 'A Critical', p. 263.

¹¹ Rasquinha, 'A Critical', p. 263.

brought much change.¹² Therefore identity-affirmation is not always transformative. We need to consider the Dalit christological image against the background of the reasons given by social scientists for the continued passive acceptance of enslavement by the Dalits in order to discern its negative potential. One of the serious problems that Dalit leaders have identified as being an impediment for Dalit initiative in social transformation as well as the positive realisation of their own inherent dignity and self worth was the appalling internalisation of their inferiority and slavish mentality. An overview of how different Dalit writers have identified the primacy of transcending this psychological enslavement as a prerequisite for engaging in liberative praxis of self- transformation helps us to realise the negative implications of a christology which affirms Dalitness and the servanthood of the Dalits.

L. M. Shrikanth the first commissioner (special officer) for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, who was constitutionally responsible for 'investigating all matters relating to the safeguards provided for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs)' points out an important observation as to how the *servility* of the Dalit mindset has prevented them from rising beyond circumstances:

By the force of habit the Harijan has lost his (sic) self-respect to such an extent that he regards his work to which his caste is condemned not as a curse from which he should extricate himself but as a privilege or presence which he must protect. He has not much courage to seek another job in field or factory. He has become lazy in mind and body and callous to his own condition; and he will not educate his children.¹³

He makes clear how casteism has inculcated within the Dalits a passive acceptance of their socially inferior status. Commenting on the words of L. M. Shrikanth, Dalit

¹² K. C. Das, *Indian Dalits: Voices, Visions and Politics*, (Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2004), p. 29.

¹³ L. M. Shrikant, Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the Period ending 31st December, 1951, p. 1. Cited in Massey, 'Historical Roots', p. 41.

theologian James Massey has this to say:

The above words of Mr. Shrikanth reveal to us the inner nature of the Dalitness of the Dalits which they have reached by the ongoing oppression of caste and the social system which our society continues to maintain...These also reveal to us the power of the caste system which can transform the person into such self-captivity or slavery from which it seems almost impossible to get liberation or freedom. The second most important truth about the Dalits, Mr. Shrikanth, has stated is that a Dalit has “become lazy in mind and body, callous to his own conditions”. Of course being “lazy in mind” and to feel ‘callous’ for his/her own condition are part of the inner nature of the Dalitness of the Dalits which really is responsible for all the problems of the Dalits, and which simply cannot be dealt with by mere passing of legislation or providing economic facilities.¹⁴

Massey’s comment contains two important points which I consider as being relevant at this stage of this study. The first is the insinuating enslavement of Dalit psyche by casteism which has conditioned Dalits to adopt (with the least resistance) attitudes of subservience as well as to idealise their servitude. The second point that I want to highlight is Massey’s diagnosis, that *slothfulness of mind* and the *callousness* of Dalits (which he regards as being synonymous with ‘Dalitness’) are the causes for ‘all the problems of the Dalits. Even nearly 30 years after the report of L. M. Shrikanth a similar report by the Backward Classes commission popularly known as the Mandal commission highlights the pervasive influence of the caste system in the psychological conditioning of the Dalits to the extreme extent of making them accept their socially inscribed inferiority and subservience as being ontological. According to the report, ‘The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes into accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as part of the natural order of

¹⁴ Massey, ‘Historical Roots’, p. 42.

things'.¹⁵ Even Ambedkar's own concern for the Dalits was for the 'need to get rid of the slavish mentality drilled into them by the caste system. He points to their need to purify themselves from the 'inferiority complex that had gripped their minds and hearts for ages and weakened their spirit and dried up their motivation'.¹⁶

Azariah also talks about the wounded psyche of the Dalits as being the biggest impediment for Dalit liberation. Identifying the denial of spiritual equality to the Dalit communities as the real issue of casteism, Azariah points out how even after their entry into the Christian fold different segments of the population carry their caste or outcaste identities, which have different markings on their souls. While for the caste Christians such markings inculcate a sense of pride, inherited privilege and status, for the Dalits it is a degraded identity, which confers on them a sense of shame and despondency. Azariah's argument is that they suffer from a sense of 'unconscious guilt for unforgiven sins (*Karma*) which they are supposed to have committed during their previous cycles of birth (*Janma*) and which is supposed to have caused their destiny (*Vidhi*) to be born as outcastes, untouchables and tribals. Thus the Dalits continue to suffer 'a pollution in their souls' which Azariah identifies as a wounded psyche. It is this psychological depravity or captivity, which demands special and urgent attention because the root cause for all the problems of the Dalits needs to be recognised as stemming from this wounded psyche.¹⁷

The christology of identity affirmation proposed by Dalit theology does not confront this negative self-imaging of the Dalits but rather tacitly complies with the reinforcement of the 'slavish mentality' by affirming the servanthood of Jesus. In his christological articulation Nirmal talks about servitude being the privilege of the Dalits on the basis of his interpretation of Jesus Christ as the suffering servant. Nirmal's thesis that God is a servant God is meant to enhance and affirm the humanity of the Dalits that through their services as scavengers and slaves they have

¹⁵ Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Govt of India, First part, Vol. I & II, 1980, p. 1. Cited in Massey, p. 45.

¹⁶ See Thumma, *Dalit Liberation Theology*, p. 83.

¹⁷ Azariah, 'The Church's Healing Ministry of the Dalits', p. 321.

participated in this 'servant-God's-ministries'. God's servant humanity is reflected in the Dalit. This affirmation also has the possibility of enhancing Dalit self understanding as bearing the image of God, but it could also imply passive acceptance of their religiously imposed inferiority and acquiescence to the prevailing status quo. By the glorification of suffering and, re-creation of Jesus in the image of the Dalits (I am not against this, but am concerned about the liberative potential of this image) Dalit theology reinforces, rather than changing the status quo.

According to Balasundaram, 'relating Jesus' servanthood to Dalit reality does not really help the Dalits'. This is because 'Jesus *offered* himself in servanthood, whereas the Dalits are already in servanthood, rather in servility'. In a context where the Dalits have 'no authentic self to offer to others', Balasundaram questions whether it is 'helpful to speak of servanthood, service and patient endurance of suffering?'. He says:

We may accept suffering to the extent that suffering helps to overcome the suffering inflicted on us by others. Thus, in preaching, projecting and emphasising the servant image, we need to be careful. This means that we should not romanticize the concept of suffering, e.g. in the Sufferer and the Servant Jesus syndrome. Dalit theology should project an image of Jesus that has worth, dignity and freedom. Let us not preach a Jesus who has a crown and who has attained glory, nor a Jesus who suffered to the end and was finally put to death, but a Jesus who is the true man, a man of freedom, identity, worth, dignity and a man with a mission.¹⁸

So it is clear that the affirmation of the *servant* nature of God suffers the risky possibility of reinforcing the deeply inculcated sense of inferiority of the Dalits, rather than help the Dalits to transcend this Dalitness. Hence, one can argue that Christian Dalit theology is in continuum with the *vedic* ideals which sought the strategic perpetuation of the slavish-mentality of the Dalits. Thus, the praxis potential

¹⁸ Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle', p. 90.

of Dalit christology is negative because it amplifies and romanticises Dalit servanthood, which is recognised as both a product and continuing source of their oppression. Also such christology offers little space for Dalits to question injustice and discrimination. We also need to question whether the Dalits themselves need such a god image. Arguing how even their choice of God reflects a strong sense of pragmatism, Arul Raja says that 'Dalits respond to only that brand of the divine which seeks to transform their vulnerabilities into empowerment'.¹⁹ If we analyse Dalit christology from this perspective one can see a tension between '*emic*' and '*etic*' theoretical conceptualizations of Dalit christology. The clash between the '*emic*' and the '*etic*' (initially used in the theory of linguistics but now extended to social and cultural theory) merely denotes the tensions and differences between perspectives and conceptualizations which emerge 'inside' and 'outside' a community. This clash of perspectives is helpful in analyzing Dalit christology. We can easily demonstrate that Dalit christology has not taken serious considerations of the Dalits' own 'concept' and 'image' of God or worked its christology in critical interaction with 'inside' conceptualizations. Rather it has imposed models from above which may not find acceptance among the Dalits. To rectify this we need to pay attention to '*emic*' conceptualizations.

At the end of this section we can conclude that there is not much pragmatic liberative potential in the image of the Dalit Christ and the focus of Dalit theology on the suffering aspect and pathos of the Dalits. This is because there are possibilities for masochistic resignation as well as the reinforcement of the inferiority and slavish mentality, which have been recognised by social scientists and activists as the main reasons for the continued unquestioning servility of the Dalits. An alternative christological framework for the Dalits will be one which will be characterised by not *only* pathos, but will encompass elements of protest and resistance, which will stress on questioning the perpetuation of the present status quo where Dalits are enslaved

¹⁹ A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Living Streams Across the Parched Land: Some Tenets of Dalit Spirituality', in *CTC Bulletin*, (pp. 1-8), p. 3. <http://daga.dhs.org/cca/resources/ctc/ctc01-04/ctc0104d.htm>.

into accepting a slavish identity and which will be characterised by a radical discontinuity with the prevailing models which over emphasise the suffering aspects of Jesus.

D - Lack of a Bipolar Ethical Imperative

The praxiological framework of Dalit theology acknowledges a partnership of mutuality to engage in struggles for emancipation. For the complete emancipation of the Dalits in particular and for the ushering in of an egalitarian and just relationship between humans in a context of discrimination what is needed is a bipolar conversion of perspective. A change in attitude should happen between two poles - the oppressors and the oppressed. What is required to facilitate this bipolar conversion of perspective is a framework of ethical imperatives which impinges upon both participating poles of the issue. The need is for an ethical model which will simultaneously challenge both the Dalits and their oppressors to act towards Dalit emancipation. So, when we talk of conversion of perspective what is meant is that on the one hand the proposed theological paradigm should help the 'victims' to transcend their psychological enslavement and enable them to consciously engage themselves in the liberative task. As we have already seen the present christological paradigm doesn't allow Dalit theology to be very effective in this area, because of its potential to reinforce inferiority and slavish mentality. On the other hand Dalit theology should also critically challenge those who fall under the category of the 'oppressors' to recognize and realize their tacit compliance, either through their inaction or action, in perpetuating a hierarchical and inegalitarian status quo. The oppressors need dalit theology because they struggle to free themselves from the forces 'which keep them bonded to the various forms of oppression that they perpetuate'.²⁰ Therefore the oppressors, through their participation in oppression, are

²⁰ Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

prevented from being full co-workers in the kingdom of God.²¹ Thus, the role of Dalit theology would be to articulate an ethical paradigm which will be relevant to both Dalits and non Dalits in order to enlist both Dalits and non-Dalits as partners in action leading to Dalit liberation.

There has been a failure to recognize the paramount importance of engaging both Dalits and 'non-Dalits' as partners in liberation combined with the apparent passivity in articulating inclusive models of praxis. Such attitude will at its best serve to reinforce the status quo and at its worst further widen the polemic between Dalits and non-Dalits. This polemic attitude has been manifest in the negativity of Dalit theologians (with the exception of Massey) towards theologies articulated by non-Dalit Brahmannic theologians. We need a paradigm which will facilitate a bipolar conversion by way of which Dalit theology will assume pertinence to both the Dalits and non-Dalits. My contention is that this proposal has potential to widen the scope for a more effective praxis because it envisages the possibility of both Dalits and non-Dalits working in partnership, in fidelity to a renewed ethical consciousness. The proposal for a more inclusive theological paradigm increases the possibility for concrete and dialogical action for transformation.

E - Critique of Deuteronomic Creed as a Relevant Biblical Paradigm

The selection of biblical paradigms to espouse one's hermeneutical cause is important for liberation theologies. It is necessary that one looks for appropriate biblical passages which are presumed to 'speak' to their own contexts when contextual biblical interpretations take place. Right from its formative stages, Dalit theology has been explicated predominantly in continuity with Latin American and Black

²¹ Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

Liberation theology. In appropriating the Deuteronomic creed Dalit theology has adopted a biblical paradigm which is in continuity with the dominant Exodus paradigm which has been expounded by liberation theologians. The choice of the Deuteronomic creed, though understandable as affirming their historical consciousness, should be subject to critical scrutiny. Questions need to be asked as to whether Dalit hermeneutics acknowledges the historical or political ramifications of using such a paradigm.

I am aware that Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez uses the Exodus paradigm to emphasise that the Exodus event was the story of God 'who leads Israel from alienation to liberation'. The event as such was 'the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery'.²² Black liberation theologian James Cone utilises the paradigm to emphasise that the God of the Old Testament is an active God who participates in the human story of liberation. He interprets the event as a unanimous testimony of Yahweh's commitment to justice for the poor and weak.²³ However there is a need to recognise that the text is not value free and the 'narrative is disdainful of the rights of indigenous people'.²⁴

Expressing his distrust over using the paradigm Robert Allen Warrior highlights the importance of considering the Canaanites as an important hermeneutical category when using the paradigm for liberation theology. From his situatedness as a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians, Warrior discerns parallels between the native Americans and the Canaanites. He points out that the 'obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites'. They were the ones who already lived in the promised land. Warrior points out that 'it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate

²² Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, (London: SCM Press, 1988), (rev. edn.), p. 89.

²³ James Cone, 'Biblical Revelation and Social Existence', in *Interpretation*, Vol. 28, 1974, (pp. 422-440), p. 429.

²⁴ Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 281.

theologies of liberation. Especially ignored are those parts of the story that describe Yahweh's command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population'.²⁵ In solidarity with other tribal people around the world, Warrior reads the Exodus story with Canaanite eyes.

Understanding the fact that the Deuteronomic creed is inextricably linked to the Exodus paradigm in the sense that it is a later recapitulative passage we need to ask the question as to who are the real poor of the Exodus paradigm? What happens to the Canaanites and rest of the inhabitants of the promised land who are exterminated in the process of the Israelite occupation of the land flowing with milk and honey.

We have to acknowledge that the history of the Israelites, who have now reached the land flowing with milk and honey, is tinged with violence. The story also manifests the character of the God of the Israelites. A cursory glance at a few verses in the book of Deuteronomy reveals this. In chapter 2: 34 and chapter 3: 4-7 we see an account of the pogrom of mass elimination of the inhabitants of Sihon and of the sixty towns of the region of Argob the kingdom of Bashan. The verses read like this: 'At that time we captured all his towns and in, each town we utterly destroyed men, women and children. We left not a single survivor' (chapter 2: 34). Chapter 7: 1-3 talks about God clearing away seven nations, mightier and more numerous than the Israelites - the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebushites. Can seven as the number of completion signify something here? The text in 7:2 goes on as follows. 'And when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them, make no covenant with them and show them no mercy'. Thus, 'combining the exodus from Egypt with the eisodus into the land of the Canaanites and others as the narrative requires, the biblical paradigm would more appropriately justify the behaviour of the *conquistadores*'.²⁶

²⁵ Robert Allen Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians', in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), (pp. 287-295), p. 289.

It is a 'violent memory' that the Deuteronomic creed celebrates from a 'hermeneutic of self-centredness' (theologically identified as 'covenantal chosenness'). When Dalit theology, by adopting the Deuteronomic creed as its paradigm, draws analogies with this memory and affirms it as the story of their roots (Dalit) it is highly incompatible and inappropriate. It is in fact the reverse of the Dalit historical condition, because the conventional understanding of Dalit history is that of a *subjugated history of the indigenous people* conquered by foreign Aryan invaders. Therefore, before using the Deuteronomic creed for Dalit theology the pertinence of the Deuteronomic paradigm to those facing the reality of displacement and subjugation in their native lands should be brought into focus. In such circumstances this biblical paradigm would more suit the interests of the dominant structures. Thus, we have to acknowledge that the suitability of expounding the Deuteronomic paradigm or any Exodus related paradigm as foundational for Dalit theological articulation has limited value and force.

Moreover, the idea of God which emerges from the Deuteronomic paradigm is highly estranged in its conformity to the images of Dalit gods and goddesses. The image of God of the Deuteronomic paradigm is more in continuity with the image of the Hindu Brahmannic weapon wielder gods, who, according to Illaiah were 'propagators of violent wars', 'basically war heroes and mostly from wars conducted against Dalitbahujans'.²⁷ Hindu Brahmanical gods like *Indra*, *Brahma* and *Vishnu* and the Avatara (incarnation) gods like *Vamana*, *Rama* and *Krishna* are known for their violent and treacherous wars against the indigenous Dalit (*Adi-Dalitbahujans*). The Aryan god *Brahma* is identified as the leader of the Aryan invaders and 'killer of Indus people' who was made not only to be a cult figure but was projected and propagated as god himself.²⁸ *Vishnu* wields the '*Vishnu Chakram*' a vicious circular

²⁶ Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism*, pp. 280-281.

²⁷ Kancha Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, (Calcutta: Samya, 2005), (2nd edn.), pp. 100-101.

²⁸ Kancha Illaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict in History', in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, Vol. 2, (New Delhi, London: Sage Publications and Thousand Oaks, London, 2001), (pp. 108-128), p. 114.

weapon, *Shiva* wields a *trishula* (trident). The lack of respect for life and use of violent means to establish control are identified as constituting the very epistemology of Brahmanism by Illaiah.²⁹

The other problem with this biblical paradigm is its oppositional and polemic dynamic where the oppressed and the oppressors are portrayed in antagonistic terms. As we have already seen the pattern of liberation in this model is one of 'replication of subjugation'. Upon their liberation, the 'once-oppressed' now subjugate and conquer the promised land and displace the locals. As a model of 'capture' and 'recapture' this model can be translated as a cyclic process of unending conflict in a situation like the Indian caste-context. This is unhelpful for the issue of caste. There is need for a more integrative model where both the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressors' are critically challenged to work in an integrative and dialogical manner for a non-exclusive and non-dehumanising society.

Thus we can conclude that the Deuteronomic creed is irrelevant as a theological paradigm for the Dalits on the basis of the following reasons:

- 1) The incompatibility between Israelite history and the history of the Dalits.
- 2) Its potential to justify and trigger a cyclic process of conflict.

F - The Need for Narrative and Performative forms of Dalit Theology

At the moment it can be stated with conviction that Dalit theology has come to be more identifiable with theological institutions than the Indian Church. In India Dalit theology has impacted the theological world significantly. It is being taught in all the

²⁹ See Illaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism', pp. 114 -121.

major theological institutions. A separate department of Dalit theology exists in the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute. Both Dalit and non-Dalit members of the faculty of many major theological institutions have published essays on Dalit theology in various Indian journals like the *Bangalore Theological Forum*, *Religion and Society*, *Vidhyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection and Jeevadhara*. Various collections of essays on Dalit theology have also appeared. Dalit theology is increasingly being recognised as an academic theological discipline. Moreover, Dalit theology has remained the work of those who are 'well positioned to reflect theologically upon Dalit struggles for basic human rights and equality of opportunity within both Indian society in general and the Christian Church in particular'.³⁰

But if Dalit theology has to make a change in the attitude of people within the Church it has to become accessible and meaningful to the people, something it was originally meant to be. Its meaning and relevance need to have a creative fidelity to the commitment to transform the situation of oppression of the Dalits. It needs to engage both the Dalits and non-Dalits to become participants in change. For theology to impact behaviour two aspects of hermeneutics are important:

- a) communicative competence, and
- b) heuristic compatibility.

a) Communicative Competence

For theology to impact the people of the church, especially Dalits, a considerable proportion of whom are from non-literate backgrounds, the medium and forms of communication of theology are important factors to be considered. Webster recognises preaching to be vital if the good news of Dalit theology is to have an

³⁰ John C. B. Webster, 'Exploring the 'Pastoral Theology' Dimension of Dalit Liberation', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 49-74), p. 50.

impact on Dalit Christians.³¹ Webster also recognises the importance of pastors or parish priests in reaching out to the church members. According to Webster, 'current Dalit theology, like all liberation theologies, is, quite intentionally, an experience-based theology and there is nothing better than pastoral experience with Dalits for the development and application of potentially healing and empowering pastoral Dalit theological insights or themes'.³² As 'informal parish theologians' the pastors help to shape the consciousness and piety of their parishioners through their implicit pastoral theologies used in various pastoral settings. But the crucial time when the pastor-as-theologian can make a distinctively pastoral and theological contribution to the liberation of Dalit parishioners is during the Sunday worship.³³

Closely related to the issue of preaching is also the content and style of preaching. Webster points out that one of the most serious problems of the homiletic of Dalit theology is that it is not receptor-oriented and therefore not very effective in communicating the gospel. Therefore it is important and necessary to begin the quest for a new hermeneutic from within the frames of reference of the Dalits themselves as receptors of preached communication.³⁴ Webster points to the importance of narrative for Dalit communication on the basis of James Theophilus Appavoo's (also known as Parattai) research on Dalit folklore in Tamil Nadu. Appavoo brings out the importance of narrative rather than concepts for effective communication among Dalit communities. The narrative basis of the Dalit communication is manifest in their proverbs, ideologies, songs, dramas and rituals.³⁵ This has tremendous implications for the present research as we evaluate how Dalit theology can become more effective in influencing the behaviour of Christian Dalits. The importance of narrative for Dalit theology has to be recognised, if Dalit theology has to make an impact on the church.

³¹ John C. B. Webster, 'A New Homiletic for Dalits?', in *BTF*, Vol. XXX, Nos. 1 & 2, March & June 1998, (pp. 3 – 24), p. 3.

³² Webster, 'Exploring', p. 51.

³³ Webster, 'Exploring', p. 51.

³⁴ Webster, 'A New', pp. 9-10.

³⁵ James Theophilus Appavoo, *Folklore for Change*, cited in Webster, 'A New', p. 11.

Though many Dalit theologians have used the Bible to reflect on the situation of the Dalits, they have followed the Anglicist mode of interpretation which involves using western tools of biblical interpretation. The exegetical attempts of Dalit theology is according to Sugirtharajah 'an example of creative Asian mimicry of Western interpretive tools'. Methods and theories originating in the west are used to meet Asian needs.³⁶ There is a great value in this mode of hermeneutics in terms of attention being paid to the contexts at both ends of the hermeneutical circle, the implied original-reader context and the present Dalit context. But one has to acknowledge that the mode of interpretation using historical-critical tools of interpretations is more concerned with the appropriateness of the interpretive task as well as to ensure objectivity in interpretation. There is also a focus on textuality, which is not a prominent part of the religious experience of most Dalits.

For the sake of communicative competence Dalit hermeneutics has to be receptor-oriented and attention has to be paid to orality. There is need for a shift from concept-based theological paradigms to narrative paradigms, with a focus on liberation. The problem with concepts, according to Appavoo is that concepts can be ambiguous, whereas narratives can rarely be ambiguous because they express ideas in terms of action. Appavoo says that Dalit theological expression has been 'restricted to the expression of ideas ...by concepts'. There is a need to follow the Dalit tradition and translate ideas into songs and drama to enhance its communication potential.³⁷

If we analyse the dominant paradigms of Dalit theology we see a mixed focus. There are partially narrative paradigms like the Deuteronomic creed which is a credal statement with a narrative background and the suffering servant image which is not a narrative. There is also evidence to suggest that Dalit theology has recognized the importance of narrative for the articulation of its theology. A few

³⁶ Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 11.

³⁷ James Theophilus Appavoo, 'Dalit Way of Theological Expression', in Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, (pp. 283-289), pp. 286,287.

biblical narratives have been used by Dalit theologians and hermeneuts, like the story of the hemorrhaging woman by Devasahayam³⁸ and the parable of the good Samaritan by Gnanavaram.³⁹

Another advantage of narrative biblical paradigms is that they are compatible with the other methodologies of reading recognized by theologians as being relevant for Dalit hermeneutics, like role playing and story telling.⁴⁰ Focusing on Dalit women, Monica Melanchton pays specific attention to their embodiment and sees a Dalit feminist/womanist methodology of reading a text as basically being of a performative nature. She understands Dalit women to be 'interlocutors between their experience of dehumanization and the world of the biblical text'.⁴¹

When talking about Dalit hermeneutics or homiletics it is important to take into consideration the use of biblical passages which are compatible with the hermeneutical methodology of the Dalits themselves. It is acknowledged that there is a performative trait in the religious experience of subalterns in general.⁴² There is a strong collective component to this oral tradition because it is through participation in the collective, communitarian performance that transmission takes place.⁴³ Because of the earthliness of the hermeneutics and the oral and performative aspects of Dalits, one cannot engage in a process of decoding and interpretation. Rather what is present is itself an interpretation of life.

One should understand that one can only participate in subaltern hermeneutics and cannot simply access them through cognitive tools. 'Hermeneutics shifts from cognitive realm as interpretation and meaning to an interpreted experience on the

³⁸ See Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 28-35.

³⁹ Gnanavaram, 'Dalit Theology' and the Parable of the Good Samaritan', (pp. 59-83).

⁴⁰ See Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, 'Dalits, Bible and Method', in *SBL Forum*, <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=459>, (pp. 1-8), p. 6.

⁴¹ Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, 'Dalit Readers of the Word: The Quest for Hermeneutics and Method', in Massey and Prabhakar (eds.), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, (pp. 45-64), p. 61.

⁴² Felix Wilfred, 'Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics Beyond Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Tradition', in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXVI, No. 151, 1996, (pp. 45-63), p. 60.

⁴³ Wilfred, 'Towards', p. 60.

world and society'.⁴⁴ Therefore if Dalit theology has to impact the life and behavior of the Dalits, Dalit theology should focus on enabling a performative and embodied hermeneutics to take place. This entails choosing biblical narratives that correspond to the life situation of the Dalits as the biblical paradigms for Dalit theology. The texts should offer scope for Dalits to see their own situation and struggles in the text and allow the Dalits to tell corresponding stories from their own life, which will help them to understand the biblical narrative as well as their own lives in a new way. Further, because praxis is the aim, the texts should offer models of praxis which enable healing as well as practical engagement in the task of liberation to take place.

b) Heuristic Compatibility

Praxis can become more effective if attention is paid to the heuristic compatibility of biblical ethics and the Dalit world view. Drawing out the framework for a pertinent Dalit hermeneutics, A. Maria Arul Raja proposes that 'the religiosity latent in Dalit culture should be activated and brought into dialogue with biblical religiosity'.⁴⁵ The meaning for Dalit liberation is produced as the result of a dialectic conversation between the openness (open-minded pre-understanding) of the Dalit Christian and the openness (semantic autonomy) of the Bible.⁴⁶ Sugirtharajah points out that the valency of the Bible for the Dalits depends upon 'its ability to espouse Dalit causes and more pertinently, its potentiality to resonate with the Dalit mode of thinking'.⁴⁷ For the impetus for praxis to emerge from within the Dalits there is need for paradigms which enable the liberative potential of the bible to be brought into critical interaction with the resistive potential inherent in their religiosity. Therefore it is important that the choice of biblical texts to be used in Dalit contexts should to a considerable extent mirror the Dalit situation. Thus for Dalit theology to become

⁴⁴ Wilfred, 'Towards', p. 62.

⁴⁵ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, pp. 233-236.

⁴⁶ Arul Raja, 'Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible', p. 31.

⁴⁷ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 235.

more effective, it is important to recognise the possibilities of narrative theology and use biblical resources which facilitate narrative and embodied theology to take place, which can also make praxis possible.

G - Problems with Romanticising of Dalit Culture and Symbolic World

Theologians like Clarke and Ayrookuzhiel have pointed out the importance of taking Dalit culture seriously. However the praxiological effectiveness of their theological articulations should be critically questioned. Ayrookuzhiel points to poems and myths which have an anti-brahmannical stance, whereas Clarke explicates a theology on the basis of the symbolic configurations of the resistive elements of Dalit religion.

Clarke's theological articulation is both appealing to the academia, as well as affirmative towards the Dalit symbolic world. The problem with Clarke's theology is that Dalit religion and culture get inordinately accented. There is no adequate recognition that inordinate accentuation of the symbolic is also symbiotically linked to the reinforcement of the concomitant idea that Dalit resistive activity can be confined to the symbolic realm alone. Moreover symbols carry indeterminate meaning which makes it difficult to derive principles of praxis which can be generally applicable. For example Clarke affirms and interprets the Dalit drum as a symbol of Dalit resistance and works out a christological image of Christ as drum. In a student paper, based on the experiences of an ethnographic research weekend with the Dalits of Thondan Thulasi village in Vellore district of Tamil Nadu, I have pointed out that the drumming of the *paraimolam* (Dalit funeral drum) also brings associations of shame and stigma of inferiority, which have prompted Dalit Christians to break the *paraimolam* as a public symbolic act of resistance to the notion that Dalits could be purchased for a price. The recognition that funeral drumming is a forced occupation of the Dalits, can act as a caveat in the overtly positive utilisation

of the drum as a symbol of resistance. This demonstrates that symbolic theology can not always be liberative for the Dalits. Moreover, such theology cannot adequately envisage the translation of the 'temporality' and the symbolic nature of Dalit resistive configuration and religious representations into pragmatic engagement with structural transformation.

Dalit liberation can be aided by symbolic action as long as it has wider social repercussions to contest hegemony. A good example is the religious conversion of Dalits. The praxiological inadequacy in translating symbolic reconfigurations of Dalit subjectivity into liberative action has to be recognised as a problem. Reflecting on the resistive elements implicit in Dalit religion is affirmative but unless a praxis which moves beyond symbolic representation is not envisaged it is highly likely that this theological reflection will not lead us to pragmatic engagement with emancipation. It is this failure to recognise the inadequacy of the symbolic resistive tendencies which needs to be questioned.

H - Conclusion

At the end of this chapter we can conclude that some of the reasons for the lacunae between Dalit theology and the praxis of the Indian Church are:

- 1) The lack of engagement with the foundations of discrimination against Dalits and the lack of an ethical framework for action.
- 2) The failure to recognise the agency of Dalits in the Church's praxis of liberation.
- 3) The ethical and praxiological inefficacy of Dalit Christology and the epistemology of *Pathos* which can lead to masochistic resignation and reinforce dalitness.
- 4) The lack of a bipolar ethical imperative which impinges upon the behaviour of

both Dalits and non-Dalits.

- 5) The inadequacy of the Deuteronomic creed as a biblical paradigm because of its incompatibility with Dalit historical experience and Dalit understanding of God, as well as its potential to justify a cyclic process of conflict.
- 6) The need for biblical paradigms which allow space for a narrative mode of theology which can make Dalit theology accessible to the Dalits.

Upon my assessment of Dalit theology what I seek to posit is that though the implied praxis of Dalit theology is intensely practical (and hence ethical), its theological content curtails the possibility of effective engagement in social transformation. The biblical framework in which Dalit theology has perpetuated itself has focussed more on identity affirmation. Also the biblical paradigms have not furnished an ethical framework to respond pragmatically to caste discrimination. In order to make Dalit theology more praxis-oriented there is a need to revise and reconstruct Dalit theology along the lines of the criticisms which have emerged. This will involve looking at theological paradigms which will give space for a christology of resistance and will have a bipolar ethical imperative which will influence a praxis of partnership. It will also need to be a paradigm which will affirm the agency of the Dalits in liberation and provide pragmatic guidelines to engage with issues of discrimination and emancipation.

**(Part - Three : Synoptic Healing Stories as an Alternative
Biblical Paradigm for Dalit Theology)**

CHAPTER - V

**A Methodological Consideration of the Synoptic Healing
Stories as a Potential Biblical Paradigm**

Introduction

In the third chapter we analyzed some of the possible reasons for the ineffectiveness of Dalit theology to influence the Indian Church to tackle the problem of caste based discrimination in an effective manner as well as to engage in praxis. Upon a critical analysis of the methodological and theological premises of Dalit theology we pointed to a lacunae between Dalit theology and praxis which we inferred was due to the lack of a systematically articulated ethical framework which impinged on the behavior of both the oppressed and oppressors. Also the dialectic that was originally envisaged between Dalit theology and praxis was not pragmatic because of the ethical impotence of Dalit theology, which we ascribed to the lack of a biblical paradigm which had the capacity to effect a bi-polar ethical reversal. We also pointed out the negative praxiological potential of the epistemological premises of 'pain', 'pathos' and 'suffering' which have so far predominantly influenced and shaped the articulation of a Dalit theology and Christology have pointed out that a paradigm which could be more effective praxiologically would involve a paradigm of Jesus whose resistance of injustice and discrimination comes pronouncedly to the fore.

In this chapter as we set to explore a relevant biblical paradigm which could be relevant for Dalit theology we should bear in mind the critique of Dalit theology which came up earlier, and also premise the paradigm in relation to the over-arching theoretical framework through which we analysed the discrimination against the Dalit communities namely - the notions of purity and pollution. The proposed paradigm should, therefore, offer scope to address the following two aspects:

- a) the critique of Dalit theology which emerged in the previous chapter, and
- b) the negative functions of notions of purity and pollution in regulating and restricting social interaction and discriminating different groups in the Indian Caste context.

Only if these two aspects are sufficiently addressed can this biblical paradigm be a pertinent and relevant one. Having seen how the discrimination against Dalits can be understood within the theoretical frame work of purity and pollution, we can hypothetically postulate that a pertinent biblical paradigm to critique discrimination based on purity and pollution should necessarily encompass segregation and discrimination based on purity and pollution regulations in the biblical narrative.

In this chapter I propose to interrogate the possibility and pertinence of considering the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm which can further the praxis – potential of Dalit theology. The tentativeness and provisional nature of this theoretical postulation which seeks concrete contextual applicability dictates me to elucidate the healing stories as just a heuristic device from which to work out my propositions. Hence the primary focus of this chapter will be to ascertain the pertinence of embarking on this theoretical venture. The effort in this chapter is just to theoretically bolster the arguments for appropriating the use of the synoptic healing stories as biblical resources to improve the effectiveness of the praxis of Dalit theology.

A - Theological Importance of the Stories of Jesus' Healings

The importance of the healing stories in the synoptic gospels cannot be discounted because over one fifth of the literary units of the synoptic gospels either contain descriptions or allusions to the healings and exorcisms of Jesus and his disciples.¹ Excluding all parallel passages Graham Stanton points to seventeen accounts of healings in the gospels, including three of vivification. He contends that the prevalent tendency in Jewish antiquity to explain away miracles or adopt a stance of open scepticism towards miracles, often offering alternative explanations, are enough evidence to denounce any speculations that Jesus' miraculous power thrived because of the gullibility and naivety of the ancient world.² Stanton grapples with the perplexity surrounding the reasons for Jesus' miracles. He points to the random but inconsistent references to the faith of the individual, the compassion of Jesus, and the attraction of the crowd to Jesus but discounts them as being the main motives for Jesus' miracles. He postulates that paying close attention to the individuals and circumstances involved in the healing stories can help throw light onto the purported intention of Jesus. According to Stanton:

Jesus healed people with many kinds of disability. The lepers healed by Jesus may have had some kind of skin disease, i.e. not what we know as Hansen's disease; but in the eyes of many, touching a leper was a violation of ritual

¹ Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 1.

² Graham Stanton, 'Message and Miracles', in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 66.

Stanton points to the scepticism of ancient writers like Epicurus, Lucretius and Lucian towards the miracles. Celsus, philosopher and first pagan critic of Christianity attributes the miracle working power of Jesus to magical powers. He is reported to have maintained that the power which Christians seemed to possess was derived from pronouncing the names of certain demons and incantations. It is important to note that Stanton places the 'healing stories' under the broad gamut of 'miracles' in this essay. Nevertheless I find it important because there are points where he differentiates between 'healing stories' and 'so-called nature miracles'. Stanton's argument is that there can be no neutrality over the understanding of magic which reportedly carried strong negative connotations. This feature did not characterise the miracles of Jesus. Thus we can infer that there was a difference between magic and Jesus' miracles.

regulations (Mark 1. 40-45 parr.; Luke 17.11-19; Lev 13.45-6; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.279-86). As Kee (1986:78-79) has emphasised, Jesus healed persons who were considered by some of his contemporaries to be 'off-limits' by the standards of Jewish piety, by reason of their race (Mark 7.24-30), their place of residence (Mark 5.1-20) in a tomb in pagan territory, or their ritual impurity (5.25-34, a woman with menstrual flow). Although a full discussion is not possible here, many of the healings and exorcisms of Jesus were an indication of his full acceptance of those who were socially and religiously marginalized.³

The acceptance of those who were identified as marginalised is one important factor on the basis of which we can consider the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. Here we have the image of a Jesus who consciously and preferentially opts for the poor and marginalised. The healing stories offer space to talk about the marginalised identities of the people through a web of signifiers – social, gender, religious, ethnic and racial which makes them a suitable paradigm for Dalit theology.

The synoptic stories can also be placed in a wider theological framework. Refuting any trace of either medical techniques or the rhetoric of diagnosis and prescription for diseases commonly found in the Roman medical tradition of the first century, or anything that can be labelled as magic within the healing stories of Jesus, Howard Clark Kee understands the healings of Jesus in a proleptic sense in relation to the reign of God:

The frame work of meaning in which these stories of Jesus' healings are told is not one which assumes that the proper formula or the correct technique will produce the desired results. Rather the healings and exorcisms are placed in a larger structure which sees what is happening as clues and foretastes of a new situation in which the purpose of God will finally be accomplished in the creation

³ Stanton, 'Message', p. 68.

and his people will be vindicated and at peace.⁴

Discounting the valence of the umbrella metaphor of 'Jesus the teacher' under which the quest for the historical Jesus has been predominantly undertaken, Stevan L. Davies in his *Jesus the Healer* argues that such studies which have as their paradigmatic locus this single ruling metaphor have more often than not led to not only a problematic conceptual diversity, but also indicate and accentuate the flawed nature of scholarly attempts to produce a comprehensive and credible portrait of Jesus' teachings, a fact overtly attested by the plethora of mutually inconsistent modalities which have been proposed for understanding Jesus' teachings.⁵ According to him the thesis of Jesus as teacher is highly estranged in its conformity with evidence. Davies castigates the inclination of scholars towards unbridled relativism which has resulted in a frivolous misrepresentation of Jesus in camouflages congenial to authorial intent.⁶ Against this metaphor of 'Jesus the Teacher' Davies proposes a paradigmatic shift to 'Jesus the Healer' which he feels is more relevant and apt :

The ruling metaphor, or paradigm, that does work, that does reveal an historical Jesus who did pretty much what the New Testament says he did, and who is *not* a social type never before or since heard of in the world (e.g., a peasant Jewish Cynic) is the metaphor of Jesus the Healer. Start with the question "how did he heal" rather than the question "what did he teach" and many things become clear.⁷

However, Davies doesn't take into appropriate consideration the theological underpinnings of the healing stories. Eric Lott, referring to Davies' *Jesus the Healer*,

⁴ Kee, *Medicine*, p. 79.

⁵ Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), pp. 14ff.

⁶ Here Davies follows the arguments of Schweitzer who, upon discovering that scholars had the tendency to present a Jesus who was congenial to them and who taught what they themselves felt should be taught, devastatingly criticised such attempts to interpret the teachings and career of the historical Jesus. According to Davies, 'Every scholar engaged in Jesus research is by profession a teacher and so every construction of Jesus the Teacher is formulated by a teacher. These teachers, professors by trade, should wonder if there is not a bit of a Jesus-Like-Us in their constructions', Davies, *Jesus*, p. 10.

⁷ Davies, *Jesus*, p. 15. *Emphasis* in original.

points out how Davies' lack of interest in theological meanings of the healing leads him to 'ignore substantial parts of the healing acts'. Lott observes that the subjection of the healing stories to Davies' view, of Jesus as a spirit possessed ecstatic who like other shaman figures effected healing by being taken over by another persona and drew others into sharing his own 'dissociative religious trance', is unnecessarily limiting.⁸ Lott makes clear the virtual impossibility of arriving upon an authentic picture of Jesus or of his liberating work, unless his healing acts are crucial to this picture. Exclaiming his perplexity that 'healing' hasn't figured as an interpretative category, as a hermeneutical key, Lott says that a psycho-anthropological way of reading these stories could prove fruitful in trying to work out a more authentic Dalit Theology and Tribal theology.⁹ Lott points out the possibility of healing being a fruitful way 'of focusing more sharply on issues at the centre of liberationist concern'. According to him:

These stories of Jesus' healing acts *can* be powerful paradigms of the wholeness we seek for our world, the new world of God's justice we must surely struggle for, whether as frontline activists, or as back stage supporters with our prayers, our preaching, our thinking. Jesus the Healer is also Jesus the Just, the one whose every act expressed his concern for the promised new world in which all god's children would find acceptance and wholeness, justice and peace. The stories of his healing acts, therefore, are pregnant with wider meaning and point us inexorably to the wider web of life of which we are part.¹⁰

Considering the fact that Lott a theologian of British origin spent thirty years in India as a theological teacher and as a pastor to predominantly Dalit congregations, his point that the healing stories can help in working out a more authentic Dalit theology is worth serious consideration. He allots limited space in his book to relate the

⁸ Eric J. Lott, *Healing Wings: Acts of Jesus for Human Wholeness*, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998), p. 1.

⁹ Lott, *Healing Wings*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Lott, *Healing Wings*, pp. 4-5.

healing stories to Dalit issues. This is understandable considering that the overall emphasis of the book was to reflect on healing than on Dalits, which is why most chapters are styled as reflections on healing than as systematic attempts to work out a Dalit or tribal theology. However, we can derive important cues from the book about integrating the stories of Jesus' healings fruitfully to Dalit issues. On the basis of the above mentioned points one can embark on a quest to justify further the rationale for using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical basis for Dalit theology.

I intend to focus my arguments for using the synoptic healing stories as the biblical basis for Dalit theology under three broad topics:

- a) **Notions of Purity and Pollution as Convergent Matrices Which Validate Hermeneutical Appropriation:** Here I explore how notions of purity and pollution constitute the common ground for social discrimination, social interaction and inter-relation in the Indian Caste system and in the context of the healing stories. I argue for these notions as being the convergent matrices of the two worlds, namely twenty-first century Indian casteism and first century Judaism, which validate hermeneutical appropriation.
- b) **Jesus' Healings as Historical Enactment of Soteriology and the Ethics of God's Reign:** My point of departure here is that salvation and God's reign/kingdom of God are central for any Christian theological discussion on ethical action. Thus, an understanding of Jesus' healing actions in relation to the themes of salvation and the Reign of God enable one to understand how they become normative for deriving Christian ethical principles to guide behavior in the Indian caste context.
- c) **Healing stories and the possibility of constructing an alternative Christocentric ethical-theological paradigm for Dalit theology:** This section delineates how Jesus' praxis can be liberatively interpreted to address the concerns of caste-discrimination in India. It also looks into how making

synoptic healing stories as the basis for an alternative paradigm will help redress some of the methodological problems facing Dalit theology (pointed out in the previous chapter) and thus help to bridge the lacunae between theology and praxis in Dalit theology.

B - Notions of Purity and Pollution as Convergent Matrices Which Validate Hermeneutical Appropriation

As part of our efforts to resource the synoptic healing stories as a relevant alternative paradigm which can be hermeneutically appropriated for the Indian caste context there is a need to validate the reasons which undergird our proposal. In this section I will argue that notions of purity and pollution furnish substantial common ground between the twenty first century Indian caste context and the context of the synoptic healing stories, which is suggestive of heuristic compatibility.

1 - Notions of Purity and Impurity as Convergent Matrices of the Two Worlds

As we seek to see whether notions of purity and impurity were integral to illness, it is important to understand the taxonomy of illnesses which prevailed during Jesus' time. Taxonomy refers to the 'identification, classification, clustering of illnesses into culturally meaningful categories'.¹¹ Pilch identifies three different illness taxonomies from biblical data found in Luke-Acts, which, because of their broad nature, can be extended to encompass the healings and exorcisms of Jesus mentioned in the other synoptic gospels too. The three taxonomies which Pilch constructs are:¹²

¹¹ John J. Pilch, 'Sickness and Healing in Luke-Acts', in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), (pp. 181-209), p. 200.

¹² See Pilch, 'Sickness', pp. 200 ff.

- a) *A taxonomy built on spirit involvement*: Here the basic conception is about the involvement of a 'spirit' in human illnesses. The stories of Jesus' exorcisms and those involving possession fall under this category.
- b) *A taxonomy built on symbolic body zones affected*: Under this taxonomy one can cluster reports under which specific parts of the body or their distinct activities are mentioned. Pilch refers to Malina who points to three mutually interpenetrating yet distinguishable symbolic zones namely.¹³
- a) the zone of emotion-fused thought (heart-eyes)
 - b) the zone of self-expressive speech (mouth-ears)
 - c) the zone of purposeful action (hands-feet)

Pilch also places conception, menstrual irregularity, leprosy and death in the hands-feet zone because people affected by these cannot engage themselves in purposeful activity. Reflecting upon the story of healing of Peter's mother-in-law from a demon called "Fever", Pilch also suggests that the spirit-related taxonomy and the symbolic body-zone taxonomy could be collapsed into one.¹⁴

- c) *A taxonomy based on purity and impurity*: Along with Neyrey and Malina, Pilch also constructs a taxonomy of illness based on degrees of purity and impurity which he considers to be particularly important. He states that a taxonomy of illness based on impurity could be 'another all-encompassing category for explaining the illnesses listed in the Gospels'. According to Malina 'the most comprehensive taxonomy is the one based on different kinds of impurity', which could 'easily subsume the other taxonomies'.¹⁵

¹³ See Malina, *The New Testament World*, pp. 61-62 for a comprehensive list of vocabulary reflecting each symbolic zone.

¹⁴ Pilch, 'Sickness', p. 206.

¹⁵ Pilch, 'Sickness', pp. 206,207.

Skin problems 'called leprosy' affect bodily boundaries thus symbolizing threats to purity or wholeness. People who suffered such conditions thus posed threats to the purity and wholeness of the whole community because their presence within the community violate the community's boundaries rendering the communities unclean, impure and lacking in wholeness and holiness (Leviticus 13-14). In the same way women and men with 'uncontrolled and uncontrollable bodily effluvia' were not only impure because of their lack of wholeness, but polluting as well.

Those afflicted in one or other symbolic bodily zones, as well as those possessed or affected by a malevolent spirit, lacked symbolic bodily integrity which further pointed to deficient purity, wholeness and holiness which makes it easy to co-opt all the taxonomies under the taxonomy of purity and impurity.¹⁶

This categorical construction of taxonomies points out that issues of purity and pollution were integral to illness. We can now say that, in the light of the findings of chapter two, notions of purity and pollution constitute the overarching paradigm and common intersecting arena of the socio-cultural matrices of 21st century Indian society and those of 1st century Judaism. This makes cross cultural hermeneutic application a plausible enterprise.

2 - Notions of Purity and Pollution in Relation to Physical States in the Mosaic Law / Levitical Codes

It is important to understand the theological context of the notions of purity and pollution which prevailed in the Jewish culture of Jesus' time. There are evidences in the Mosaic Law/Levitical Codes which relate sickness to purity and pollution.

¹⁶ Pilch, 'Sickness', p. 207.

According to the Mosaic Law/Levitical codes, purity laws relating specifically to physical states can be divided into two categories:

- a) Purity laws on physical states in relation to the sanctuary.
- b) Purity laws on physical states in relation to daily life.

a) Purity Laws on Physical States in Relation to the Sanctuary

Support can be drawn from the book of Leviticus to argue that holiness meant wholeness in Judaic context, especially in relation to the sanctuary and holy of holies. One has to be cognizant of the fact that this dictum extended beyond anthropology.

The Levitical stipulations in Leviticus 22: 21-22 regarding animals meant for sacrifices make it clear that the sacrificial animals had to be without blemish.

v.21) when anyone offers a sacrifice of well beings to the lord, in fulfilment of a vow or as a free will offering, from the herd or from the flock, to be acceptable it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it.

v.22) Anything blind, or injured, or maimed or having a discharge or any itch or scabs – these you shall not offer to the lord or put any of them on the altar as offerings by fire to the Lord.

Support for the dictum ‘wholeness as holiness’ can also be drawn from the stipulations regarding priests mentioned in Leviticus 21: 6-23:

v.16) The Lord spoke to Moses saying

v.17) speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God.

v.18) For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame,

or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long,
v.19) or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand,
v.20) or a hunch back, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.
v.21) no descendent of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.
v.22) He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy.
v.23) But he shall not come near the curtains or approach the Altar because he has a blemish; that he may not profane my sanctuaries...

At this point we may question that if these stipulations were applicable to the priests who were on top of the purity scale how much would it be applicable to the common people? It may seem right to conclude (at this point) that only in the context of the sanctuary notions of purity and pollution (based on physical wholeness) were the basis of marginalization. Hence animals and officiants with defective and excessive physical traits (scabs, hunch backs) were considered as posing the threat of profaning the sanctuary and thus marginalised from the temple. Then to what extent was this purity code active and instrumental in marginalizing the masses? To tackle this question it would be appropriate to see how purity laws regarding physical states governed day to day life.

b) Purity Laws on Physical States in Relation to Daily Life

There were rules to govern day to day impurity. We will be looking initially at the rules of contagion applicable to leprosy, menstruation and corpse defilement for which there is ample and direct reference in the Hebrew Bible.

Leprosy

Leviticus chapter 13 deals exhaustively with leprosy, its identification, accompanying rules of contagion and the procedures involved in its cleansing. Leviticus 13: 45-46 puts the rules of contagion concerning people identified as having leprosy as follows:

v.45) The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled, and he shall cover his upper lips and cry out, “unclean, unclean”.

v.46) He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Certain important aspects of the disease which emerge from Leviticus chapter 13 are:

- a) It is clearly a priestly prerogative to examine a leprous person and pronounce him / her unclean and clean. Throughout the chapter we see how only the priest can examine the lepers and pronounce them as unclean or as clean.
- b) Leprosy doesn't concern persons alone leprosy can even affect houses (14: 34 ff) and clothing (13: 47).

Menstruation

Leviticus 15 concerns bodily discharges. This section gives us information about the rules of contagion governing bodily discharges.

v.25) if a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the

days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.

Regarding what it means to be unclean during her impurity, verses 19-24 make it clear that any person who touches her and everything that she lies on and sits upon shall be unclean (v.20), and whoever comes into contact with these things shall be unclean until the evening (vs.22-23). Anyone who lies with her will be unclean seven days and every bed on which this person lies.

Corpse-defilement

There are also strict rules about becoming impure through corpse contact in Numbers 19: 10 ff:

v.10.b) This shall be a perpetual statute for the Israelites and for the alien residing among them.

v.11) Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days.

v.12) They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day and so be clean; but if they don't purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean.

v.13) All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and don't purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the Lord; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them.

v.14) This is the Law when someone dies in a tent everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.

Numbers 5: 1-3 captures the fear of contagion which accompanied such notions of purity and pollution, which made it imperative for people 'polluted' by bodily discharge, leprosy and corpse-defilement to be marginalised from the camp as follows:

v.1) The Lord spoke to Moses saying,

v.2) "Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge, and every one who is unclean through contact with a corpse,

v.3) you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them".

Though leprosy, menstruation and corpse-defilement occur outside the realm of the sanctuary, any impurity contacted through these poses a threat to the sanctuary. The adjunction found in Leviticus 15: 31 makes the point clear:

Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.

We can conclude that maintenance of purity through the exclusion of the potentially 'defiling' was understood to be the requirement to ensure the holiness of the camp. Any aberration of this holiness affected the sanctuary – the dwelling place of God which was part of the camp. Hence people in certain physical states understood to be polluted had to be separated from mainstream society because their presence was perceived as a threat to the integrity of the whole symbolic order especially the temple which was the microcosm of the holiness pertaining to Israel. The consequence of this was the marginalisation of lepers, menstruating woman and those defiled by corpse-touch who were considered the manifestation of impurity.

3 - Notions of Purity and Pollution and Hierarchy: Evidence from Socio-Critical and Anthropological Sources

On the basis of the above mentioned evidence from the Levitic and Mosaic codes one can say almost that there is no indication of a hierarchy in terms of purity and pollution. But Douglas' arguments in the book *Leviticus as Literature* suggest a link between purity/impurity and hierarchy. After a careful analysis of the passages on leprosy found in the book of Leviticus, Douglas argues as follows:

If there is no cure, the incurably defiled house must be destroyed (Leviticus 14: 39-42), as also the incurable leprous garment (Leviticus 13: 52), and eventually the incurable leper can expect to be destroyed by the disease. In the last case, defilement of the tabernacle, chapter 16 enjoins the rite of atonement for the tabernacle. If defilement of the tabernacle were not remedied, the people could expect the curses of chapter 26 to be unleashed upon them as a punishment for failing to keep the covenant.¹⁷

This clearly brings out the differences in the consequences of impurity. The sanctuary because of its higher level of purity is not to be destroyed like the others but atoned for. Even Jerome H. Neyrey's reconstruction of Jewish purity maps makes it clear how a hierarchy regarding notions of pure and polluted prevailed with regard to people, places and things.

Neyrey's mapping of the symbolic universe of first century Judaism helps us to place notions of purity and pollution as the ideology used to impose structure and order on the Jewish world of Jesus. Following Mary Douglas' principle of understanding 'purity' as a process of ordering a socio-cultural system, and 'pollution' as whatever violates that ordering, he understands purity in two senses:

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 191,192.

- a) As the general, abstract system of ordering and classifying.
- b) As the specific purity rules on the basis of which persons, objects, places etc are labelled pure or polluted in a given social group.¹⁸

For Neyrey the basic model to study the symbolic universe of first century Judaism is the model of purity and pollution. Cultures embody and express core values which are structured in the cultural life of a group. The core value is the overarching rationale for behavior and influences the classification and location of persons, places and things. In first century Judaism 'pure' refers to all that accords with the core value and its structural expression and 'polluted' refers to anything which contravenes the core value in any way.¹⁹ Neyrey, through the mapping of places, people, times, body, and uncleanness, points out how these maps make clear the valuational structuring and definition of places, people, times, parts of the body. He brings in sufficient evidence from rabbinic literature to make his point that notions of purity and pollution were inextricably related to hierarchy and discrimination at the empirical level in the Judaism of Jesus' time.²⁰ His reconstruction of purity maps of places, persons, things and time will give us a broad overview of the idea of purity which prevailed during the Judaism of Jesus' time and how it is connected to hierarchy.

¹⁸ See Jerome H. Neyrey, 'The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel', in *Semeia*, Vol. 35, 1986, (pp. 91-127).

¹⁹ Jerome H. Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts: "They Turn the World Upside Down" ' in Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, (pp. 271-304), pp. 274-275.

²⁰ I am aware that scholarly debate has brought out the tensions about accepting rabbinic Judaism *per se* as the Judaism which governed social life during Jesus' time. But one has to recognise the interconnection between the Pharisees and rabbinic Judaism which has been satisfactorily established. This is a point of contention from many scholars.

a) *Map of Places*

On the basis of the *m.Kelim* 1.6-9 Neyrey constructs a map of places according to ten degrees of holiness.²¹

- 1) The *Land of Israel* is holier than all other land.
- 2) The *Walled Cities* (of the land of Israel) are still more holy in that they must send forth lepers from their midst.
- 3) *Within the Walls* (of Jerusalem) is still more holy, for here they may only eat the Lesser Holy things and the Second Tithe.
- 4) The *Temple Mount* is still more holy, for no man or woman who has flux, no menstruant, and no woman after child birth may enter therein.
- 5) The *Rampart* is still more holy, for no gentiles and none that have contacted uncleanness from a corpse may enter therein.
- 6) The *Court of Women* is still more holy for none that had immersed himself the same day because of uncleanness may enter therein.
- 7) The *Court of the Israelites* is still more holy...
- 8) The *Court of the Priests* is still more holy...
- 9) *Between the Porch and the Altar* is still more holy for none that has a blemish or whose hair is unloosed may enter there
- 10) The *sanctuary* is still more holy... the *Holy of Holies* is still more holy.²²

On the basis of this map one can discern that the holiness of any place corresponds with its proximity to the temple. Hence, the Holy of Holies, being the centre of the temple, has a superior degree of holiness, whereas gentile territory is entirely off the map since it is out of Israel and so not holy.²³

²¹ Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts', pp. 278-279.

²² Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 606 ff & Neyrey, 'The Idea'.

²³ Neyrey, 'The Idea', p. 95.

b) *Map of People*

Neyrey also brings out a map of persons given by the *t.Megillah 2.7*. In a descending order of holiness / purity the following order prevails:²⁴

- 1) Priests
- 2) Levites
- 3) Israelites
- 4) Converts
- 5) Slaves
- 6) Disqualified Priests (illegitimate children of priests)
- 7) Netins (Temple Slaves)
- 8) Mamzers (bastards)
- 9) Eunuchs
- 10) Those with damaged testicles
- 11) Those without a penis

Neyrey goes on to add that one should bear in mind the place of the physically impaired as well as the general exclusion of women on this list. According to this map two things become clear about holiness:

- a) That holiness means wholeness
- b) That one's ranking invariably corresponds to one's standing vis-à-vis the Temple

So people with damaged bodies are ranked last; their lack of wholeness denoting deficit holiness, and people with damaged family lines are ranked second to last. People defective either in body or in family lines are on the perimeter of the temple whereas the priests and Levites stand closer to the temple.

²⁴ Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts', p. 279.

c) *Map of Impurities*

Considering the fact that even observant Jews may pass through stages of purity and pollution, the *m. Kelim 1.5* furnishes a map of impurities which would help the Israelites to know one's place in the purity system at all times. It lists the contaminant, the period of contamination and the remedy for the contamination. Based on the *m. Kelim 1.5*, Neyrey draws a map of impurities which lists in a hierarchal manner the sources of contamination:

- 1) There are things which convey uncleanness by contact (e.g. a dead creeping thing, male semen)...
- 2) They are exceeded by carrion...
- 3) They are exceeded by him that has connection with a menstruant
- 4) They are exceeded by the issue of him that has a flux, by his spittle, his semen and his urine...
- 5) They are exceeded by (the uncleanness of) what is ridden upon (by him that has a flux)...
- 6) (The Uncleanness of) that is ridden upon (by him that has a flux) is exceeded by what he lies upon...
- 7) (the uncleanness of) what he lies upon is exceeded by the uncleanness of him that has a flux ... (*m. Kelim 1.3*)²⁵

Neyrey goes on to add that the uncleanness of a man is exceeded by the uncleanness of a woman, whose uncleanness is exceeded by that of a leper, then by that of a corpse (*m. Kelim 1.4*).

²⁵ Neyrey, 'The Idea', pp. 91-127; 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts', pp. 279,280.

4 - Conclusion

On the basis of this analysis of the notions of purity and pollution in the Jewish context one can discern a few intersecting matrices which will facilitate the hermeneutical task of appropriating the synoptic healing stories as biblical paradigms for the Indian caste context:

a) Notions of purity and pollution function as the basis of social and physical segregation in both the contexts. Allusions to notions of purity and pollution are central to the segregation of Dalit communities in Indian villages. Dalits are forced to live in *cheries* and *Dalitwadas* and are thus separated from the caste-communities who live in the main village. The discrimination of the Dalit communities is on the basis of notions of the pure and impure. Similarly in this chapter we have seen that purity concerns, operating through the idiom of contagion are the foundations on the basis of which lepers, menstruating women and those defiled through corpse-defilement are segregated from the rest of the camp.

b) The *m.Kelim* and *t.Megillah* clearly invoke notions of purity and pollution to ascertain superiority and inferiority on a relational scale to persons, places and things. It is not as straight forward to determine the status of each caste on the purity scale in the Indian caste context. However it is on the basis of notions of purity and pollution that one caste groups negotiates its relational status with the other groups. The low social status assigned to Dalits in the caste hierarchy is on the basis of their 'polluting' nature.

c) Religious codes undergird and validate hierarchy in both the contexts based on the notions of purity and pollution. The *varnasrama dharma* and the *Manusmrithi* provide the theological foundations for the marginalisation of the Dalits in the Indian context whereas in the Jewish context the foundations are the Levitic codes and the Pharisaic legislations. These foundations give a sacrosanct status to both hierarchy

and marginalisation. Notions of purity and pollution derive their religious sanctions and 'legitimations' from these codes.

d) The social function of stratification which inheres in all notions of purity and pollution can be conflated with the usurpation of autonomy of the powerless by the dominant. The powerful and the dominant interpret and validate the notions of pure and impure. If the *Brahmans* are usually accused of reinforcing these in the Indian system – we can see the Priests, Pharisees and Scribes acting as boundary keepers in the synoptic gospels.

e) Relational situatedness on the purity scale corresponds to the degree of proximity or estrangement from the religious centers of the dominant group. Lepers, menstruant women and those defiled by contagion are kept away from the camp and the sanctuary. In some Indian villages Dalits are denied entry into temples and are kept away from religious centers for fear of polluting the holy space.

f) We need to acknowledge the differences between the two contexts as well. Dalit impurity is considered as permanent impurity whereas the impurity in synoptic sickness is socially considered as reversible impurity. Nevertheless what is important is to recognise that these states of impurity and their concomitant inferiority are not ontological, but socially and religiously ascribed. This is crucial if we are considering the hermeneutical compatibility of the two contexts along an analogical basis.

5 - Methodological Considerations for Hermeneutical Appropriation

An understanding of notions of purity and pollution as constituting social semiotics is crucial if we are exploring the possibility of critiquing caste discrimination on the basis of the ethics of Jesus as reflected in the gospels. These symbolics of social

order constitute the very grammar of social semiotics as they condition groups to perceive their place in society in accordance with the prescribed values and 'norms', enunciated and evoked by this pattern of social semiotics. The danger arises when in this patterning there are inherent spores of disenfranchisement and social ostracism. It is this aspect which I hold to be analogical between the context of the synoptic gospels and the Indian caste context. The sick and the 'sinners' constituted the disenfranchised groups in Judaism while in casteism they are the Dalits – both I consider as victims of the semiotics of social order. I feel that when we focus on this aspect there is a widening of our scope to provide an ethical critique without succumbing to the common pitfalls of political-hermeneutics namely anachronism and cultural relativism.

C - The Healing Stories as Historical Enactment of the Ethics of the Kingdom of God

The point of departure for this section is the understanding of the centrality of the concepts of 'Reign of God / Kingdom of God', and soteriology, for any Christian ethical action. As Sobrino puts it, 'When one attempts to reproduce the *following* of Jesus, then the Reign of God reappears once more in a central place. Let us recall that, in the first stage of Jesus' public life, discipleship or following meant proclaiming and positing signs of the Reign, while in the second stage it meant steadfastness in the face of the mighty reaction of the anti-Reign. Without the Reign of God the following of Jesus would have neither its motivation or its central content'.²⁶

²⁶ Jon Sobrino, 'Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, The Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God' in Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (eds.), *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1996), (pp. 124-145), p. 133.

What this section does is to see how the aspects of soteriology and the ethics of the Reign of God are all intersected in the praxis of Jesus in the healing stories. It helps to make clear how this praxis involves working for the Reign of God in the present, rather than to dismiss it as purely a utopian concept. It brings the political nature of soteriology made manifest by Jesus in concrete history. The intention of this section is to point out that the synoptic healing stories adequately testify to the essential nature of Jesus' praxis in relation to the notions of purity and pollution within the context of salvation. The section points to the possibility of praxis prototype inherent in the synoptic healing stories which helps us to reproduce our own praxis which can and must be examined in terms of the essential elements of Jesus' life.²⁷

1 - Healing Stories as Points of Intersection of Soteriology and the Ethics of the Reign of God

a) Gerd Theissen

Theissen's interpretation and understanding of the healing stories of Jesus places them within the ambit of soteriology. Theissen argues for understanding the miracles as the episodic realisation of salvation in the present in a manner that is consistent with the broader picture of apocalyptic soteriological expectation. He perceives that through the healings Jesus combined two conceptual worlds namely the apocalyptic expectation of a futuristic universal salvation and the realization of salvation in the present.²⁸

²⁷ Jon Sobrino, 'Spirituality and the Following of Jesus', in Sobrino and Ellacuria (eds.), *Systematic Theology*, (pp. 233–256), p. 243.

²⁸ Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 278.

b) Graham Stanton

Stanton claims that the message and miracles of Jesus go together. According to him Jesus' own insistence was that his miracles and exorcisms embodied and acted out his message of the Kingdom of God.²⁹ His contention is that Jesus believed himself to be the proclaimer of God's good news to the poor. Through his elucidation of the characteristic features of the 'poor' to whom the good news of God is proclaimed through Jesus, Stanton sheds more light on the nature of Jesus' ministry:

They (the poor) are people who are experiencing oppression and helplessness, including those living in dire poverty. They are the blind, the lame, the lepers and the deaf whom Jesus heals as a sign of the coming of God's kingly rule. They are the tax collectors and sinners to whom Jesus extends table fellowship in the teeth of vigorous opposition. The message, miracles and actions of Jesus focused on the socially and religiously marginalized, for God's kingly rule belonged to them.³⁰

Stanton links the healing stories with the kingdom of God. According to Stanton, Jesus claimed that his healing activity, which was carried out among those on the 'fringes of society, was in fulfilment of the promises for the coming age referred to in Isaiah 29: 18-19; 35: 5-6; 61: 1'. He adopts a line of thought that is similar to the line adopted by Theissen and argues that Jesus perceived the healings as 'signs of the breaking in' of God's kingly reign. However he adds that miracles like parables were 'signs' but not proof of the kingdom of God and were intended by Jesus to mediate to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear the reality of God's kingly rule.³¹

²⁹ Stanton, 'Message', p. 57.

³⁰ Stanton, 'Message', p. 71.

³¹ Stanton, 'Message', p. 68.

c) *Christopher Rowland*

In continuity with Theissen's argument, of the historical impingement of eschatological salvation in the present (through the miracle stories), Christopher Rowland also reflects on how in the New Testament the present is understood as the time of fulfillment:

The significance of the present is so integral to the understanding of God's propitious time that history is the arena for eschatologically significant actions. In the New Testament the present becomes a moment of opportunity for transforming the imperfect into the perfect; history and eschatology become inextricably intertwined.³²

On the basis of this argument it is hard to discount that the synoptic healing stories in many ways embody that crucial dialogical juncture between the temporal and the spatial aspects of the Kingdom of God. My argument too is in affirmation of the manifestation of salvific continuity in the healing stories. Through this episodic realisation of salvation one gets to understand that the ethical imperative of the imminence of the Kingdom is not a futuristic-oriented passivity but action tempered by the realisation that the Kingdom belongs to the poor. It is the present concern for the poor that characterises both the healings of Jesus and the message of the kingdom. As one recognizes this crucial and dialectic embodiment of the message in the healing episodes one can realize that one can divest neither the healing stories nor the message of the kingdom of God of any political connotations.

Rowland's observation of the healing stories makes it clear that Jesus' healings were not altogether apolitical in their consequences. Registering the need for more attention toward the political character of the actions of Jesus in the gospels, Rowland

³² Christopher Rowland, 'Reflections on the Politics of the Gospels', in R. S. Barbour (ed.), *The Kingdom of God and Human Society*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1993), (pp. 224-241), p. 232.

also evokes attention to the subtleties of the political nature of Jesus' actions and clarifies the basis for his own attestation as to how he perceives the 'political' nature of Jesus' actions. Understanding the political message of Jesus' actions in this context in relation to the conventional patterns of human interaction and organisation, Rowland says:

The political challenge posed by Jesus involved departures from norms of behaviour, status, attitude and access to social intercourse which are typical of a particular society. The narratives of Jesus' actions portray a challenge to conventions and imply different standards of human relating. The touching of lepers and of 'unclean' women, the restoration of those excluded as 'mad', the healing of paralytics and blind, whose disabilities inevitably caused impoverishment, signify sitting loose to boundaries of conviction and a preparedness to countenance in human action something different which claims to be restorative. There is of course, nothing that is unconventional about healing the sick but the challenge and perhaps even the breaking of 'taboos' represent a shake up of the personal relationships which constitute the fabric of social relations, the very stuff of politics.³³

2 - Healing Stories as Reflecting Christic Praxis

a) Leonordo Boff

Attempting to place Jesus in his socio-political and cultural context, Boff works out Jesus' critical transcendence of the prevailing circumstances. He contends that the real oppression in Jesus' time can be attributed to 'the legalistic interpretation of

³³ Rowland, 'Reflections', pp. 239-240.

religion and the will of God', which characterised post-exilic Judaism.³⁴ It was the hegemonic degeneration and manifestation of this obsession towards a rigid cultivation of the law which evoked in Jesus a stringent proclamation of a final end which called 'into question all immediate interests of a social, political or religious nature'.³⁵ According to Boff, Jesus utilises the term the Kingdom of God to 'revive hopes for total liberation' from potentially alienating social-political and religious mechanisms. Further Jesus announces the immanence of the 'hoped for new and reconciled world' in their very midst. The Kingdom rhetoric of Jesus is also interlinked closely to the practical and social implications of Jesus' preaching and way of life which signified realized eschatology. Boff understands Jesus' praxis as crystallising the eschaton which was very much immanent. 'That absolute goal and end was mediated through concrete gestures, anticipated in surprising behaviour patterns, and made tangible in attitudes that signified that the end was already present somehow in the midst of this life'.³⁶

Boff's interpretation of Jesus' praxis points to Jesus' rejection of the misuse of power. He finds in Jesus' praxis a tangible representation of the power of God's love to inaugurate a new order which refrains from violation of people's freedom or exempts people from the task of taking responsibility for their human project. Jesus inaugurates this process of liberation where ritual service is subordinated to the concerns of the people and where fellowship transcends patterns of social conformity to include the outcastes or those discriminated against.³⁷

³⁴ Leonardo Boff, 'Christ's Liberation via Oppression', in R. Gibellini, (ed.), *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, (London: SCM, 1979), (pp. 100-132), p. 105.

³⁵ Boff, 'Christ's', p. 106.

³⁶ Boff, 'Christ's', p. 109.

³⁷ John Riches, 'Biblical Theology and the Pressing Concerns of the Church', in R. S. Barbour (ed.), *The Kingdom of God and Human Society*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), (pp. 256-279), p. 259.

b) *John Riches*

John Riches further helps in clarifying what Boff means when he talks of elements of the life and death of Jesus which transcended the circumstances of his time and which can be fruitfully applied to Boff's own context. Dividing Boff's views into two kinds Riches says:

On the one hand he (Boff) identifies in Jesus' teaching and actions a commitment to certain values: of love, of openness, of human interdependence and freedom. On the other he derives from Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom certain views about the course of history: (1) it is tending towards some point where our regionalisation of meaning, the attempts of particular societies, to build themselves a world of meaning which excludes, marginalizes and therefore oppresses others, will be overcome and (2) a belief that meanwhile it is the task of those faithful to the gospel to 'anticipate' that final global meaning, to mediate it through concrete acts which, while they will not themselves bring in the kingdom, are nevertheless pointers to others, forms of proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom of God.³⁸

Following on from that, he suggests that a closer examination of the interrelation between Jesus' beliefs and actions and the social, cultural and political realities prevailing during Jesus' would provide further clarification and insight. He identifies that Boff's interpretation of Jesus' transcendence of circumstances and regionalisation of meaning theoretically relied on contrasting Jesus' teachings and praxis with the narrow legalism of the Pharisees. Suggesting that a movement beyond such common portrayal warranted fruitful results Riches takes recourse to social historical approaches for assistance and, interestingly, discerns in Mary Douglas' account of purity regulations in *Purity and Danger* assistance to understand

³⁸ Riches, 'Biblical', p. 261.

Jesus' praxis in proper perspective. Drawing insights from Douglas, about the important function of purity regulations being the reinforcement of external and internal boundaries of the group, Riches identifies the Pharisaic attention to cultivation of purity rules as a natural tendency to set tighter lines around the group which was characterised on ethnic and religious lines.³⁹ Against this insight he perceives promising ways of understanding Jesus' teaching and behavior which 'evinced a very surprising openness in a society where there were forces at work attempting to strengthen group boundaries'. According to Riches the nature of Jesus' openness:

...was not simply the rejection of a narrow legalistic vision of God and the social practices which flow from it; it is rather to be seen as a rejection of attempts on the part of religious leaders to forge the people into a more cohesive group in an alien world. Sharing the same table with those who are significantly socially deviant, who live at odds with the group's norms, or who indeed are agents of an alien and threatening power, is clearly very different from keeping oneself apart from such people and associating as far as possible only with members of one's own group.⁴⁰

Riches touches upon the intersecting matrices of purity concerns and social segregation and prevalent patterns of social interaction in the Judaism of Jesus' time which are crucial aspects of the present study. We can well understand that at this moment Riches' focus on the purity concerns makes explicit mention of only the open commensality practiced by Jesus. He makes no direct references to the impurity

³⁹ He interprets the Pharisaic cultivation of purity regulation as attempts to set tighter lines around the group and to enforce a greater internal discipline within it. He points out that if Neusner's argument that "even before 70 C.E. the Pharisees were engaged in a process of transferring the centre of the cult away from the temple to the home and local community" was right, "then that transference was in all likelihood related to attempts to set up strong social boundaries around the group, organised now less as a nation state than as an ethnic, religious community" (p. 262). See also John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, (London: Darton Longman & Todd., 1980), Chapter 6 and Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of Apostle Paul*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983). This sustained focus on Pharisaic purity regulations by Riches in this article is because he is reviewing Boff's own references to the narrow legalism of the Pharisees.

⁴⁰ Riches, 'Biblical', p. 263.

associated with disease or sickness which is our primary area of focus. But considering the purity concerns prevailing in time it would be illogical and incorrect to presume that lack of explicit reference to sickness excludes sickness from the gamut of purity concerns. Riches's concerns are more to emphasise the openness of Jesus in transcending the social strictures imposed by purity concerns and so his arguments are applicable and relevant to our present attempts in working out ethical principles on the basis of Jesus' attitude to purity concerns - where purity concerns are predominantly understood in relational reference to the realm of sickness and disease. What emerges clearly is Jesus' vision to forge inclusiveness in a context where the prevailing dictum was exclusivism.

c) Howard Clark Kee

Kee also touches on the relationship between purity and separation of human beings in their social interaction in his understanding of Jesus' healings and exorcisms. He sees these activities of Jesus as opening up 'participation in the group of his followers in circumstances which directly violated the Jewish (and especially Pharisaic) rules of separation'.⁴¹ He also draws attention to Jesus assuming divine prerogatives and healing people who were off limits. Kee interestingly interprets Jesus' actions of healing as activity consciously carried out in continuity with the messianic prophecies of the Jewish traditions as reflected in the prophecies (Isa 29:18-19; 35: 5-6; 61:1).

d) James Dunn

James Dunn, drawing attention to the two pronged debate concerning Jesus' attitude to purity posed by the polemical interpretations of E. P. Sanders (for whom impurity was not sin as it was not wrong to be impure, but the close relation between holiness

⁴¹ Kee, *Medicine*, p. 78.

and purity warranted regarding any breach of the holiness code as sin) and J. Neusner and Bruce Chilton, points out that substantial evidence remains of an attentive practice of purity in the Galilee of Jesus' time. Purity/impurity 'was not regarded as a matter of insignificance or to be treated lightly'. It was sought on a regular basis even at distances so remote from the Temple, because 'impurity was regarded as undesirable, to be avoided as much as possible, and to be removed at the earliest opportunity'.⁴²

Dunn brings out the point that maintenance of purity was not an issue related to worship in the Temple alone but it was an issue central to the 'definition of Second Temple Jewish identity and in enforcing the corollary of separation'.⁴³ But he problematises the question of the attitude of Jesus towards the purity rules. He points out that the implications of purity/impurity for Judaism as a whole would mean that 'Jesus the devout Jew would have shared that concern'. If so, would it be correct to conclude that 'Jesus went out of his way to undermine purity rules'? Given his observation that it was not wrong or sinful to contact impurity, Dunn advocates caution about interpreting Jesus' actions of healing as defiance of the purity code. However he refers attention to Chilton's argument for the emphasis on Jesus' own purity than his attitude to rules regarding impurity. Here Jesus' actions can be interpreted as countering the contagion of impurity with the contagion of purity. Holiness was for Jesus a positive healing force rather than a negative defiling force. Making a further brief referential analysis of episodes of Jesus' healing, Dunn's interpretation of Jesus' attitude towards purity is summed up as follows:

Much the same can be said in regard to the episodes in Jesus tradition where Jesus encounters the other main sources of impurity – corpse impurity (Mark 5.1-20, 21-4, 35-43; Luke 17.11-17) and discharge impurity (particularly mark 5.25-34). To be noted is the fact that Jesus is not remembered as going out of

⁴² James G. Dunn, 'Jesus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate', in *NTS*, Vol. 48, 2002 (pp. 449-467), p. 452.

⁴³ Dunn, 'Jesus', p. 451.

his way to defy the relevant purity laws: he incurred the first by his concern for those struck by tragedy; and he incurred the second by the action of someone else (the woman with the haemorrhage). At the same time, the stories do not make the purity issue explicit, though for any Jew telling or hearing these stories the purity implications would have been inescapable. The point is rather that Jesus seems to disregard the impurity consequences in such cases, so that it may be fairly concluded that Jesus was indifferent to such purity issues. And once again it may be valid to deduce that in these episodes we see the power of holiness countering the contagion of impurity.⁴⁴

There may be a seemingly apolitical character at the outset when we consider the above rhetoric - about the power of Jesus's holiness countering the contagion of impurity. But it is not necessarily so, because the total disregard for a religio-cultural semiotic which stratified society and defined acceptable social interaction has a distinctively political character. Disregard towards an operant cultural principle implies an undermining of its importance and is thus political. Dunn concludes that there was no echo of the concern to profess Israel's set-apartness in Jesus' conduct and association with different people (fellow Jews, 'sinners' and Gentiles). Thus if 'purity was a concern for Jesus, it was an *inclusive*, not an *exclusive*, purity'.⁴⁵

e) *Marcus Borg*

Borg delineates two approaches in Jesus' teaching regarding the paradigm of holiness which he finds applicable to individual instances. They are:

- i) the replacement approach, and
- ii) the redefinition approach.

⁴⁴ Dunn, 'Jesus', p. 461.

⁴⁵ Dunn, 'Jesus', p. 465.

He maintains that in some texts holiness is replaced by another core value – compassion - and in others holiness is understood in a manner different from the prevalent conception in first century Judaism.⁴⁶ Under the replacement approach Borg posits that Jesus substituted the paradigm of compassion for the paradigm of holiness and under the redefinition approach he posits that Jesus modifies holiness as a transforming power which overpowered uncleanness rather than the converse.⁴⁷ Borg alludes to the various healing stories of Jesus which are related to purity concerns like the healing of the leper in Mark 1: 40-45, the healing of the woman with discharge in Mark 5: 25-34 and the story of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20 and concludes as follows:

These stories, most or all current in a Palestinian milieu in which the significance of uncleanness was well understood, reflect the Jesus movement's affirmation that holiness, far from needing protection, was an active dynamic power that overcame uncleanness.⁴⁸

The healings stories are not the only biblical resources which reflect Jesus' attitude towards notions of purity and pollution. The open commensality practised by Jesus through his table fellowship is another crucial source. Norman Perrin places the table fellowship as 'the central feature' of Jesus' ministry.⁴⁹ Geza Vermes points to the table fellowship as the distinct feature of Jesus' ministry, which characterised the difference of Jesus' ministry from that of his contemporaries as well as his prophetic predecessors.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), (new edn.), pp. 92, 93.

⁴⁷ Borg, *Conflict*, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁸ Borg, *Conflict*, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁹ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 107.

⁵⁰ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, (London: Collins, 1973), p. 224.

Both the healing acts and the table fellowship can be interpreted as resistance through subversion of the symbolic order of holiness. When discussing Jesus' open commensality and his healing stories I find Crossan's mapping of the locatedness of Jesus' praxis between the covert and the overt insightful. Crossan judges Jesus' praxis in the following manner:

What Jesus was doing is located exactly between the covert and the overt acts of resistance. It was not, of course, as open as the acts of protestors, prophets, bandits, or messiahs. But it was more open than playing dumb, imagining revenge, or simply recalling Mosaic or Davidic ideals. His eating and healing were in theory and practice the borderline between the private and the public, covert and overt, secret and open resistance.⁵¹

Both the healing stories as well as the accounts of his social intercourse portray him as defying the rules of segregation fostered by the 'symbolic order of Judaism'. Thus, my contention is that any paradigm to critique casteism as a system which perpetuates itself through division and discrimination, should emerge out of an interaction with these examples of Christ where we find Jesus resisting hegemonic social and religious structures based on notions of purity and pollution, which created asymmetries and divisions between collective social and ethnic entities.

The core of the arguments elucidated above point to an inextricable intertwining between ethical action, the ideals of kingdom of God and soteriology. I strongly perceive in the synoptic healing stories a concrete and historical incarnation of this intertwining. The synoptic healing stories bring to the fore the concerns of the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus. Though not divesting salvation of its eschatological nature, the healing stories validate the historical processes and actions needed for its culmination. These healing stories furnish us with the hermeneutical key by which one can dispense with all 'objectivising rhetoric' of the eschaton (which

⁵¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), (paper back edn.), p. 105.

wrests all historical and concrete commitment towards projects of human liberation) and explore the ethical and concrete translation of the praxis of Jesus in contexts of discrimination, disenfranchisement and marginalization. In short they give us insights of the nature of, 'Christic-praxis' or the praxis of Jesus, with the implication being that our own praxis should be evolved in close conformity to Jesus' praxis. Thus, theoretically the proposal to resource the synoptic healing stories seems to hold sufficient ethical potency. The fact that Jesus is at the core of the healing stories gives the healing stories the needed Christo-centric thrust.

D - Healing Stories and the Possibility of Constructing an Alternative Ethical Paradigm for Dalit Theology

So far we have been pondering the possibility of resourcing the synoptic healing stories as a possible paradigm for our theological articulation. We have also seen that the synoptic healing stories have the potential to furnish an ethical paradigm for Dalit theology, which can enhance the practical efficacy of Dalit theology.

In the previous chapter where we critically analysed Dalit theology we delineated the lack of a bi-polar ethical imperative as constituting one reason for the lacunae between theology and praxis. We concluded that, in order for caste practices within the Church to be considerably affected, there was a need for an ethical framework which impinged upon the behavioral patterns of people belonging to both the Dalit communities and dominant castes. Now it remains to be ascertained whether the praxis of Jesus emerging from the synoptic healing stories is potent for articulating a bi-polar ethical imperative which will affect the oppressors and oppressed.

1 - Praxis as Emulative Action: Provision for a Bi-polar Ethical Imperative

The aspect of 'following' Christ has been a normative factor which has characterised Christian discipleship. Following Christ implies emulative action. Jon Sobrino's understanding of 'following' makes clear how it is understood in the Latin American context as an 'existential, praxic expression of faith' which must be historicized.⁵² In a simple manner Sobrino describes what it means to follow Christ:

After all, following means doing, in terms of the present, what Jesus did, and doing it in the way that he did it. It means the mission of building the Reign with the attitude and spirit of Jesus. In this praxis a kinship is acquired – greater or lesser, obviously – with Jesus, and this praxis (like all praxis) explains one's antecedent concept of Jesus, his mission and his spirit.

On the other hand, our praxis, like that of Jesus, is also subject to the vagaries of history. That is, although its horizon is the ultimate, its concretions are not, and depending on how these come to be, the same praxis can be the verification or temptation for faith itself.⁵³

Praxis bears evidence of the content and nature of Christian faith. It is the action which consciously reincarnates the actions of Jesus in a relevant manner for one's context. 'Following', for Sobrino also 'stands in essential relationship with the building of the reign of God and the destruction of the anti-Reign'.⁵⁴ Thus there is an intrinsically ethical component to following. Understanding praxis as emulative action, i.e. emulation of Christic praxis, gives it a bi-polar ethical imperative which offers a challenge for both the 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed' to re-orient their lives

⁵² Sobrino, 'Systematic', pp. 132-133.

⁵³ Sobrino, 'Systematic', p. 135.

⁵⁴ Sobrino, 'Systematic', p. 133.

and praxis in conformity with Christic praxis. Taking the synoptic healing stories as the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology opens up the scope for emulative action because Jesus is the locus in the synoptic healing stories and his actions become the guiding paradigm for ours.

The present epistemological premise under which Dalit Theology has worked out its Christology leaves insufficient space for critical praxis. Dalit theology doesn't offer the necessary Christic impetus which will make involvement in transformation a pragmatic possibility. Following our analysis of Dalit theology we concluded that Dalit Christology which was exclusively premised in the epistemological paradigm of 'pain' and 'pathos' and the suffering servant model of Christ had the potential to operate as a palliative inuring the Dalits to their existing suffering through marginalization and make the Dalits masochistic in their attitude towards suffering. Pain-pathos-centred paradigms can help reinforce the slavish mentality and deeply inculcated sense of inferiority among the Dalits, which, Dalit theologians like Massey and Azariah and Dalit leaders and activists like Ambedkar have pointed out to be the one overarching reason impeding Dalit initiative in accepting responsibility for self-transformation and the positive realisation of their inherent worth and dignity. Thus if one uses the rhetoric of ethical imperative in relation to the Dalits then it should mean an imperative that makes them to consciously reject their psychological enslavement and gives them impetus to work towards self-emancipation.

Making the synoptic healings as the alternative paradigm for our constructive purpose allows sufficiently for this ethical impetus for the Dalits because primarily it gives a Christological paradigm of resistance, and protest. Riches points to the importance of recognizing Jesus as a 'significant agent of cultural and social change' who, 'enabled the poor and the oppressed to find a voice and a purpose and a vision of a new world to live and die for'.⁵⁵ Emulation of the praxis of Jesus is the primary manner through which most Christians practice their faith as Christians and so here in the situation of the Dalits the paradigm of Jesus the healer shows them that social segregation on the

⁵⁵ Riches, 'Biblical', pp. 269-270.

basis of notions of pure and impure was perceived by Jesus as wrong and resisted and so if the Dalits passively accepted such discrimination it would imply tacit complicity to a sinful structure and a contradiction of the examples set by Jesus.

Positing the synoptic healing stories as the alternative paradigm for Dalit theology can serve a corrective purpose. It will widen the applicability of Dalit Theology to the people belonging to non-Dalit castes as well as the 'oppressors' of Dalits. By comparative reference to the praxis of Jesus the 'oppressors' also can change their attitude towards marginalization and oppression of Dalits. This emulative aspect of praxis will imply that the oppressors understand that for Jesus purity was an inclusive force rather than an exclusive force (Dunn). Jesus countered purity regulations when they subordinated compassion. When purity concerns threatened to alienate and segregate people he resisted them and posited alternative forms by way of which holiness, which was understood as a prerequisite for relating with God, was modified in a manner, which created new possibilities for human social interaction and relation.

My interpretation would be that Jesus radically conflated the aspect of relating to God with relating to other fellow human beings, thus bringing pronouncedly to the fore the theological understanding of all human beings as bearing the image of God. It can also be interpreted to imply that aspiring to relate with God at the expense of alienation and marginalization of fellow human beings was a mistake which Jesus tried to correct through his attitude towards the prevailing notions of purity and pollution. Thus, the synoptic healing stories which portray Jesus' contravention of the operant social dynamic of his day posit a challenge to the behavior of 'oppressors' in the Indian caste context. The ethical impetus of Jesus' actions for the oppressing Christians would mean that emulation of Jesus invariably entails the transformation of the pattern of social interaction and stratification on inclusive and non-hierarchical and egalitarian lines. Thus, on the basis of our arguments we can point out to the possibility of a bipolar ethical imperative in the emulative appropriation of the Christic praxis reflected in the healing stories.

E - Conclusion

On the basis of our consideration of the synoptic healing stories as a possible point of departure for articulating an ethical framework to critique casteism as well as an alternative paradigm for Dalit theology we can conclude that synoptic healing stories can constitute the foundations on which ethical principles can be derived which will be helpful in bridging the lacunae between Dalit theology and praxis. Taking the synoptic healing stories as the point of departure for this theological enterprise can not only be helpful in addressing the fallacies of Dalit theology, but can also provide a theological basis which will enhance the praxis potent of Dalit theology. In general there is enough possibility for the synoptic healing stories to function effectively as an alternative paradigm for Dalit Theology, because they can give us not only an ethical framework to engage with discrimination based on notion of purity and pollution, but can also help to enhance the praxis- potential of Dalit theology. The task ahead in the next chapters will be to see what ethical principles can be delineated which can help in the construction of a Christian ethical framework to critique the notions of purity and pollution.

Chapter - VI

Analysing the Synoptic Healing Stories

Introduction

One of the reasons for exploring the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology is to derive ethical values which can constitute an ethical framework that can aid Christian praxis in a situation of marginalization based on notions of purity and pollution. This chapter seeks to identify some ethical values which can be derived from the synoptic healing stories, on the basis of which the praxis of Dalit theology can be strengthened.

A - Methodology for Identifying Features

Our task of identifying core ethical values entails the question concerning the appropriate method of identifying those values. On what basis can one identify the ethical values from the bible? A very recent example of identifying Christian ethical values which can be used in secular ethics has been set by Robin Gill in his *Healthcare and Christian Ethics*.¹ Gill, in his attempt to identify a primary biblical resource for health care ethics, identifies certain explicit or implicit values contained in the synoptic healing stories through a process of counting. Though he recognises that there is an inevitable element of reader response when biblical texts are approached with a specific focus, he reckons that approximate ways of counting are possible which can enable the identification of the most prevalent values that are

¹ Robin Gill, *Healthcare and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

actually present in biblical texts independent of the person studying them.² With specific reference to the study of the predominant features of the synoptic healing stories, (which he does with focus on a concern for healing within the context of Western medicine), he points out that ‘at most any system of counting involves identifying rough prevalence’.³ He uses a method of ‘weighting’ to identify the most prevalent features of the healing stories, which involves ‘giving a full weighting to a primary occurrence in one of the synoptic sources and just half a weighting for a parallel occurrence (judging the latter to be not without significance yet not as significant as the former)’.⁴

On this basis, Gill identifies six prevalent features:⁵

- 1) *Passionate emotion*: He gives passionate emotion a high rating of eighteen. Passionate emotion takes several forms in the healing stories like anger, situations of sharp confrontation, crowd amazement / fear, sharp controversy, expression of anger or compassion on the basis of different versions.
- 2) *Faith*: With a weighting of approximately fifteen faith is identified as another predominant feature.
- 3) *Mercy or Compassion*: Mercy or compassion takes several forms. Mostly pleas by the ill for help are pleas for mercy either explicitly (as in Mark 10:47 / Luke 18:37 and Mt 9:27 & 20:30) or implicitly (in stories where the ill either beg for healing or prostrate themselves while appealing for healing). Compassion or Mercy is also explicitly attributed to Jesus’ response to the ill.
- 4) *Touching*: Touch emerges as another important feature of the healing stories with an overall weighting of at least twelve.
- 5) *Uncleanness*: Uncleanness also emerges, both explicitly and implicitly, as a related feature to touching with an almost equal weighting.

² Robin Gill, ‘Health Care, Jesus and the Church’, in *Ecclesiology: The Journal for Ministry, Mission and Unity*, Vol. I. No. 1, (London: Continuum Publishing Group Ltd, 2004), (pp. 37-55), pp. 39,40.

³ Gill, ‘Health Care’, p. 40.

⁴ Gill, ‘Health Care’, p. 40.

⁵ Gill, ‘Health Care’, pp. 40-43.

- 6) *Reticence / restraint* also emerges as a strong feature (with a weighting of around ten) around which much scholarly attention has been focussed.

Gill's method of identifying the prevalent features helps one to make an objective evaluation of the prevailing features. My method of identifying the features would be in close conformity with Gill's, but taking into consideration the fluidity and interpenetrating nature of these features and bearing in mind the focus of my study, I intend to narrow down my analysis to four predominant features, namely:

- 1) Touch / uncleanness
- 2) Faith
- 3) Mercy / compassion
- 4) Conflict / confrontation

I agree that *reticence / restraint* needs to be treated on its own. If it can be understood as *humility* my contention is that *reticence* can be 'subsumed' under the feature of *mercy / compassion*. There is considerable ambiguity among scholars about the purpose of these commands to secrecy. This feature, as Gill himself points out, is rather inconsistent. Gill understands this feature in the context of healing as *humility*.⁶ My argument is that *reticence* or *restraint* was ordered to place focus on the actual act of healing and the healed rather than on the healer. The intention could be to shift attention away from the healer. The object of the healer is the ill and so it was adequate that the world realised that a person who was ill earlier was healed now. The centre of focus is the ill and the restorative value of the healing act. This outward pointing nature and the 'other-centeredness' of this feature make it possible that this feature can be related to *compassion*.

⁶ Gill, 'Health Care', pp. 55 ff.

B - Prevalence of the Ethical Features

So far we have identified four ethical features in the synoptic healing stories namely uncleanness / touch, faith, compassion and conflict / confrontation. Now in a tabular form I attempt to identify the forms in which these features prevail in the synoptic healing stories and analyse them.

1 - Touch / Uncleanness

This feature can be best understood in the light of the purity maps and regulations that we analysed in the previous chapter in relation to not only physical states, but also relating to persons, places and things. In a context where notions of purity and pollution are assumed to have governed social interaction as well as spatial mobility, the purity maps and regulations serve as appropriate tools to enable us to discern the implicit and explicit manner in which notions of purity and pollution operate in the context of the synoptic healing stories and to identify the various ways in which defiance of uncleanness is implicit in the actions of Jesus and other characters. They also help us to recognise the subversive significance of touch in the context of the healing stories. Understanding these aspects of uncleanness will give more completeness to understanding Jesus' restorative actions.⁷ Aspects of the healing stories where the emphasis on purity and pollution is inchoate yet strong can be identified. On the basis of our previous analysis we can construct the following table to map uncleanness / touch as it appears in the healing stories.

⁷ John. Pilch, 'Healing in Mark: A Social Science Analysis', in *BTB*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1985, (pp. 142-150), pp. 142 ff.

Touch / Uncleanness				
Form of prevalence		Matthew	Mark	Luke
	Unclean physical states	8:2; 15:26.	1:40; 7: 33.	4:33; 7:12; 5:12; 8:29.
	Unclean places	15:21,22.	7:26.	17:12; 8:26.
	Touch	7:15; 8:3; 9:20; 9:29; 14:36.	1:23,27; 1:31; 1:41; 3:11; 5:2,13; 5: 41; 6:5; 6:56; 7: 25; 7:33; 9:27; 8:22,23,25.	5:13; 7:14; 8:44,54; 13:13.
	Declaring clean / cleansing	8:2.	1: 40.	5:12; 17:14.

a) Unclean Physical States

On the basis of the centrality of purity and pollution in the Judaism of Jesus' time, we can discern uncleanness in the following contexts. In Luke 5:12 the leper is portrayed as being 'covered with leprosy'. Mark 1:21 talks about the exorcism of an unclean spirit in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. In Luke 4:33 and 8:29 Jesus deals with unclean spirits. The story of Jairus' daughter and the haemorrhaging woman (Mt

19:18-26; Mk 5:22-43; Lk 8:44 ff) has women in two unclean physical states namely menstruation and death. Jesus uses the word 'dog' to refer to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:26 and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:27. In all the stories about lepers, demoniacs and menstruants impurity is implicit as it is in the stories which involve using bodily effluvia (Mk 7:33; 8:22). We find the mention of clean / unclean in various contexts of the healing stories. If the governing dictum of the day was wholeness as holiness we can conclude that all the sick whom Jesus healed were impure. Though we cannot conclude that impurity was contacted in all circumstances, we have seen specific instances where taboos of contagion were high – especially corpse defilement, menstruation and leprosy. But uncleanness should be understood in relation to the inferior social and religious status associated with it. Most of the people Jesus deals with in his healing episodes can be 'defined as "out of bounds" by religious categories'.⁸

b) Unclean Places

Having understood purity as 'order' and strict maintenance of boundaries certain places can be considered as being off limits and impure. Jesus' healings involve moving in gentile territory. Gentile territories are often associated with demoniacs and unclean spirits in the healing stories. So, we need to be perceptive about the connotations of pollution that such territories connote. Gentile lands do not even feature on Neyrey's map of places. In Luke 8:26, in Gerasenes the person affected by Legion lives in tombs - the realm of uncleanness. In the story of the healing of the ten lepers we see the lepers living outside the cities. Even in their approach to Jesus the lepers maintain their distance thus reflecting the boundaries entrenched in their psyche. The Syrophenician / Canaanite woman is a gentile, as is the centurion of

⁸ Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 73. According to him the man with the unclean spirit, the possessed gentile in the land of the Gerasenes, the leper, and the woman with the haemorrhage, the gentile woman who comes to beg for her daughter are all impure according to the standards of the law.

Capernaum, Jesus still moves to their place. Defiance of the uncleanness related to places and people can be discerned when Jesus moves to ‘gentile’ and polluted places and interacts with ‘polluted people’.

c) Touch

We find touch being used for healing in various situations where the risk of contagion / contacting impurity is highest. Jesus responds to the leper with a touch in the process of healing (Mt 8:3; Mk 1:41; Lk 5:13). Jesus heals by risking corpse-defilement when he touches the bier of the widow of Nain’s son in Luke 7:14. In the story of Jairus daughter and the haemorrhaging woman, where both physical states carry immense implications of pollution, the healing is effected through touch. Peter’s mother-in-law is healed by touch in Mark and Matthew (Mt 7:15; Mk 1:31). In Luke 13:13 the woman who had been crippled for eighteen years is healed when Jesus lays his hands on her. Jesus uses touch to heal the two blind men in Matthew 9:29.

Jesus also uses ‘contagious bodily effluvia’ in the healing process at certain times. In the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida found in Mark 8:22, Jesus heals by touch using saliva. Jesus uses spittle to heal the deaf man suffering from impeded speech in Mark 7:33. We need to understand these acts in the light of the understanding of purity and uncleanness that we have received from our analysis of the purity and pollution codes that influenced social life in that context.

d) Cleansing / Declaring Clean

There are situations where the pleas of the ill are pleas for cleansing and the healing of Jesus involves a strong element of ‘declaring clean’. The leper’s plea which is found in all the three gospels is a plea to make him clean (Mt 8:2; Mk 1:40; Lk 5:12).

Jesus pronounces the leper clean in all three Gospels. Luke 17:14 reports that the ten lepers were made clean.

On the basis of all these factors we can conclude that uncleanness is either implicitly or explicitly a predominant feature of the healing stories. Touch is also invariably related to the feature of uncleanness. The theme of uncleanness furnishes the background against which to understand the other three features.

2 - Faith

The table given below identifies the different forms in which faith emerges as a predominant feature of the healing stories.

Faith				
		Matthew	Mark	Luke
Form of prevalence	Faith as initiative	8:2; 9:18, 21.	1:30; 1:40; 2:5.	5:12; 7:3,4; 9:37; 17:11; 18:38.
	Faith as persistence	15:22 ff.	2:4; 7:26 ff; 9:17, 24.	5:18,19; 18:39.
	Recognition / Acknowledgement of faith by Jesus	8:10,13; 9:2, 22; 15:28.	2:5.	5:2; 7:9; 17:19; 18:42.

a) Faith as Initiative

In the context of the synoptic healing stories, faith can be understood as being manifest in the initiative taken in approaching Jesus to be healed. In the healing of Peter's mother-in-law her condition is 'told to Jesus *at once*' in Mark 1:30. The leper in all the three gospels (Mt 8:2; Mk 1:40, Lk 5:12) approaches Jesus saying if you choose you *can* make me clean. The Capernaum centurion takes initiative for the healing of his slave in Luke 7:3 ff. Both Jairus and the haemorrhaging woman approach Jesus in faith in all three gospels. The ten lepers though hindered by distance which excluded them, take the initiative in calling to Jesus for healing in Luke 17:12 and 13. The blind man on the road to Jericho, upon hearing that Jesus is passing along, takes the initiative to become healed. In Matthew 15:22 / Mark 7:25 ff the Canaanite / Syrophenician woman takes the initiative in approaching Jesus for the healing of her demon possessed daughter. The father of the spirit possessed boy affirms his belief in Jesus' exorcising powers in Mark 9:23.

b) Faith as Persistence

This is prominent in Mark's version of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12. Four men overcome obstacles (the crowd and the roof) as they lower the mat on which the paralytic lay before Jesus. In Luke 9:37 the father of the demon possessed boy is persistent in his efforts to get his son healed. After the disciples fail to cast out the demon the man 'shouts' to Jesus for help. Despite being sternly ordered to be quiet the blind man on the road to Jericho persists in his pleas for mercy and Jesus acknowledges this persistence as faith in Luke 18:42. In the story of blind Bartimaeus found in Mark 10:46, Bartimaeus refuses to be silenced and Jesus acknowledges this as faith. The two blind men in Matthew 9:28 also respond affirmatively to Jesus' question, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' The

Canaanite woman persists in her pleas to such an extent that the disciples consider her a disturbance, however Jesus recognises her persistence as faith (Mt. 15:28).

c) Recognition / Acknowledgement of Faith by Jesus

Jesus recognises the faith of the accomplices of the paralytic who is let down through the roof in Mark 2:5 and Luke 5:20 and just brought to him in Matthew 9:2. Jesus acknowledges the faith of the Capernaum centurion in Luke 7: 9 and Matthew 8:10,13. In Matthew 9:22, Mark 5:34 and Luke 8:48 Jesus acknowledges the faith of the haemorrhaging woman. Jesus acknowledges the faith of the Samaritan leper who thanks Jesus after being healed in Luke 17:19. There is also a corresponding mention of faith with regard to the healing of the two blind men in Matthew 9:29. In Matthew 15:28, Jesus appreciates and acknowledges the faith of the Canaanite woman.

3 - Compassion / Mercy

The theme of mercy / compassion is another dominant feature. It has to be understood from the perspective of both the healer and the healed because it features in the expressions of both. The pleas of the ill to Jesus are pleas for mercy and Jesus' is portrayed as being moved by compassion at a few places.

Compassion / Mercy				
		Matthew	Mark	Luke
Form of prevalence	Jesus' reaction	9:36.	1:41; 3:5.	7:13; 9:41; 17:13.
	Explicit & implicit in pleas for mercy	5:2; 9:27; 14:36.	1:40.	5:12; 8:41; 9:38; 17:13; 18:38.
	Reticence and restraint	8:4; 12:16;	1:34; 1:44; 3: 12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 9:30;	4:41; 5:14; 8:56;

a) Compassion / Mercy Explicit and Implicit in Pleas for Healing

Mark and Luke in their version of the healing of the leper found in Mark 1:40 & Luke 5, portray him as *begging* Jesus to make him clean, Matthew only mentions the kneeling down along with Mark whereas Luke portrays him as bowing with his face to the ground. Jairus *begs* Jesus to heal his daughter (Mk 5:22, 23; Lk 8:41) / bring her back to life (Mt 9:18). The ten lepers in Luke 17:13 beg for mercy. In Luke 9:38 the father of the demon-possessed boy begs Jesus for help. The ten lepers in Luke 17:12 ff beg Jesus to have mercy upon them. The blind man on the road to Jericho shouts twice to Jesus to have mercy on him (Lk 18:38, 39). In the healing of the two blind men in Matthew 9:27-31 the blind men cry for mercy. In a general healing

Matthew uses the language of begging to denote the response of the crowd to the healing power of Jesus.

b) Compassion as Jesus' Response

In Mark 1:40 ff Jesus is moved with *compassion* towards the leper (depending on the version). Mark also portrays Jesus as being grieved at the hardness of heart of the Pharisees in the episode of the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (Mk 3:5). Luke reports Jesus as having compassion on the widow of Nain when he restores her only son to life (Lk 7:13). Another aspect of Jesus' compassion is the space that he allows for the ill to communicate their needs. In Luke 18: 41 Jesus asks the blind man what he wanted Jesus to do for him. Jesus' attitude of healing the ear of the high priest's slave which had been cut off, (as well as his accompanying warning, 'No more of this!', to his followers can be interpreted as being an act of compassion (Lk 22: 50,51) taking into consideration the fact that a similar meaning is connoted in the parable of the good Samaritan for response to an act of assault. Jesus' response to the crowds is said to be one of compassion in Matthew 10:36.

c) Inclusive Nature of the Healings

There is a strong element of resistance to exclusion in Jesus' healing stories. The anti exclusionary stance of Jesus comes out clearly in the different categories of people he healed. A majority of them were people who are likely to have been marginalized by purity concerns like the lepers and the haemorrhaging woman. There are people with 'marginal identity', gentiles, and people considered to be of inferior worth. Jesus heals people from Gadarenes (Mt 8:28), the daughter of a synagogue leader (Mt 9: 18, Mk 5:22 ff), daughter of a Syrophenician woman (Mk 7: 24 ff) / Canaanite

woman (Mt 15: 21 ff), a Samaritan leper (Lk 17:16), and a slave of a centurion of Capernaum (Mt 8:5 ff).

There are people who also belong to the 'upper class' – Jairus is the ruler of a synagogue. There is also the centurion of Capernaum who approaches Jesus to heal his slave. Hence, we can state that there is an inclusive character to Jesus' healings. I place this inclusive nature of Jesus healings under the theme of compassion because we find a focus on disvalued states of the ill irrespective of their identity. Also one should understand that compassion which is selective can never be true compassion. What comes through this motif of inclusiveness is Jesus' concern for humanity where it is most threatened. Inclusiveness with its focus on the illness and the disvalued state of the ill rather than on the healer corresponds with the next motif - reticence - which also I have placed under the feature of compassion.

d) Reticence

Reticence is mentioned in Mk 1:32 the reason for it being 'because they knew him'. The demons (Mk 1:34; Lk 4:41), unclean spirits (Mk 3:12; Mt 12:16), two blind men in Matthew 9:30, Jairus and his family (Mk 5:43; Lk 8:56) and the crowd in Mark 7:36 are all ordered to maintain secrecy. Jesus' intentions behind asking the people to exercise restraint was because he did not want to publicise his power and attract people to him.

The authorial comments on the conditions of the people healed also give us glimpses of the suffering undergone by certain characters pointing out that the focus of the healing stories was the transformation of human conditions of distress. A semantic construction would give space to argue for compassion as being associated with and implicit in Jesus' response to the suffering person/s. A few instances stress the severity of the person's condition using words which make it possible to understand

Jesus' act of healing as rising from compassion. The haemorrhaging woman had 'endured much', the centurion's servant is 'in terrible distress'.

4 - Conflict / Confrontation: Pedagogical content

Conflict and confrontation also emerge in the context of the healing and most of the time the confrontation is between Jesus and the religious leaders. The synoptic gospels have stories of those confrontational discourses whereby Jesus acts in a way which is considered 'inappropriate' and then explains to the people about what needs to be done.

Conflict / Confrontation : Pedagogical content				
		Matthew	Mark	Luke
Form of Prevalence	Anger	1:25;	1:41-43; 3:5;	5:14;
	Confrontational argumentation / Pedagogy	8:4; 12:11;	1:27; 1:44;	5:14; 5: 21-26; 13:15-17; 14:2-6;
	Controversy	9:34; 12:14; 12:24;		11:15

a) Confrontational Argumentation / Pedagogy

In Jesus' first 'healing' in Mark dealing with the exorcism of an unclean spirit, the crowd is amazed and understands Jesus actions as teaching, however, they quiz

among themselves about its content, which they find to be perplexing (Mk 1:27). Confrontation is also implicit in the story of the leper found in all the three gospels. The phrase *as a testimony to them* - which is implied to be the primary reason for Jesus' command to the leper to show himself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded (Mt 8:4, Mk 1:44, Lk 5:14) - is thought to be better translated as 'as a witness against them'.⁹ Jesus faces charges of blasphemy and confronts the Pharisees and scribes regarding his authority over forgiving the sins of the paralytic (Mt 9:3-6; Mk 2:7-10; Lk. 5:21 ff). When Jesus heals the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath Jesus confronts the Pharisees with a pedagogical discourse on human worth (Mt 12:11-12; Mk 3:4; Lk 6:8-10). In Luke 13:15-17 Jesus is engaged in a confrontation with the leader of the synagogue because Jesus healed the woman crippled for eighteen years on the Sabbath. This confrontation follows the typology of a pedagogical discourse. A similar situation emerges in Luke 14:2-6 when Jesus confronts the lawyers and Pharisees on the issue of Sabbath healing while healing the man with dropsy on the Sabbath, verse 5 follows the pattern of a pedagogical discourse.

b) Anger

There are three references implying rage in the Markan version of the healing of the leper (Mk 1: 41 ff). In the healing of the man with a withered hand in the synagogue on Sabbath day, Mark 3:5 portrays Jesus as being angered.

c) Controversy

The Pharisees conspire against Jesus when he heals the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Mt 12:14; Mk 2:6; Luke 6:11). In Luke 11:15 and Matthew 9:34, 12:24 (by the Pharisees) Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul.

⁹ Crossan, *Jesus*, p.83.

C - Analysis of the Features in Relation to the Motif of Boundary Transcendence

The features that we have identified to be predominant in the healing stories are touch (also understood as defiance of uncleanness), faith, compassion and conflict / confrontation. In the light of our concern to evolve a Christian response to discrimination my proposal is to analyse these features under one overarching theme, which I will call for convenience sake as 'boundary - transcendence', which will help us to analyse in a focused manner the practical implications of these features. The motif of boundary transcendence though inherent and intrinsic to the healing stories (when understood in the light of the context and notions of purity and pollution), is also incipient and inchoate. By analysing the patterns in which the four features interact with one another within the healing stories (not all healing stories have all four features explicitly) we can approximately ascertain how this element of boundary transcendence is implicit in the healing stories.

Boundary transcendence as an overarching feature of the healing stories can be broadly mapped by constructing a dualistic oppositional motif field: consisting of two motifs namely boundary-stressing motifs, and boundary-transcending motifs. Theissen in his work on the miracles constructs a motif field which helps to understand how boundary stressing motifs and boundary transcending motifs prevail within the healing stories.¹⁰ Theissen points out to three aspects to analyse the boundary motifs within the healing story: the volitional, the cognitive and the affective. Volitional refers to all those *active actions* through which boundary stressing and boundary transcendence is *effected*, cognitive refers to those motifs where boundaries are *recognised*, affective refers to the feelings and emotions *felt* where boundaries are stressed or crossed.

¹⁰ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, pp. 77 ff. Though he adopts a form critical approach to understand the miracles, Theissen here examines the motif fields independent of their compositional structure.

Theissen's attempt can be helpful in examining the intrinsic opposition between boundary-stressing and boundary-transcending motifs. My approach for analysing the theme of boundary - transcendence borrows heavily from Theissen. The scope of Theissen is much wider. But my intention here being focussed on discerning whether and how there is a boundary - transcending motif in the healing stories, I propose to engage in a systemic study of the four features I have identified so far under the overarching theme of boundary - transcendence. Therefore, though the following table relies on Theissen, various aspects of it have been modified to suit our purpose.

	<i>Boundary reinforcing motifs</i> ¹¹	<i>Boundary crossing motifs</i>	
		<i>Human perspective</i>	<i>Healer' perspective</i>
<i>Volitional aspect</i>	Impediments for healing (Uncleanness)	Initiative; Overcoming the impediments (Faith)	Initiative for healing, declaring clean (touch, compassion)
<i>Cognitive aspect</i>	Misunderstanding; Scepticism; self-perception; (conflict, uncleanness)	Persistence; pleas for trust; (faith)	Pedagogy, arguments; words of assurance; (Conflict/confrontation)
<i>Affective aspect</i>	Rejection; accusation of blasphemy; (controversy)	Admiration, acclamation	Admiration of faith, amazement, anger, (compassion)

¹¹ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 77.

1 - Volitional

The volitional character of boundary-transcendence becomes clear through the feature of *faith* understood as initiative and persistence from the human perspective, and from *compassion* and *touch* and the actual act of healing when understood from the perspective of healer. The boundary-stressing elements here (boundary understood not in terms of purity and pollution but as difficulties in approaching the healer) are the impediments and the difficulties which actively prevent the ill from reaching out to the healer. For example: The crowd prevents the friends of the paralytic from taking the paralytic to Jesus, in the story of the Syrophenician / Canaanite woman the woman's gentile status is clearly the impediment for the healing. But the boundary is transcended by the initiative of the ill or their suppliants as well as the compassion and touch of Jesus who acts in defiance. One can explicitly see the boundary stressing and boundary transcending elements in action here.

2 - Cognitive aspects

These are aspects which reflect recognition of boundary reinforcement or boundary transcendence. The boundary here appears not as an obstacle which comes up against the will to be healed, but 'as a perceived obstacle which prevents the very emergence of an effort of the will to overcome it'.¹² Misunderstanding, scepticism and mockery and criticism are identified as cognitive boundary stressing motifs. Misunderstanding deals with what is thought as possible and no time is wasted on the boundary with the impossible. The boundary is taken as unquestionably obvious. The breaches and gaps in it are left unnoticed.¹³ 'Scepticism and mockery' is the defence against claims to cross the boundary. Though cracks are seen they are treated as non-existent, and most

¹² Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p.75.

¹³ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p.75.

effectively by collective ridicule. Liberation is rejected as a pragmatic possibility.¹⁴ Criticism sees boundary - transcendence as both meaningless and illegitimate as this breaches sacred rules. In the name of the sacred the boundary is fiercely defended, though boundary-transcendence may be life saving and life affirming.¹⁵

The fear and trembling of the haemorrhaging woman can be considered as reflecting an awareness of this inherent boundary. The lepers who shout from a distance again help us to recognize boundary reinforcement. The dwelling places of the unclean spirits / demoniacs – (predominantly gentile territory, tombs and humanly uninhabitable spaces) - cognitively reinforce boundary. We can also recognise the cognitive aspects of boundary stressing in the scepticism of the Pharisees and scribes towards the breaking of the rules with regard to Sabbath and forgiveness of sins. The boundaries, though unmentioned, are incipiently but ‘powerfully’ present as implicit assumption.¹⁶

The opposed motif of boundary transcendence comes out through the cries for help and pleas of trust where people deliberately cross boundaries. The centurion of Capernaum recognises the boundary but nevertheless approaches Jesus for help. The cognitive aspects of boundary crossing are present in those instances where faith is manifest as persistence. In cognitive terms the boundary is crossed in the acts of healing. The way Jesus confronts his critics also has a cognitive structure: ‘they challenge the fundamental legitimacy of the customary world of meaning and establish a new concept of the sacred’.¹⁷

¹⁴ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 76.

¹⁶ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 75.

¹⁷ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 78.

3 - Affective aspects

Boundary stressing is reflected in affective terms in the scepticism of the Pharisees and the scribes towards the healing acts of Jesus. Their sceptical outbursts, their refusal to accept the healing and rejection of the miracles as well as their allegations of blasphemy against Jesus reflect the boundary in affective terms. In contrast to this, boundary transcendence is reflected in affective terms in the acclamation and amazement which result from the healing. Several of the healed persons proclaim what has happened to them often using titular exclamations regarding the healings or the healer. Wherever amazement is implied there is fear, astonishment and wonder as to whether this is a new kind of a teaching. The boundary transcendence motif is reflected in affective terms when Jesus himself marvels at the faith of the centurion and acknowledges the persistence of others like the Syrophenician woman and Bartimaeus. In the story of the leper the reactions of Jesus recognised as either compassion or anger reflects the affective aspects of boundary crossing (Mk 1:41ff). We see the affective aspect also in the story of the healing of the man with a withered hand in the synagogue (Mt 12:11-12; Mk 3:4; Lk 6:8-10).

The above analysis helps us to identify 'systematic connections' between opposite motifs of boundary stressing and boundary-transcendence through the form-critical fields. We need to understand that the volitional, cognitive and the affective aspects cannot be strictly distinguished and there is a significant deal of overlap. Yet what this analysis helps us to do is see the tension between the two motifs in the narratives.

D - A Praxis Oriented Reading of the Features

To understand how the four features – touch, uncleanness, compassion, faith and conflict/confrontation - can be used for a praxis-oriented ethical response to discrimination based on notions of pure and impure there is a need to understand them in relation to the motif of boundary transcendence.

1 - Touch / Uncleanness

The motif of uncleanness seems to give us a background for the happenings in the healing stories. Hence, uncleanness is strictly not a value. But its related feature touch is a value because it involves breaking conventional behavior. The purity maps help us to identify that defiance of uncleanness in the synoptic healing stories happens not only through Jesus' touch but also through Jesus moving into gentile territory and healing gentiles and all those considered as extreme sources of impurity. This feature by itself encapsulates the boundary-transcendence motif. The subversive praxis of Jesus is made manifest by his actions which defy the holiness code. By healing through *touch* Jesus brings the polluting outsider into communion.¹⁸ Jesus' actions of touching is a challenge to the social structure.¹⁹

Defiance of uncleanness cannot be dealt with in exclusive terms. Such an approach would be unnecessarily limiting. It should be studied in relation with other features because it permeates the other features as well. For example the initiative of the hemorrhaging woman to touch Jesus can be classified under both initiative (faith) as well as defiance of uncleanness. Jesus' moving into symbolic gentile territory as well as healing Gentiles can be subsumed under both compassion as well as defiance of uncleanness. The distinctness of this feature is that it attacks the religious legitimation

¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), p. 261.

¹⁹ L. Stanislaus, 'Healing and Exorcisms: Dalit Perspectives', in *VJTR*, Vol. 63, 1999, (pp. 192-199), p. 197.

of inferiority. It comes forth as a publicly 'significant' act which subverts the semiotics of social classification. Because of the interpenetrative nature of this feature, as well as the fact that considerable attention has already been paid to understand the background for uncleanness I propose that we analyse the feature of defiance of uncleanness along with the other three factors and delineate the various points where this feature comes pronouncedly to the fore.

2 - Faith

As we have seen so far human initiative and persistence amidst obstacles are the two predominant manifestations of *faith* in the healing stories. Seen from this perspective there is an element of boundary transcendence implicit in this feature because humans consciously take the efforts to transcend the factors that limit human possibilities to be whole and valued. The agency for the boundary transcendence rests on human initiative and persistence. These two manifestations of faith denote the importance of human participation in acts of transformation and emancipation. Thus, when understood in a praxiological sense *faith* puts huge implications on human participation and human agency. Therefore the praxiological dimension of *faith* as a boundary-transcending feature can be analysed by placing emphasis on human participation and perseverance.

If one is talking of the feature of faith in praxiological terms one should also recognise the participatory nature of human initiative. As we have seen so far human initiative for healing is reflected in the pleas of people for healing. Some times this initiative is taken by people acting on behalf of the ill. Theissen talks of 'representatives' with the reference implying to people who make petitions on behalf of the 'sick'- petitioners. He finds the motif of faith interrelated with the appearance of these representatives. According to him:

The representative is the paradigm of a request made in faith (Mt 8:5 ff; Mk 5:21 ff; 7:34 ff; 9:14 ff). While the motif of faith is independent of that of the

‘representative’, the latter in the New Testament is never independent of the motif of faith. The two are associated motifs.²⁰

Another related motif in association with which *faith* in the healing stories occurs is the motif of impediment. Very often the supplicant/s of the miracle stories has(ve) difficulties in approaching Jesus. Their approach is impeded by various factors. In the healing of the paralytic found in (Mk 2:4) the paralytic had to be let down through the roof to Jesus because of the crowd. The Matthean version of the ‘Canaanite woman’ puts partial responsibility on the disciples in dissuading her from getting healing for her daughter. In what is widely considered to be the episode which portrays Jesus’ perception of his Gentile ministry, the story of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus himself appears to be an ‘impediment’ to the healing process.²¹ The centurion from Capernaum and the Syrophenician woman overcome the barrier of ethnic division when they plead for Jesus to effect healing. The father of the epileptic boy has to move beyond the disciples’ impotence to reach Jesus (Mk 9:14 ff). The crowd in a way hinders the approach of the haemorrhaging woman. Therefore what comes to the fore is the concern for people to cross boundaries. The companions of Jesus also drive blind Bartimaeus away before Jesus takes notice of him (Mk 10:48).²² It is interesting to note that faith and ‘impediment’ are associated. Faith in these ‘contexts’ implies overcoming obstacles. One can also use the language of boundary - transcendence in relation to this aspect of overcoming obstacles.

Another striking feature of such contexts where people persevere amidst obstacles is the mention of the words ‘believe’ or ‘faith’ by Jesus to the suppliants. The people who make petitions for others cross boundaries and overcome obstacles to the extent that the healing is attributed to their efforts / faith by Jesus. Jesus identifies their persistent efforts as faith (Mk 2:5). There is acknowledgement of the faith of the suppliants while dismissing them, (Mk 5:34; 10:52; Mt 15:28; cf Mk 7:29), and the

²⁰ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 49.

²¹ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

²² Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 52.

language of faith is used in exhorting the suppliants to confidence.²³ Theissen analytically brings out the different ways in which faith is manifest in the three gospels from the perspective of boundary crossing:

In Mark faith is the crossing of a boundary seen from a voluntaristic point of view. In Matthew a cognitive element is added: the conviction expressed in the petition; in Luke the affective aspect is dominant, acclamation and gratitude are regarded as the essence of faith. In other words, faith is simply the crossing of the boundaries of the human, and is associated in turn with different aspects of that crossing. 'Faith' is therefore not just one motif among other motifs of boundary crossing associated with human characters, but the essence of all motifs of boundary crossing. This faith is, however always recognized by the divine miracle worker. The word occurs almost only on his lips: it is only the revelation of the sacred which provides crossing of the boundary and legitimates them. In the reproduction of the miracle stories this revelation is realised in the three synoptics from different points of view.²⁴

There is also a response element in the healing stories. Many respond with gratitude and some insist on following Jesus. One can also argue that the theme of faith can be linked to discipleship. The story of blind Bartimaeus found in Mark 10: 46-52 shows how the theme of discipleship is related to the theme of faith. The story has been categorised as a legend because the story 'as it now stands in Mark had as its intention something other than the narration of a wondrous healing by Jesus. A healing is present in the story but in such abbreviated form that it appears to have been subordinated to some other intention'.²⁵ The point that is sought to be focussed in this story is the example of Bartimaeus himself who epitomises persistent faith - faith which persists to the point of even following Jesus and which is worthy of

²³ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

²⁴ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 139.

²⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, ' "And He Followed Him": Miracles and Discipleship in Mark 10:46-52', in *Semeia*, Vol. 11, (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), (pp. 115-145), p. 121.

emulation.²⁶ Thus faith can be understood as also being related to discipleship. The emphasis on relating healing to discipleship varies with the synoptic writers:

More than any other evangelist, Luke appends to miracle stories references to the fact that those who had observed the miracles, or who had benefited from them, give praise to God (eg., 5:25; 7:16; 9:43; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43), an attitude which belongs to the Lukan understanding of faith (cf Acts 1:13; 2:22-23, 36; 4:77; 10:38). The emphasis on “seeing” in Luke, less prominent in the other Gospels, also points to the significance of miracles for faith in Jesus (compare with their parallels, Lk 10:23-25, 19:37) and Luke’s use of the story of the ten Lepers (17:11-19) in the context of a discussion of the meaning of faith (17:1-10) shows further the significance of this connection.²⁷

Faith is never demanded as a prerequisite for the healings. In Mark’s healing stories whenever faith is mentioned or implied it is regarded as in effect prior to the act of healing (Mk 2:3-5; 5:23, 34; 7:24) where as in Luke faith emerges as a result of miracles. Mark’s account doesn’t furnish adequate growth for faith as having a motivational force for miracles. There is a prominent emphasis on seeing in Luke. The connection between faith and healing in Luke is extended to discipleship. By their strategic placement preceding the calling accounts the mighty acts of Jesus are portrayed as being motivational for prospective disciples. The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law precedes Peter’s call. The women who follow Jesus in Luke are identified as those from whom Jesus has exorcised demons (Lk 8:23):

Therefore in praxiological terms if we were to understand faith it has to be understood as human participation in God’s acts of wholeness. It tells us how the component of human participation is integral to emancipation. This initiative can be the result of subjective or objective experience of being treated as disvalued beings. Related to this aspect of faith is also the concept of autonomy where there is a

²⁶ Achtemeier, ‘ “And He Followed Him”’, p. 122.

²⁷ Achtemeier, ‘ “And He Followed Him”’, pp. 133,134.

conscious engagement to free themselves from bondage. The implications of an understanding of faith as participatory and persistent action, with regard to the praxis of the Indian Church in the Dalit context has been interestingly brought out by M. Azariah. Using the story of the paralytic who is lowered from the roof before Jesus by his four friends as a paradigm Azariah elucidates what *faith* which is manifest in human action can mean for the Indian church as follows. According to Azariah:

Jesus was impressed with the faith of these four men that could laugh at all barriers. These men had the compassion and the courage to be in solidarity with the victim of a paralysis that had long crippled not only the body but also the mind and spirit of that patient (who might have lost faith in getting healed long time ago, possibly suffering with his wounded psyche)...seeing the faith of the four men, Jesus proceeded to heal the paralytic. Indeed the process of healing (catharsis) had already begun in the various steps of barrier-crossing taken by the four men of faith, (or the community of faith) in solidarity with the victim of paralysis. We can imagine the paralytic himself resisting the initial moves of the four men who had to find a stretcher, then carry him some distance and, when at the door of the house where Jesus was, found only impossibilities and obstacles and barriers - each of which, however, the faith of the four men could overcome....the point of the paradigm case for the Indian church to learn, I would like to think, is the fact of *being in solidarity with the victim* not only by the four men who carried him to Jesus but Jesus himself *being in solidarity with the victim* at the deeper levels of his inner being where 'faith, sin and forgiveness' operate.²⁸

From this perspective we can understand that in order for holistic healing to take place human effort is needed. There is a need to recognise their agency as participators in God's restorative acts. In a praxis oriented reading of *faith* participatory action, perseverance, solidarity and discipleship emerge as related values.

²⁸ Azariah, 'The Church's Healing Ministry', pp. 322 ff.

3 - Conflict / Confrontation

In the healing stories which mention 'conflict / confrontation which has pedagogical content', Jesus is portrayed as taking the initiative for the boundary crossing. This usually takes place as critical confrontation to the boundary keepers.

The criticism or allegations against Jesus' healings inevitably involve his boundary-transcendence. In stories where legislations are crossed (rule miracles) the boundaries are stressed by Jesus' 'opponents', before Jesus is shown as critically repudiating them. The dissonant and dissenting voices help us to recognize the boundary-stressing aspects of the healing stories while the criticism, resentment and scepticism of the 'opponents' also help us to recognise which boundaries are crossed. Jesus is confronted when:

- a) He crosses role-boundaries when proclaiming forgiveness of sins (Mk 2: 5 ff)
- b) He breaches the Sabbath rules, thus breaking time boundaries (Mk 3:1 ff; Lk13:10 ff; Lk:14:1 ff; Mt 12:9ff)

The boundaries are sometimes stressed by the implicit or explicit questioning by the opponents. Theissen calls the stories which 'centre on the breaking of rules' as 'rule miracles' and calls their contexts 'apothegmatic miracle stories'.²⁹

Usually when criticism or allegation is made against Jesus' acts of healing on the grounds that he is breaking / transcending the law, Jesus' response to them involves provoking them to rethink the validity of their claims. Argumentation usually features in these stories. Jesus' reply to his 'challengers' takes the form of an 'either/or question', where he contrasts between the position of the challengers and his own position (Mk 2:9, Mk 3:4; Lk 14:3). Another form of argumentation is bringing out

²⁹ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 57.

the manipulative and selective nature of the opponent's criticism by pointing out how their own behaviour conflicts with their objection of Jesus breaking the law: they too rescue animals on a Sabbath (Lk 13.15 ff; 14:5).³⁰ This pedagogical aspect of his miracles should not be ignored.

The amazement and wonder of the crowd and the disciples can also be understood as their response to the pedagogical value of Jesus' teaching. In Mark 1:21-28, the crowd's response to the first healing of Jesus is 'What is this? A new teaching!' (Mk). This striking proposal by Mark to understand Jesus' first miracle as teaching also helps us to understand the pedagogical element in his teachings. The miracle as well as the teachings of Jesus raise questions about the *authority* with which he undertakes his actions. Because he is not part of the institutionalised 'authority', his extra-institutional authority inevitably attracts hostility.

Identifying the message of love as being an important aspect of Jesus' teaching we can say that praxis – oriented pedagogy is an implicit characteristic feature of Jesus' ministry. His message of love is proclaimed by word and deed.³¹

Jesus' teaching through his conflict and confrontation provokes the exercising of one's capacities to discern to what extent the 'boundary reinforcing' legislations had become a means of "repressive socialization".³² The interactions after the healing do portray a provocation of debate where a new radical insight into one's situation seeps through. Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientization' comes into the fore as a feature of the healing arguments.³³ Sometimes the healings teach a binary opposite of the ideologies in which the listeners have structured and interpreted reality so far. There is a subversion of the conceptual world of the listeners. The manipulative notions

³⁰ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, pp. 59,60

³¹ Soares-Prabhu, 'Jesus the Teacher: The Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus of Nazareth', in *The Dharma of Jesus*, (pp. 27-40), pp. 27 ff.

³² See Arun Shouri, *Hinduism: Essence and Consequence*, (Ghaziabad: Vikas, 1979), p. 372 for more on this phrase.

³³ For more on this concept see Paulo Fiere, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), (pp. 51-83); *Education for Critical Consciousness*, (New York: Seabury Press), 1973, p. 58 and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1972), p. 60.

around which their world was structured and which legitimised oppressive and alienating society is challenged by Jesus's healings provoking them to think. Jesus' teaching is liberative as it enables people to think. Sometimes a teacher or teaching might be paternalistic and authoritarian. Jesus does not function as a depositor for knowledge upon the depositories, neither does he function as the necessary opposite of their ignorance. Rather his healings free people to critically analyse the situation and respond to it in their own way. Some of the healed choose to follow him, some thank him, some pay no attention to the purity regulations after the healing (the leper/s), probably because they felt that it was necessary. Liberative as it made them conscious of their worth as children, this is a convincing demonstration of the freedom offered by Jesus. It imparted freedom to think and involved the listener in creative response. So there is a critical and dialogical component in his actions where the accepted values of the world of the listeners are put into question.

Pointing out the importance of understanding the healing stories as challenging the structures and as pointing towards boundary transcendence Herman Hendrickx argues as follows:

...this (Jesus' healing) is the most authentic signature of God in Jesus' life: in him God takes up the cause of the poor (Mt 5:3; 11:5). Hence Jesus' fury against a religious system that (with the best of intentions!) made it impossible for the poor to live the good news. Jesus' healings on the Sabbath are a sign that the sole criterion for a religious law is that it is at the service of man (sic); liberation and not enslavement! ... Jesus' healings and exorcisms were mainly performed for outcasts or marginals. Here there appears a commitment and an involvement which is unknown in other miracle stories. It should be recognized how much Jesus wanted to challenge and change the order and criteria of existing society.³⁴

³⁴ Herman Hendrickx, *The Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman & San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 26.

In praxiological terms this aspect of conflict and confrontation can be understood as conscientious resistance to oppression and injustice. As praxis involves a dialectic between action and reflection, the component of pedagogy can function as the reflection: the part where people are enabled to reflect upon their actions. This critical dimension of praxis can be translated into concrete and corporate action when it is revalidated as pedagogy for a wider group. This feature of conflict / confrontation involves justice as action, which involves resisting actions which dehumanize. It also includes critical retrospection of the ethical validity of human modes of structuring 'order'.

4 - Mercy / Compassion

Mercy / Compassion is another feature which has Jesus transcending boundaries. It is the affective aspect of praxis where one is moved to act. A praxis oriented understanding of compassion / mercy as it appears in the healing stories warrants consideration of two points:

- a) The inclusive and universal nature of Jesus' compassion.
- b) The subordination of Law to human need.

Both features encompass a great deal of radicalism; especially in a context where boundary reinforcement thrived on the basis of stringent exclusivism validated by the Law. One can cognitively identify compassion as a feature that also inheres in the universality and inclusiveness which characterise Jesus' healings.

Hence, this feature of compassion can also be studied with the feature of conflict and confrontation because, in the healings where Jesus breaks the rules, Jesus' relativization of the law is extraordinarily radical in the sense it subordinates every institution to human need. Jesus is shown to be in conflict with the religious leaders 'whose casuistic interpretation of the Law and whose thoroughly legalistic

understanding of religion he opposes vigorously'.³⁵ The interpenetrating nature of compassion and conflict especially with regard to Jesus' acts of healing is brought out in Mark 3: 1 ff. where before Jesus goes on to heal the man with withered hand on the Sabbath, he questions the onlookers whether it was appropriate to do good or harm on the Sabbath. The silence of the crowd both angers and grieves Jesus.

But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. (Mark 3:5)

Jesus' compassion when understood as inter-human concern brings out the challenges such compassion would have entailed:

The radicalism of Jesus who brushed aside the letter of the Law in order to grasp its spirit (radical obedience to God shown by radical concern for the neighbour) would have collided head on with the rigorism of the sects. His universalism with its sympathy for the outcasts within Jewish society and its openness to Samaritans and gentiles outside it, would have clashed with the particularism of the Jewish groups, whose bigoted insistence on the strict observance of the Law turned them into closed elitist or fanatical communities, which excluded from their fellowship not only gentiles but even Jews who failed to live up to their own exacting standards.³⁶

Thus, we can understand Jesus' compassion to be manifest in his anti-exclusionary stand and we can understand that such compassion was also manifest as conflict and confrontation. The radical nature of the compassion of Jesus can be seen in his violation of the social codes of exclusion. The inclusive nature of the healings proclaim the unconditional and non-discriminatory nature of God's love. Regarding the people who come to Jesus for healing, Donald H. Juel comments as follows:

³⁵ Soares-Prabhu, 'Jesus and Conflict', p.164.

³⁶ Soares-Prabhu, 'Jesus and Conflict', p. 167.

They are the least important members of the society - outcasts, people whose diseases have relegated them to the status of outsiders whom no one can even touch. Jesus' willingness to cross boundaries to touch and cleanse and eat with them brings life and hope where there was none. That willingness also threatens the whole religious and cultural and political system by which life is ordered. It is Jesus' concern for the little people that makes him a matter of concern to those who are in charge.³⁷

Soares-Prabhu goes on to talk of Jesus' '*Dharma of Concern*' which I feel is related to compassion. By *Dharma* Prabhu means the complex of religious insight and ethical concern which determined the lifestyle that Jesus followed. *Agape* approximates Prabhu' understanding of concern. The striking features of this *Dharma* of Jesus are as follows:

Concern for the neighbour is central to the Dharma of Jesus. Such concern is understood by the New Testament in a most radical way. It must be absolutely *universal*...wholly gratuitous...In a word it must be as *unconditional* as the love of the Father from which it ultimately derives...

This concern of the dharma of Christ which emulates the love of the father is an *affective* concern, responding affectively (as the father's love does) to human need...

Responsiveness and sensitivity to human need signify compassion. That is why even when we look at reticence or restraint as humility the implication inextricably involves placing human need and human situations as the locus of attention rather than the healer.

³⁷ Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 73.

Thus in the compassion of Jesus, we can see the interplay of the features of compassion, conflict and pedagogy. It brings out the complementary nature of all the three factors. Thus if we understand praxis here as emulative action, (emulating Jesus) we need to recognise that conflict and compassion go together in contexts where praxis involves subversion of boundary - reinforcing structures.

E - Conclusion

At the end of this chapter we can sum up our findings as follows:

The main features which can be identified from the synoptic healing stories and can aid the praxis of Dalit theology are, i) touch which is usually associated with defying the boundaries between clean and unclean, ii) faith understood as human initiative, perseverance, and participative actions iii) Conflict and confrontation with the sources and structures which uphold inequality and injustice, iv) Compassion. There is a high degree of overlap between the features. These features take different hues in the synoptic healing stories. Touch is employed by both the healer (Jesus) and sometimes by the sick person like the hemorrhaging woman. Initiative is taken most often by either the sick persons like the lepers, or representatives of the sick person like the Syrophenician woman who approaches Jesus on behalf of her daughter or the four men who carry their friend to Jesus. Conflict and confrontation is usually between Jesus and the 'religious structures and strictures'. Compassion is Jesus' reaction to the crowd and all who are in need. In the light of all the features we have identified and analysed, one can say that they all constitute the very process of praxis. They seem to be in conformity with Ambedkar's dictum - 'Educate, organise and agitate'. Jesus' confrontations as we have seen have a pedagogical content and can be linked to 'educating'. The aspects of organising and agitating can be seen in faith and compassion.

If one adopts a systemic view of praxis, one perceives a need for all the values analysed above: faith as participatory action, compassion and conflict as justice, and confrontation as critical impugnation of oppressive ideology. The complementary nature of these three features for any praxis should be recognised. The definition of praxis given below brings out the interactive pattern of praxis in which faith, compassion, critical confrontation are actively important:

Although the (Liberation) theologians define praxis in various ways, a commonly agreed upon definition is, 'transformative activity motivated by love and guided by faith'. The faith dimension sets it apart from materialist notions and at the same time gives praxis an eschatological quality. As a consequence, praxis, guided by faith, directs itself toward the reign of God as its ultimate end and moral standard. As a positive guide, faith illumines who the neighbour is, inspires persons to love compassionately and efficaciously, and moves them to work for justice in solidarity with the poor. As a negative guide, faith criticizes all types of praxis that are self-focussed or too narrowly focussed and ideologies that obstruct the pathway to justice and solidarity.³⁸

This definition encompasses all the aspects of the features we have identified so far. It also brings out the importance of each feature for praxis. With this introduction to the features which constitute the ethical framework for Dalit theology we move to analyse how the features operate in specific forms within select texts.

³⁸ Thomas L. Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models and Norms*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 83.

(Part - Four : A Praxis-oriented Reading of Select Biblical Texts)

Chapter - VII

A Praxis - Oriented Reading of the Healing of the Leper (Mark 1: 40 – 45) in Relation to the Motif of Boundary Transcendence

Introduction: Some Hermeneutical Confessions

This section of the thesis deals with the hermeneutical appropriation of three synoptic healing stories. I will follow the liberationists' way of reading the scriptures, which implies that my engagement with the synoptic healing stories will be committed and partisan. I agree with Arul Raja for whom 'all (our) attempts at a Dalit hermeneutics of the Bible could be genuine only when our solidarity with the Dalits entuse them to decide on their own, to fight a pitched battle with relentless hope, till the end, against all the forces upholding the caste hierarchy'.¹ This will be the perspective from which I will be reading the selected texts.

The point of departure for my hermeneutics will be my own commitment to the cause of liberation of the Dalits. *Commitment* assumes priority over *understanding*. A hermeneutical spiral is envisaged. The primacy of committed engagement is 'the point of insertion into the hermeneutical spiral, the place from which the effort to deepen understanding and improve faithful practice begins'.² This commitment to deepen praxis enables me to be open to the possibility of altering received interpretations of the

¹ Maria Arul Raja, 'Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible', in V. Devasahayam, (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, (Delhi/Madras: ISPCK / GLTCRI, 1997), (pp. 336-345), p. 344.

² Duncan B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 29.

Bible,³ so that the Bible speaks anew in the Dalit situation. For this I will also be open to the insights of other hermeneutical methods like postcolonial, subaltern and feminist readings of the Bible.

Having identified four praxiological features namely touch (defiance of uncleanness), faith, compassion and conflict/confrontation we now move on to study the story of the healing of the leper, in order to see how praxis is manifest as boundary-transcendence in this healing story. The story is found in all three synoptic gospels. I consider it here as being representative of the passages dealing with extreme forms of impurity namely leprosy, menstruation and corpse-defilement. We find all four ethical features in the story either in an explicit or implicit manner. We will examine the story briefly in the light of the motif of boundary-transcendence and draw out implications for a Dalit christology of liberation.

There are a few convergent trajectories which make hermeneutical appropriation of the biblical text for the Indian context possible. Two need specific mention. They are:

- a) Lepers as well as the Dalits are marginalised on the grounds of impurity.
- b) Religious codes are the foundations which legitimate this marginalisation.

The Levitical law in Leviticus 13: 45 prescribes that lepers had to 'wear torn clothes, leave the hair dishevelled cover the upper lip and cry 'unclean, unclean' and live outside the camp. In a similar manner the *Manusmriti* prescribes that the *candalas* (Dalits) must reside out of the village and wear clothing of the deceased. Faxian a Chinese traveller also mentions that a *candala* must sound an alarm by striking a piece of wood as a warning when entering a city.⁴ The primary focus of our interpretation of this story would be to glean principles which will enable a practical engagement with these two issues pointed above.

³ Forrester, *Truthful Action*, p. 29.

⁴ Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', p. 14.

We will initially analyse the correspondence of the four ethical values to the two oppositional motifs: boundary-reinforcement and boundary-transcendence. Later we will delineate the practical pertinence of the principles of faith, compassion and conflict/confrontation in a context governed by regulations imposed by the notions of purity and pollution. The pertinence of the image of Jesus which emerges from the story for a Dalit christology will also be briefly assessed.

A - Analysing the Story from the Perspective of Boundary-Transcendence

1 - *The Stigma Associated with Leprosy: Uncleaness as a Boundary-Reinforcement Motif*

This story as we understand is a story of healing of a 'leper'. The so-called 'leper' is the embodiment of uncleanness and contagion and was thus likely to have been stigmatized. 'The "sickness" described in the Old Testament as leprosy is simply not leprosy at all from a biomedical perspective. But from the socio - cultural perspective - which is what the Bible always reports - this condition called leprosy threatens communal integrity and holiness and must be removed from the community'.⁵ Crossan helps us to understand how leprosy posed a threat to a socio-cultural world governed by strict symbolic boundary maintenance:

... leprosy raises an even more dangerous boundary problem. The standard bodily orifices can be clearly delineated and their incomings and outgoings categorized as clean or unclean. And that establishes, as it was meant to do, an intense concentration on boundary establishment. When, however would-be orifices start to appear where no orifices are meant to be, then, unable to tell orifices from surface or with all boundaries rendered porous, the entire

⁵ Pilch, 'Healing in Mark', p. 142.

system breaks down. That is why biblical leprosy applies not only to *skin*, as in Leviticus 13:1-15 and 14:1-32, but to *clothes*, as in 13:40-59, and to house *walls*, as in 13:33-53, and it renders each surface ritually unclean - that is, socially inappropriate. The leprous person is not a social threat because of medical contagion, threatening infection or epidemic, as we might imagine, but because of symbolic contamination, threatening in microcosm the very identity, integrity, and security of society at large.⁶

On the basis of these insights we can identify an implicit boundary-stressing motif in the very identity of the man. The man is iconic of the 'semiotics of contagion' and is a perceived threat to the symbolic order. As such he is the very embodiment of the boundary-stressing motif.

There is evidence in 2 Kings 5:7 to suggest that disease was often associated with divine punishment for human sin.⁷ Given that there is a connotation of sin attached to disease in the Jewish world of Jesus or within the wider Greco-roman world, connections can also be made to the theory of *Karma* which sustains the caste-discrimination in the Indian context. Lott, commenting on the healing of leper makes interesting connections with the doctrine of *Karma* which considers disease as a curse from God in the sense of a retribution for some past heinous deed.⁸ From this perspective Lott interprets, in an insightful manner, the leper's important question about the willingness of Jesus to heal him:

No wonder this leper was shouting for help from a point at some distance from Jesus. It was the law of God that compelled him to keep his distance from every one else. Alienated from his community he was expected to live along with the other untouchables / diseased as he was. No wonder, too, this leper had such doubt about Jesus' *willingness* to heal him. Was he not cursed

⁶ Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 79.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), p. 103.

⁸ Lott, *Healing Wings*, p. 41.

by God? What confidence could he have that Jesus would want anything to do with him? The great wonder is this leper had come to believe that somehow the wandering healer, the holy man who taught about God's new reign breaking into our lives *could* cure him if only he *would*. He did not doubt the power of Jesus but he only doubted his *will* to do so. Would Jesus *want* to?⁹

I understand that such a reading of the text would provoke much debate. However it widens the perspective for us to understand the *faith* of the leper. The insights from this reading help us to understand the boundary reinforced within the psyche of the leper. Taken either as a frustrated challenge or a meek hesitant plea the struggle within the leper's psyche is plausible considering the stringency of the rules of purity and pollution which governed social life. This perspective also aids us to perceive the implicit manner in which boundary reinforcement occurs in the story. The boundary-reinforcement motif is present both socially and psychologically in the story.

2 - The Boundary - Transcending Elements in the Story

The following boundary-transcending elements can be found in the story:

- a) Jesus' Touch and Pronouncement of Cleansing (volitional level).
- b) The Command of Confrontational Witness (cognitive / volitional).
- c) Jesus' Anger (affective level).
- d) The Faith of the Leper: Initiative (affective and volitional).

a) Jesus' Touch and Pronouncement of Cleansing

Delving into deeper examination of Jesus' healing activity we need to understand that the purity regulations regarding leprosy maintain that:

⁹ Lott, *Healing Wings*, pp. 41,42. Emphasis mine

- a) The disease is communicable, and
- b) A priest must be the one who presides over the ritual cleansing.¹⁰

Jesus is portrayed as challenging both these regulations. 'First, Jesus touches the leper in the process of healing. Touch here becomes more than 'physical', because it is firmly co-opted into the symbolics of contagion. According to the symbolic order Jesus should have become unclean through contagion, but rather in what seems to be a 'subversion of this symbolic order' the leper is the one who becomes clean according to Mark'.¹¹ Healing through touch is one of the regular features of Jesus' healing actions. It becomes an act of nonchalant defiance of the existing purity codes and should seldom be interpreted without reference to the purity codes. Second, Jesus does not merely 'cleanse' the leper but he 'declares him clean'. This becomes clear by the repeated use of the verb *Katharizein*. From our analysis of the Levitical regulations on leprosy, it is clear that this action of cleansing is solely a priestly prerogative. Here Jesus can be described as acting in daring defiance to the Torah.¹²

b) The Command of Confrontational Witness

The aftermath of this healing involves the instruction of Jesus to the leper. In Mark 1: 44 Jesus says to the healed man, 'See that you say nothing to anyone...but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your cleansing which Moses commanded, as evidence to them'.

We should take note of the change in the object from 'priest' to 'them'. Jesus' instructions to the healed man seem to be a deliberate attempt by Jesus to confront the

¹⁰ Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 152 ff.

¹¹ Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 106.

¹² C. H. Cave, 'The Leper: Mark 1:40-45', in *NTS*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1979, (pp. 245-249), pp. 246 ff.

ideological hegemony. The change in object from 'priest' to 'them' does suggest a protest against not merely an individual but a whole ideological regulative system; a protest against 'the entire purity apparatus' controlled by the priests.¹³ Meyers prefers the translation of the Greek phrase *eis marturion autois* as 'witnessing against them' and points out that it is a technical phrase frequently employed for bearing testimony before hostile audiences as found in Mark 6:11 and 13:9.¹⁴ Crossan also argues that a more appropriate way of understanding the phrase 'as a testimony to them' is to translate this phrase as a 'witness against them'. This will help make clear that the transmissional injunction to go to the priest was intended not to portray Jesus' legal observance but to identify the leper as 'confrontational witness'.¹⁵ The leper stands as a confrontational witness in defiance to the priestly prerogative of cleansing leprosy. He is the 'embodiment' of the subversion of symbolic order that Jesus' act of healing had triggered.

c) Jesus' Anger

Three Greek words (*orgistheis*, *embrimesamenos* and *exebalen*) which are suggestive of agitation can be found in the story, in relation to Jesus' response of healing to the leper, much to the perplexity of the reader. The first of these *orgistheis* means that Jesus was moved with *anger*. A majority of the translations tend to replace this with another word *splagxvisticheis* which connotes *pity* or *compassion*.¹⁶ However *orgistheis* seems more probable because it is in conformity with the picture of Jesus especially the images which appear in Mark 3: 5 and 10: 14.¹⁷ It also makes the use of *embrimesamenos* and *exebalen* in the text intelligible. The word *embrimesamenos* used after the declaration of wholeness can be translated as 'snorting with

¹³ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 153.

¹⁴ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 153.

¹⁵ Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (London: A & C Black, 1991), pp. 79 ff.

¹⁷ Sam P. Mathew, 'Jesus and Purity System in Mark's Gospel', in *IJT*, Vol. 42, No. 2, September, 2000, (pp. 101-110), p. 103.

indignation' and the last word of the trio *exebalen* could be translated as 'dispatches'.¹⁸ Some use the word 'drive'.¹⁹ Those arguing for the probability of *orgistheis* point out that it even helps make sense of the negative reading of *eis martution autois* (a witness against them).²⁰ One postulation to understand the agitated escalation of Jesus' emotions is to understand this anger as being directed not against the leper but against the system which victimized him. Some have understood Jesus' anger to be provoked by the 'inhuman state to which the leper had been reduced'.²¹ An image of an 'enraged Jesus' emerges from the story.

d) The 'Faith' of the Leper: Faith as Initiative (affective and volitional)

The faith of the leper, though implicit, is to be assumed taking into consideration the stringency relating to the law regarding lepers. In approaching Jesus the leper transgresses the purity regulations. This is where the leper's action can be understood as faith. The leper takes the initiative for the healing and, even if the anger of Jesus is considered to be directed towards the leper's impunity in approaching him (as variant readings see), it needs to be acknowledged as faith manifest as overcoming obstacles, the obstacles here being the purity regulations. From this dimension the leper's actions can be considered as a serious breach of behavior in a culture which was conditioned by these purity regulations, the conclusive stringency of which Oppenheimer highlights in the following manner:

The great strictness characterizing matters of ritual purity and impurity, the difficulty of complying with it, the danger of transferring ritual impurity from

¹⁸ Meyers, *Binding*, pp. 153 ff.

¹⁹ Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark*, pp. 80, 81.

²⁰ Mathew, 'Jesus', p. 104.

²¹ Lott, *Healing Wings*, p. 43.

one person to another, all this led to a situation whereby ritual impurity became the guiding principle in the division of Jewish society into classes.²²

Understood in the light of this comment the leper's challenge to Jesus that he could heal him only if he wanted to is indicative of the apparent desperation which drove the man to violate the social codes and approach Jesus. The leper's initiative is a model in which we can see 'pathos' leading to 'praxis'. Hence, it assumes pertinence for Dalit theology.

B - Jesus' Praxis as the Praxis of Boundary Crossing

In order to understand Jesus' actions as redemptive praxis we need to understand the difference between healing and cure and disease and illness. Arthur Kleinman makes the distinction between disease and illness clear:

Disease refers to a malfunctioning of biological and/or psychological processes, while the term *illness* refers to the psychological experience and meaning of perceived disease. Illness includes secondary personal and social responses to the primary malfunctioning (disease) in the individual's physiological or psychological status (or both)... from this perspective, illness is the shaping of disease into behavior and experience. It is created by personal, social, and cultural reactions to disease.²³

Having understood the dichotomy between two aspects of sickness: disease and illness, we need to understand the differences between *healing* and *cure*. 'Cure

²² A'haron Oppenheimer, *The 'Am Ha-aretz: A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p. 18. Cited in Meyers, *Binding*, p. 75.

²³ Arthur Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland Between Anthropologies, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, in the series Comparative Studies of Health System and Medical Care, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 72.

involves a form of aetiological therapy that takes ‘effective control of a disordered biological and/or psychosocial process usually identified as a *disease*. *Healing* involves a symptomatic therapy where a new meaning is created for the sufferer. *Healing* is ‘a process by which (a) disease and certain other worrisome circumstances are made into illness (a cultural construction and therefore meaningful), and (b) the sufferer gains a degree of satisfaction through the reduction, or even the elimination of the psychological, sensory, and experiential oppressiveness engendered by his (sic) medical circumstances’.²⁴

In the present story, illness characterises the stigma, isolation, marginalization and sense of inferior worth felt by the leper. In the case of the leper, we can say that though Jesus may not have necessarily *cured* the disease through a medical intervention in the physical world, he nevertheless *healed* it through a symbolic intervention in the social world. All this may look like a threat to the ‘miraculous’ content of the healing. Crossan helps us to understand how we can make sense of the healing stories without necessarily emphasising on the ‘miraculous’:

Miracles are not changes in the physical world so much as changes in the social world, and it is society that dictates in any case, how we see, use, and explain that physical world. It would, of course, be nice to have certain miracles available to change the physical world if we could, but it would be much more desirable to make certain changes in the social one, which we can. We ourselves can already make the physical world totally uninhabitable; the question is whether we can make the social world humanly habitable.²⁵

Jesus’ praxis takes the form of ideological confrontation, which threatens the very foundation on which the existing social order is based. This was a symbolic order whereby the physically ‘un-whole’ were relegated to second-class citizenship. Jesus contemptuously engages in a process of ‘de-pacification’ discontented to maintain the

²⁴ Kleinman, *Patients and Healers*, p. 265.

²⁵ Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 82.

'peace' of existing reality.²⁶ His alternative consciousness is at radical variance with the dominant consciousness of his culture and thus threatens to destabilise the present 'order'.²⁷

The healing was affected by Jesus' refusal to accept the ritual uncleanness and social ostracism associated with the disease. Analysing this healing against the background of the politic body, the praxis of Jesus can be interpreted as quite deliberately impugning the rights and prerogatives of society's boundary keepers and controllers. We see Jesus functioning as an 'alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of his society'.²⁸ The whole episode can now be understood as the articulation of Jesus' resistance to the notions of purity which governed and shaped the symbolic order.

C - Impulses for a Liberative Dalit Christology

The image of Jesus which emerges from the story can contribute to a Dalit christology. The image of Jesus which emerges in the story is an image of Jesus who is enraged at the oppressive forces which marginalise the man and is at variance from the popular understanding of Christ as someone 'sweet, soft and humble'.²⁹ Understanding Christ as someone who can never get angry even in contexts of injustice and oppression makes us 'lose our sensitivity to the problems that confront us'. While the portrait of an angry and agitated Jesus challenges the powerful and ruling class, 'the picture of a compassionate Jesus is always harmless and safe'.³⁰ The image of Jesus which emerges from the story is at variance with the pictures of Jesus that have been preferred in Dalit theology and has potential to influence praxis.

²⁶ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 204 ff.

²⁷ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), p. 183.

²⁸ Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 82.

²⁹ Mathew, 'Jesus', p. 106.

³⁰ Mathew, 'Jesus', p. 106.

It is an image which has emphasis on solidarity as well as on partnership between Jesus and the leper which engages in resistance and protest to the extent of subverting the social codes and creating an alternative social order. Jesus' subversive praxis in the story, made manifest specifically through his *touching* of the leper and his '*usurpation*' of the priestly prerogative to declare the leper clean, brings to the fore his 'political activity', which 'seeks attention with the help of legitimating and delegitimizing political symbolic actions'.³¹

One of the social labels under which Jesus is identified is that of a 'deviant'. Jesus' conscious action of touching the leper can be identified as the praxis of 'achieved deviance' which Jesus achieved through public, overt action which was 'ban-able' in his society.³² The model of Jesus as deviant is in stark contrast with the meek and passive christological images. This christological image is paradigmatic for Christian Dalits 'who are seeking a way to move from a situation in which Jesus has been crafted to serve the interest of pacification to a position in which Jesus is transformed into a gestalt that drums up support against the oppressive dictates of religion and for the resistive dimension of the christic presence'.³³ In a situation where Dalit Christians do not have 'the advantage of a radical ideology or a mature political leadership to guide them' and where the church leadership has rarely taken a firm political position publicly,³⁴ this christological image offers a corrective paradigm.

³¹ Gerd Theissen, 'The Political Dimension of Jesus' Activities', in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen, (eds.), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), (pp. 225-250), p. 244.

³² Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew*, (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1988), p. 62.

³³ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 204.

³⁴ Matthias, 'Identity Dilemmas Confronting the Dalit Christians', p. 136.

D - The Praxis of Empowerment

If we understand Jesus' instructions to the leper as an instruction for confrontational witness, from a Dalit perspective, we can re-read it as a partnership of empowerment to challenge the 'religious establishment'. Jesus by declaring the leper clean and asking him to communicate the liberative act to the priests enables the leper to confront the priests with an alternative ideology, in which the authority of the religious laws which sanction the 'untouchability' of lepers is denounced not by Jesus but the leper himself, who was once a victim of these laws. As Jesus 'snorts with indignation' and dispatches the man to confront the 'system', the implied mood is one of protest and not of co-operation'. The man's task involves helping to confront the system which marginalises him.³⁵

In the process the powerless leper becomes an agent of praxis, by being empowered to challenge the 'boundary-keepers'. I do not consider it crucial to 'know' whether the leper followed Jesus' instructions, because the text makes it clear that the man went unrestrainedly public about the cleansing. This leaves open the possibility of a sense of empowerment which accompanied the restorative act. The praxiological implications that can be derived here are to recognise the importance of equipping the Dalits to confront the structures which sanction their oppression within the churches and the society. Equipping the Dalits with confidence is one of the main lines of action pursued by the Dalit liberation movements.³⁶

There has been an increased pedagogical emphasis in these initiatives for empowerment which are sometimes closely related to denouncing the authority of religious codes which sustain the oppression in the minds of the oppressed. For example, pamphlets authored by Dalit thinkers which attempt to criticize and reformulate the Hindu legal texts like the *Dharmashastras* (especially the *Laws of*

³⁵ Ched Meyers, et.al, '*Say to this Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*', (edited by Karen Lattea), (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 18.

³⁶ Jean-Luc Racine and Josiane Racine, 'Dalit Identities and The Dialectics of Oppression and Emancipation in a Changing India: The Tamil Case and Beyond', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, 1998, (pp. 5-19), p. 11.

Manu) are emerging as an important ideological weapon to support transformative action among the *Chamars* in Lucknow, North India.³⁷ The titles of the pamphlets reveal the emphasis on attacking the religious legitimization of oppression. Some of the titles are *Manusmriti: Ek Pratikriya*, (*Manusmriti: A Reaction*) by Premkumar Mani, *Shoshiton Par Dharmin Dakaiti*, (*Religious Dacoity on the Exploited*) by Lalsingh Yadav, *Hindu Sanskriti Main Varna Vyavastha Aur Jati Bhed* (*The Varna system and Caste Discrimination in Hindi Culture*) by Sundarlal Sagar. What these attempts to empower the Dalits are seeking to do is to create awareness among the Dalits about the dominant religious ideologies which seek to sustain them in their sub-human state. I understand that for the Church to undertake such a line would be sensitive and could result in religious polemic. However the central issue is to enable a critical consciousness about the hegemonic ideology behind religious regulations which perpetuate differences in human status.

By taking the priestly prerogative of declaring the cleansing of the leper, Jesus critically reformulates the religious codes which oppress people. We see this as a deliberate attempt which involved rebuilding a society on the foundations of economic and religious egalitarianism. This needs to be reckoned as a challenge against not only the strictest purity regulations of Judaism, or the Mediterranean's patriarchal combination of patronage and clientele, honour and shame, rather it needs to be perceived as a deliberate attack at civilization's unceasing inclination to draw divisions, invoke boundaries, perpetuate hierarchies and maintain discriminations.³⁸ It is this example of Jesus which becomes paradigmatic for practical involvement in countering discrimination. It is a challenge to which Jesus invites the leper. Dalits who have experienced liberation are invited to take the task of challenging the structures which uphold casteism.

³⁷ Michael B. Schwartz, 'Indian Untouchable Texts of Resistance: Symbolic Domination and Historical Knowledge', in H. L. Seneviratne (ed.), *Identity, Consciousness and the Past: Forging of Caste and Community in India and Sri Lanka*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), (pp.177- 191), pp. 178,179.

³⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), p. xii.

In the Indian context where casteism as a social system divides humans into the 'pure' and the 'polluting', and further denies the Dalits equality and justice in terms of their socio-economic standing and human dignity, Jesus' attempts to enable an egalitarian social coexistence through active resistance to the social semiotics of purity and pollution should become paradigmatic. The model of Christic praxis which emerges from the story gives impetus for pragmatically dealing with a system which fosters and nurtures relative deprivation of the worst genre. Therefore in conclusion we can say that this story helps us to construe praxiological principles, applicable to the Dalit context of discrimination based on purity and pollution, which can be derived based on the following models through which various boundaries are transcended in the story:

- a) The model of the leper who transcends the boundary of inferior self worth which the dominant religious system has reinforced within him. From the perspective of the oppressed Dalits the initiative and participation of the leper for self liberation assumes paramount importance. The principle of 'faith as initiative', which the leper embodies, opens new frontiers for Dalit praxis which are affirmative of the agency of the oppressed in self-liberation.
- b) The subversive model of Jesus, who through his compassion / anger, and touch refutes the boundary which demarcates the unclean from the clean. Through 'touch' the boundaries are themselves challenged and redrawn.
- c) The models of compassion and resistance embodied by Jesus are applicable as emulative praxis to not only the victims but the victimizers as well. Through an embodiment of the ethical principles which can be discerned from Jesus' own response to discrimination : namely compassion (working in solidarity with the victims and their attempts for self-emancipation), and critical-subversive confrontation (confronting the ideological structures which reinforce discrimination and subverting them to extend human worth) - Christian praxis can become a critical, corrective and constructive enterprise.

Chapter - VIII

The Gerasene Demoniac: Mark 5: 1 – 20

A Praxis - Oriented Dalit Reading of a Story of 'Resistance'

Introduction

In this chapter I will analyse an exorcism narrative with a focus on the issue of resistance. In this story Jesus exorcises a man who is possessed by a demon identified as Legion. Though the selected exorcism account appears in slightly different forms in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 8: 28-33, Mark 5: 1-20 & Luke 8: 26-39), I will focus pre-dominantly on the Markan version of the exorcism in this chapter. Similarities exist between the Markan and the Lucan texts, except that Mark additionally identifies the area as the Decapolis (Ten cities). Matthew differs from both Mark and Luke. There is no mention of 'Legion' in the comparatively shorter and less vivid Matthean version of the exorcism, where two demoniacs are mentioned and the country of the Gadarenes is identified as the locale for the exorcism.

The story helps us to focus on the issue of the *form* of Dalit praxis and pay specific attention to the 'tension' between symbolic and actual protest in Dalit praxis. The text opens the space to highlight and engage with the following issues which are of relevance to Dalit theology and praxis:

- 1) The role of symbolic resistance in Dalit struggles and the issue of *translation of 'symbolic resistance' to pragmatic political action.*
- 2) The issue of 'collaboration' and 'collusion' with the oppressors, which is a big impediment for Dalit emancipation.
- 3) Opposition to the assertive and resistive strategies of the Dalits.

A - Understanding the Text within the Context of Roman Occupation

The story is an idiomatic integration of the cosmic and the socio-political dimensions of the conflict between the forces of good and evil. We have to pay attention to the socio-political implications of this exorcism in its first-century Palestine context. One cannot underestimate the influence of Roman occupation on Palestine, especially the Decapolis area (ten cities), which functions as the context of the story.¹ Both Mark and Luke's choice of Gerasenes as the site of the symbolic confrontation and subjugation of the 'Legion' accentuates the political connotations of the story. Josephus reports of Vespasian despatching Lucius Annius with a cavalry and a division of foot soldiers to Gerasa who captured the town, massacred a thousand young men, ransacked the region, captured families and ultimately torched the houses.² Placing this story in the region of Decapolis could thus have made significant sense to the Markan audience.

Encoded cryptically in the story is also the implication of the freedom from Roman rule.³ There are many military overtones in the story suggestive of connotation with the occupying Roman military.⁴ The term Legion signifies a specific meaning in the context.⁵ The reference to Legion, which fits with the 'metaphor of occupied territory overrun by a power which brutally plunders and oppresses the original inhabitants ... refers us to enemy occupation and associates Roman law and order with the power of Satan'.⁶

On the basis of the textual evidence I agree with Hollenbach in categorising the demoniac under the '*Iumpenproletariat*' - commoners who resented their situation

¹ For more see W. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 45.

² Josephus, *War*, IV, ix,1. Cited in Meyers, *Binding*, p. 191.

³ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 256.

⁴ Richard Dormandy, 'The Expulsion of Legion: A Political Reading of Mark 5:1-20', in *ExpTim*, Vol. III, No. 10, 2000, (pp. 335-337), p. 335.

⁵ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 191.

⁶ Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p. 249.

of hopelessness and marginalization.⁷ The connection between demoniac possession and colonial oppression has been pointed out.⁸ Hollenbach points out how in the situation of Roman Palestine mental illnesses could be seen 'as a socially acceptable form of oblique protest against, or escape from oppressions'. As such mental disorders were both therapeutic and symptomatic of social conflict.⁹ Hollenbach suggests the possibility that Palestinian possessions may have performed a similar function and occurred within a similar social and political pattern ... as a 'fix' for people who saw no other way to cope with the horrendous social and political conditions in which they found their lot cast'.¹⁰

From a socio-literary perspective we can see the demoniac as the textual representative of the 'collective anxiety over Roman imperialism'.¹¹ Though at that time popular resistance in the form of social banditry assumed the expression of the common people's sense of justice,¹² the mode of resistance of this man seems to be one of retreat into an inner symbolic world. The reasons for this could probably be frustration over the increasing failure of resistance, self-defeatism and fatalistic acceptance of the power of the occupiers and the fear of recrimination. A series of failed rebellions reinforced the sense of powerlessness of the people.¹³ It is probably this sense of powerlessness, which is symbolically represented by the futile attempts to bind the demon, which is addressed by Mark. Thus, we can say that the man represents the cathartic response of the subjugated, which, in order to avoid recrimination, could only be articulated in a symbolic world.

The projection of the man in this story also seems to be symbolically encoded. Though Jewish, he lived among tombs which were places of uncleanness.¹⁴ The encoded symbolism may be suggestive of the way Jewish land had been

⁷ P. W. Hollenbach, 'Jesus, Demoniacs and Public Authorities: A Socio-historical Study', in *JAAR*, Vol. 49, 1982, (pp. 567-588), p. 573.

⁸ Crossan, *Jesus*, pp. 88-91.

⁹ Hollenbach, 'Jesus, Demoniacs', p. 576.

¹⁰ Hollenbach, 'Jesus, Demoniacs', p. 576.

¹¹ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 193.

¹² Richard A. Horsely, 'Ancient Jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66-70', in *CBQ*, Vol. 43, 1981, (pp. 409-432), pp. 416 ff.

¹³ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', pp. 335,336.

¹⁴ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', pp. 335,336.

considered to be defiled by the gentile presence of the occupiers. Also there could be a link to Herod Antipas' coercion of the Jews to inhabit Tiberias, which was considered unclean as it had been built on the site of a graveyard.¹⁵

Drawing attention to the socio-literary functions of the miracle stories, Meyers calls the exorcism 'public symbolic action'.¹⁶ The destruction of the swine can be understood as the symbolic destruction of the hegemonic Roman rule. Crossan understands the drowning of the pigs as a 'brief performancial summary' of the dream of every Jewish resister.¹⁷ In a context of foreign occupation and severe oppression Mark portrays a christological image of Jesus as the source of liberation and hope, who symbolically ushers in an alternative social structure.

We have to be cautious about claiming that the exorcism should be understood exclusively as political repudiation. The christological framework in which these exorcisms are worked out cannot be neglected. Jesus' divinity was understood and interpreted in terms of a cosmic conflict. That the 'human' face of the cosmic conflict could have been understood as contemporary historical conditions, though speculative, seems probable. The point of departure for our interpretation would be to accept that the central motif of the story is the destruction of the 'oppressive powers'. The real encounter of Jesus in exorcisms is with oppressive structures which have transcended human understanding and coping ability.¹⁸

Through a trifocal analysis dealing with the central motifs of possession / oppression, exorcism / liberation, post-event confrontation / reaction, one can unearth various details in the rest of the story, which will further aid our interpretive task:

- a) *Possession / Oppression* (v.1-5): There are various interesting details related to the oppression. They denote on the one hand the power of the unclean spirit and on the other hand the utter depravity of the possessed

¹⁵ George A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, (25th edn.) (London, 1931) pp. 289 ff. Cited in Meyers, *Binding*, p. 191.

¹⁶ Meyers, *Binding*, pp. 142,143 & 193.

¹⁷ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 314.

¹⁸ A. Gabriel, 'The Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20): A Socio-political Reading', in *Bible Bhashyam*, December, 1996, (pp. 167-174), p. 171.

man. Initially the spirit is perceived as being 'uncontrollable' any more. In verses 3 and 4 it becomes clear that the frequent attempts to bind the spirit in chains and shackles had resulted in failures. The chains had been wrenched apart and the shackles were broken into pieces. The seeming conclusion seems to be that 'no one had the strength to subdue him'. The unclean spirit was not only powerful but also numerous as the name 'Legion' denotes. The other effects of the possession were that the man lived among the tombs and mountains. He was always crying out and constantly bruising himself with stones. He was alienated from normal life and resorted to self-destruction.

- b) *Exorcism / Liberation* (v.6-13): The act of liberation is also symbolically scripted. The demoniac who has been so hard to control adopts a subdued posture at the entry of Jesus. He runs to Jesus and worships him (v. 6). The overall framework of the act of liberation is christological. Jesus is the one in command. The spirit *begs* Jesus earnestly not to send 'them' away out of the country (v.10). Later the spirits beg Jesus to send them into the swine (v.12). The switch from singular to plural when referring to the demon which has taken control of the man is indicative of the chaotic world we are dealing with, in which the man is simultaneously a free agent and occupied territory and in which 'the occupying force is at the same time single and multifarious'.¹⁹ Ultimately Jesus' command is obeyed. Even the destruction of the Legion is at the 'command' of Jesus who literally dismisses them to be drowned in the sea (v.13).²⁰ The liberation ends in total transformation of the demoniac. He is no longer agitated as in his former self and he is clothed and in his right mind. This is a way of confirmation of the total liberation of the demoniac.
- c) *Post-event Reaction* (v.14-20): The exorcism creates a stir in the area. A variety of reactions ensue. The herdsmen flee the area and spread the news to the country and to the city. People come to the locale of the

¹⁹ Watson, *Text, Church and World*, p. 249.

²⁰ J. Duncan H. Derrett, 'Contribution to the Study of the Gerasene Demoniac', in *JSNT*, Vol. 3, 1979, (pp. 2-17), pp. 5 ff. Also cited in Meyers, *Binding The Strong Man*, p. 191.

incident to see what had happened (v.14). The man is in a transformed state. The reaction of the people who see the man in his transformed state is one of fear (v.15). After the news is spread about what happened, the people of the neighbourhood begin to beg Jesus to depart from their neighbourhood (v.17). As Jesus began to leave the neighbourhood the man begs to accompany him (v.18). Jesus however asks him to go home and tell his friends about the manifestation of God's mercy in his life (v.19). The man obeys Jesus and the people are amazed (v.20).

B - Preliminary Observations in the Light of Ethical Features

We can find defiance of uncleanness, compassion and confrontation featuring in the story. However the central feature of the story seems to be confrontation. There is a component of compassion in the confrontation because the end is liberation.

Jesus crosses the boundary by moving to the other side. The setting talks of a gentile socio-symbolic space and the living area of the demoniac is among the tombs. The symbolism of impurity cannot be neglected in the story. The man with the unclean spirit can be considered as being culturally unclean because of the nature of his dwelling place.²¹ The presence of the swine also brings connotation of uncleanness. The role of pigs in the story, as the symbolic site where the imperial Roman forces are consigned to, also connects notions of impurity to the colonisers.

However the focus of the story is not primarily on uncleanness. One cannot simply premise this story under the overall frame work of purity and pollution. Notions of purity and pollution can be ascertained both to the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor'. It may be of exegetical interest to note the connection between tombs and swine in Isaiah 65: 4 f. Here the link is to the *gentile nature* of 'sitting

²¹ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 142.

inside tombs and eating swine's flesh'. However what is of more interest is the connotation of pure and impure which seems to inform the symbolic content of the destruction of the legion. The point which may be relevant for me here is that notions of 'pure and polluted' function as the epistemic sphere through which the perceptions about the oppressor are constructed in the story.

In contrast to his first exorcism which took place in Capernaum, which was the focal point of Jesus' Galilean ministry, this exorcism takes place in Gentile territory. This is the first instance where Jesus enters a gentile environment.²² The place is identified as the region of the Gerasenes. There is confusion over the exact identity of the place (precipitated by Mathew's naming of the place as Gadarenes). However, this journey is a 'symbolic transit to a symbolic locale'. Jesus' sphere of activity extends to the gentile socio-symbolic space. There is further corroboration of the gentile nature of the miracle, when at the end of the miracle the geographical area is identified as Decapolis.²³

The aspect of boundary crossing is implicit in the journey of Jesus to 'the other side of the sea'. But the point is to understand such boat journeys as 'structural devices for the organisation of the narrative *and* important symbolic actions in and of themselves.²⁴ Jean Starobinski has initiated an ontological-theological way of understanding Jesus' crossing of the sea:

If the geographical-religious opposition (Jewish territory- pagan territory) presents the substitution of an ecclesiological allegorizing, the image itself of the crossing to a nocturnal, savage land inhabited by demons can also be read in an ontological-theological sense... The *crossing* of the 'flaunter' is the central event capable of functioning as the decisive *sign* both in ecclesiological allegorising and in the ontological reading. Christ *goes to the other*, to the adversary, the unbeliever, and the suffering man.²⁵

²² Gabriel, 'The Gerasene Demoniac', p. 168.

²³ Werner Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and A New Time*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 51.

²⁴ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 194.

²⁵ Cited in Christopher Burdon, ' 'To the Other Side': Construction of Evil and Fear of Liberation in Mark 5: 1-20', in *JSNT*, Vol. 27, No. 2, December, 2004. (pp. 149-167).

It is this aspect of engaging with the other which is one of the features of Jesus' compassion. Jesus' healing and liberative activity cannot be confined to specific groups. It is inclusive and transcends the barriers of region and race. At the end Jesus interprets the miracle as an act of divine mercy. Jesus asks the man to go home to his friends and tell them 'how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you'. By interpreting the exorcism in terms of God's mercy, compassion is placed at the core of the liberation process.

However the feature that is predominant in the story is the feature of 'confrontation'. The confrontation between two powerful forces constitutes the meta-narrative in Mark. Within this meta narrative one can see various confrontations. The primary confrontation is between the demon and Jesus. But the 'confrontation' of Jesus by the Gerasenes is also significant for us. We will be focussing on both aspects of the confrontation and draw out their implications for Dalit praxis.

C - Understanding Possession as Socially Acceptable Articulation of Resistance

Many scholars have identified possession along the lines of a coping mechanism. Sugirtharajah understands 'possession' as one of the defences of ordinary people to face and withstand the stranglehold of colonial oppression.²⁶ Strecker proposes understanding possession as 'performance' where the possessed person activates dramatically in public the role society regards as being indicative of possession.²⁷ As such it is a process based on and within an established cultural pattern.²⁸

²⁶ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 94.

²⁷ Christian Strecker, 'Jesus and the Demoniacs', in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen, (eds.), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), (pp. 117-133), p. 122.

²⁸ Strecker, 'Jesus and the Demoniacs', p. 123.

Understanding possession as a socially accepted coping mechanism of an oppressed people can serve as a convergent trajectory which aids the hermeneutical appropriation of the text for the Indian context. An ethno-cultural understanding of 'possession' in the Dalit context helps us to recognise the various points of convergence.

1 - Possession in the Dalit Context

Robert Deliege, on the basis of his ethnographic research among Catholic *paraiyar* communities in Tamil Nadu, points out that among the *paraiyars* 'spirit possession is what may happen to people to disrupt the normal order of the world'. In this connection, Deliege raises the following questions:

...could we say that spirit possession is a symptom of the expression of the rejection of caste oppression by the Dalit Paraiyars? Would it mean that Dalits, who wish to break away from the existing social structure, are prone to demonic possession? And if so, is demonic possession a means of hitting out at an oppressive society?²⁹

These questions indicate the possible ways in which we could make sense of demonic possession in the Dalit context. They help us to be open to the link between oppression and the deployment of the 'possession idiom' as a resistive tool. Some ethnographic studies have shown 'possession' to function as a symbolic act of dissent and rejection of hegemony. Clarke points out that possession among the Dalit communities is understood as visitation of the deity in which a particular human being 'operates as the agent of the deity' because the person 'participates in the power of the deity and mediates this divine power to

²⁹ Robert Deliege, 'Demonic Possession in Catholic South India', in Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India*, (pp. 252-271), p. 269.

people who come to them'.³⁰ There is recognition of the empowerment which accompanies 'transphysical rituals of possession' by the *sami* (deity) among the Dalits.³¹

We can see the translation of this sense of empowerment into protest, in the form of 'ritualistic dissent' directed explicitly against the 'upper castes', in the religiosity of two south Indian Dalit communities, the *Madigas* and *Paraiyars*. There is one ritual associated with the goddess *Matangi* under whose possession a *Madiga* priestess 'rushes about spitting on those who in ordinary circumstances would almost choose death rather than to suffer such pollution from a *Madiga*'.³² Because of the *ritual nature* of this action the caste people actually wait for a 'full measure of her invective'. However the resistive element of her trance lies in 'wild', 'exulting songs', which speak of the 'humiliation to which she is subjecting the proud caste people'.³³ There is also a 'thoroughly abusive content' to the songs. The medium of this cathartic expression is often anger expressed through derogatory language. The autonomous subjectivity which characterises 'possession' makes it a social mechanism of emancipatory meaning-making.

We can make the following conclusions on the function of possession in the Indian caste context on the basis of the above discussion:

- 1) Possession is public ritualistic protest in a communitarian context.
- 2) It is understood by Dalits as participation in divine power.
- 3) The 'consequences' of such possession are accepted by 'upper-castes' because of the ritualistic nature of the context.

³⁰ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 76.

³¹ Zoe C. Sherinian, 'Dalit Theology in Tamil Christian Folk Music: A Transformative Liturgy by James Theophilus Appavoo', in Selva J. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey (eds.), *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), (pp. 233-253) p. 236.

³² Wilber Theodore Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India*, (Madras: CLS, 1925), p. 25. Italics mine.

³³ Elmore, *Dravidian Gods*, p. 25.

2 - An Appropriate Reading Strategy

On the basis of the above discussion on ‘possession’ in both the Dalit and the Biblical context, two observations which emerge and which need to be borne in mind as we go on to interpret the exorcism are that:

- 1) Possession is symbolic articulation of resistance and protest by an oppressed people.
- 2) It is expressed in a socially-acceptable idiom.

Understood in this light (possession as resistive activity of the oppressed people) the story now poses some problems for a liberative interpretation because through the exorcism Jesus has removed a tool of resistance from the oppressed people. Pointing to a possible understanding of Jesus’ exorcising action as ‘neutering the only option the oppressed had in declaring their opposition to the colonial occupation’, Sugirtharajah questions whether Jesus has ‘simply treated the symptom without confronting the system which produces such behaviour?’ Has Jesus ‘effectively removed one of the potential tools in the hands of the subjugated people?’³⁴ Such questions bring out the need for a fresh re-reading of the text with a liberating focus.

It is from this problematic hermeneutical point that I seek to reread the text to reflect on Dalit modes of resistance and to deepen Dalit praxis. I will define the mode of hermeneutics that I will apply to re-read this passage as *Dalithos* hermeneutics. *Dalithos* simply means Dalit ethos. My proposal for a *Dalithos* hermeneutic is to follow the ethological models employed by the Dalit communities in their own day to day engagement with and utilisation of religious sources.

One of the main categories of *Dalithos* that I will critically employ in rereading the present text is the category of ‘pragmatism’. *Pragmatism* is an integral feature

³⁴ Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 94.

of *Dalithos*. There is a sense of pragmatism in *Dalithos* which views everything in terms of its interconnectedness and purpose.³⁵ One has to talk of pragmatism in conjunction with earthliness. This earthliness indicates an element of immediacy and directness with which religious experience is bound up with the material and physical realities and struggles of real life.³⁶ Even the Dalit concept of goddess/god has an existential pragmatism, as it functions to create a common cultural ethic which ‘re-energises the masses so that they can engage in productive activity’.³⁷ It is this purpose-filled existentialism or pragmatism which becomes the critical-hermeneutical and praxiological category in my *Dalithos* reading of the present text. When this aspect of pragmatism is brought into the Dalit hermeneutical task, the imperative will be to approximate the text in a purposeful manner for the Dalits struggles. The hermeneutical spiral envisaged in a *Dalithos* reading starts when the cultural-experiential world views of Dalits are cross-fertilized with the liberative resonances in biblical texts and consequently lead to renewed praxiological engagement.

From the perspective of *Dalithos* any interpretation of the text which would aim to mobilise this text as a biblical warrant to ‘demonize’ the conceptual understanding of possession within the Dalit communities would be hegemonic. In the light of an understanding of possession as resistance our reading strategy should not seek to make the text a template to co-opt and domesticate resistive aspects of Dalit culture and religiosity on the basis of their non-conformity to the verities of ‘Christian-ness’. Christian interpretations serving casteist-interests would solely address the issue of the ‘unchristian aspects’ of Dalit religiosity. The hegemonic potential of these interpretations would mean that:

- 1) It would estrange the Dalits from their religiosity in which possession is understood as communication with the Divine.
- 2) It would be hegemonic in the sense that it wrests from Dalits one of their resistive practices.

³⁵ Illaiah, ‘Dalitism and Brahminism’, pp. 11 ff.

³⁶ Wilfred, ‘Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics’, p. 58.

³⁷ Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu*, p. 91.

- 3) It is also hegemonic in the sense that it creates binarism's within the Dalit communities on the basis of the Christian and the un-Christian.

The victim is the collective consciousnesses of the Dalits. Thus, I propose a reading of the story from the perspective of '*Dalithos*' or Dalit ethos in order to bring a fresh disclosure of its meaningfulness for Dalits.

D - A Praxis-oriented Reading of the Story from the Perspective of *Dalithos*

1 - From Tombs to Family and Friends: Praxis as Resistance of Alienating Tendencies and Working in solidarity

Markan temporal and spatial references contribute to the implied readers' appreciation of the narrative because of their allusive or symbolic character. Hence spatial references have the function of acting as signifiers to aid the mapping of the overall plot of the narrative.³⁸ Upon close scrutiny we find the binarism of alienation / community corresponding with the binarism of subjugation / liberation in the story. There is a semantic value attached to alienation and community in the text. While alienation symbolically characterises the oppressed state of the man, his liberation is characterised by his re-association with the community. The man who in his oppressed state inhabits *tombs* - the 'land of the dead' (the site of his introverted-resistive activity simultaneously the site of alienation and his dehumanisation) is restored to community and is asked to go home to family and friends. Thus, the exorcism can be interpreted to mean liberation from alienation.

³⁸ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, 'Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean', in Anderson and Moore (eds.), *Mark and Method*, (pp. 23-49), p. 32.

Understanding possession in general as resistive activity, what makes it demonic both from the perspective of the Dalit struggle as well as from the semantic connotations in the text is the aspect of alienation which estranges the man away from community and into self-destruction. For active resistance to take place there is a need for solidarity. Jesus offers him freedom from this mode of resistance. The discursive arena of resistant practice now transits to community.

Especially in contexts of occupation as well as of caste domination there are tendencies to alienate people from one another. In general, the presence of the Roman occupiers polarised people into those who resisted and those who collaborated with the occupiers.³⁹ That the Roman occupiers in this text have already achieved this goal of estranging the local people from one another is clear from the text. The locals have succumbed to the oppressors' ideology of dividing people. In this situation Jesus' intention of reintegrating the man into community has to be interpreted politically. It is not a removal of his 'socially accepted mode of resistance' but a liberation from the oppressors' deliberate and strategic ploy of alienation and estrangement from his own community (his friends with whom Jesus reunites him). When the man requests to accompany Jesus to be with him Jesus refuses. The challenge is not to encourage a tendency of dependence but to enable the incarnation of the liberative activity in one's own local sphere.

From a Dalit perspective Jesus' actions are a recognition and affirmation of solidarity. Reinstating the man into the community is a subversive act which counters the strategy of alienation. It is a deliberate strategy which liberates the man - the icon of resistance - from alienation and helps him to recognise community as the proper sphere of resistive activity. There is emphasis on the corporate axis of action. Individuated responses towards transformation are an integral component for praxis as the urge for change has to come from within individuals. However for this urge to gather force as a resistive surge it needs to have a corporate dimension whereby the energy of the individuated symbolic revolution will be a collective transformative force. This is one praxiological principle which emerges from the story.

³⁹ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 335.

A praxis-oriented reading of this text for the Dalits could point to working in solidarity with one another and to resist all alienating tendencies. The Dalit sense of solidarity and community is a great source of hope and resistance for the Dalits. Dalit solidarity as a symbiotic relationship between Dalits of different religious orientations emerges from their sense of pragmatism.⁴⁰ Dalit communities share in a togetherness which they construct in solidarity against forces which seek to victimise them. Dalit solidarity has sustained the Dalits, whether Christian or not, over a long time against forces which continuously seek to demean or disrupt their communal life.⁴¹ The foundation of subaltern solidarity is their shared experience of powerlessness. This solidarity 'acts as a cushion in the face of repeated suffering imposed by the dominant'.⁴² The solidarity of the Dalits emerges from a pluralistic orientation which is 'incorporative, participatory, and cooperative: thus communitarian'.⁴³

From a Dalit perspective, the story can also be interpreted as Jesus's challenge to the *lone resister* to enthuse and empower others in the community to join him in the liberation struggle. The Dalit and other anti-caste movements have a history in which 'lone-resisters' like Ambedkar and Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra, Ayothee Das and Periyar in Tamil Nadu have acted as catalysts in mobilising communities to join in the resistance against casteism. The basis of this resistance is their own experience of discrimination. This translation of experience into empowering praxis gives us fresh hermeneutical clues to understand Jesus' action of reintegrating the man into the community. For the Dalits the act of Jesus reinstating the resister into the community, effectively disrupting the status-quo, can be understood as having a counter-ideological thrust which envisages a future where Dalit resistance will be concretised and 'corporatised' in order to become more effective.

⁴⁰ Robert Deliege, *The World of the 'Untouchable': Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 301.

⁴¹ Sathianathan Clarke, 'Hindutva, Religious and Ethnocultural Minorities, and Indian-Christian Theology', in *HTR*, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2002, (pp. 197-226), p. 211.

⁴² A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Living Through Conflicts: The Spirit of Subaltern Resurgence', in *VJTR*, Vol. 65, June, 2001, (pp. 465-476), pp. 471,472.

⁴³ Clarke, 'Hindutva', p. 212.

2 - The Semiotics of Self-stoning and Drowning: Liberation as Freedom from Self-destruction and Praxis as Deconstruction of the Absoluteness of the Oppressor

In the story we find that the actions of the man are self-destructive. One has to understand the dichotomy between the man and the unclean spirit. Verse 8 makes it clear: Jesus issues the command 'Come out of the *man* you *unclean spirit*'. The unclean spirit is not the man. But the unclean spirit has taken residence in the man and has 'besieged' his identity. It is not the man who resists Jesus but the demon which has 'possessed' him. There is a complete lack of respect for the self. The demoniac was always howling and bruising himself with stones (v.5).

The self-destructive tendencies of the man are paradoxically, but, inextricably linked to the 'power' of the demon. There is a tone of seeming helplessness in overcoming the demon. Understanding the text from a socio-literary perspective can help us to see in the portrayal of the seemingly unsubduable demon a mirroring of the political reality which was marked by futile attempts to chain down Israel's oppressors.⁴⁴ The self-destructive tendencies of the possessed man here can be considered to bear a reflection of the sense of futility of first century Jewish history, which was brutally displayed in the mass suicide at Masada.⁴⁵ Due to the 'dispiriting sense of powerlessness', the Maccabbean revolt had degenerated into sordid strife, the Sicarii's assassination campaign was directed against their fellow countrymen.⁴⁶ Thus instead of resisting the conquerors, the resistive tendencies of the Jewish locals were subverted to intra-Jewish enmity. They directed their pent up frustration on each other. Oppression operated psychosocially.

Liberation takes the form of symbolic repudiation of the power and absoluteness of the demon in the narrative. In the narrative there is a gradual shift in the perception of the demon. Crossan calls the exorcism 'individuated symbolic

⁴⁴ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 336.

⁴⁵ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 336.

⁴⁶ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 336.

revolution'.⁴⁷ Jesus effectuates a reconfiguration of the perceptions of the oppressor. On the one hand the demon is 'Legion' (many) and cannot be restrained or overpowered, but on the other hand it is brought to a subdued position in the course of its confrontation with Jesus. The agency of the situation rests with Jesus. In a situation of challenge and riposte, while Jesus *issues orders* (v.8), and *permissions* (v.13) which consequently culminate in the destruction of the Legion, the Legion *bows* before Jesus (v.6), *adjures* Jesus not to torment him (v.7), *begs him earnestly* not to send him out of the country (v.10) but to send him into the swine (v.12), and ultimately *rushes to its self-destruction*. By placing the story within the framework of challenge and riposte the supremacy of Jesus over the legion is reinforced. The demon is not all powerful. For Mark the strong one has been bound by a stronger one.

The story is a case of the self-negating activation of the repressed resistance operative in the man's colonised consciousness. The result of this is dehumanisation - (he lives in the space meant for the non-living) and alienation. One of the important issues it raises for the Dalit context concerns the liberation of 'enslaved personality'. The story highlights the highly disconcerting fact that internalisation of the absoluteness of the oppressor can result in self-destructive psychological states. Thus, the story also enables us to look at the psychological effects of oppression on one's identity. The self-destructive patterns of resistance of the demoniac are challenged through a 'Christological vision' of the power of Christ over forces of oppression. It is this emphasis on Jesus' authority over unclean spirits which comes up in this account, which is a dramatic fulfilment of the cry of the demons in 1: 24 : 'Have you come to destroy us?'⁴⁸ 'Jesus is able to control both the raging of the wind and waves and the raging of a possessed demoniac, since in both cases the forces responsible for the outbursts recognize his superior authority'.⁴⁹

The praxiological message for the Dalits is to be critical about the insidious ways in which myths of the 'absoluteness' of the oppressors are perpetuated in order to

⁴⁷ Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 141.

⁴⁹ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 141.

curb their resistive potential. It is especially important for the Dalits if one looks at it from the perspective of frustration at the incessantly futile attempts at resistance. Casteism has resulted in perpetuating a lack of respect for the self among the Dalits. Their self-destruction lies in the 'sense of inferiority' that has been drilled into them. Casteist oppressors have sought the perpetuation of the negative image of the Dalits actively through the fabrication of myths, legends and rituals to serve their own interests.⁵⁰ It has to be acknowledged that this perpetuation of a negative and stereotypical image over generations has led to a great psychological damage to the Dalits, who 'developed a 'wounded psyche' and a distorted self-image which have destroyed their self respect too'.⁵¹

Jesus uses the medium of emancipatory mythography in facilitating the exorcism. If one army the 'Legion' is responsible for the demoniac's repressed consciousness, the familiar religious imagery of another army (the Egyptian army which is drowned in the sea in the Exodus narrative) is evoked to signify the exorcism. This 'mythical' reference is invoked as a form of 'transformance'. It is 'literally' a symbolic contest between Legion and 'the *Drowned* Egyptian armies in the Exodus narrative'. By evoking the familiar Exodus image where the 'oppressive powers' were defeated, there is a reaffirmation of the man's identity in positive terms.

This aspect of the exorcism is affirmative of one of the important symbolic media of Dalit emancipation. Reconfiguring their identity using the idiom of re-mythologisation is an important praxiological tool of the Dalits. Dalits tell their stories by utilising and subversively revalidating the dominant symbolic configurations and mythographies so as to rearticulate their subjectivity and identity in an affirmative and identity enhancing manner. In a constrained life situation, village mythographies serve as subtle acknowledgements of the subversive potential of Dalits. Analysing the nuances of such religious remythologization in the context of the Dalit communities (*Paraiyars*) Sathianathan Clarke comments as follows:

⁵⁰ Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 'Foreword', to S. Manickam's *Nandanar, The Dalit Martyr: A Historical Reconstruction of his Times*, (Madras: CLS, 1992).

⁵¹ S. Manickam, *Conspiracy of Silence*, (Madurai: Dalit Research Centre, 1995), pp. 11-12.

(R)eligious remythologization is a domain of specific meaning making for the Paraiyar. It is the arena of tactful contestation in which the hegemonic outlook of Hinduism is weakened. This process of construing emancipatory mythographies, as just explicated, involves both an interaction with and appropriation of forms from the dominant group and a subtle rejection of it in order to reclaim for the Paraiyar their own human identity and rationale for existence.⁵²

In a similar way in the story, a past story of victory is 're-membered' and even re-enacted to subvert a situation of fatalism and defeat. Freedom is thus brought from the self-destructive power of fatalism. The message is that Dalit resistive surge cannot thrive on the basis of the conceptions of 'absoluteness of the oppressor' that have been conscripted in their minds. It remains a reality that the internalisation of their economic and political disempowerment curtails any pragmatic chances of undoing the power structure of the hierarchy. Hence, the challenge is to move beyond such internalizations because internalization of *victimhood* in relation to the 'unsurpassable' might of the oppressors would not be resistive. The significance of the story for the Dalits is that the first steps of the emancipatory process are to break meta narratives of the oppressors which result in self-defeatism.

3 - A Critique of Collaboration and Collusion

The initial reaction of the Gerasenes to Jesus' liberative activity is one of 'fear' towards his strange voltaic power. In verse 15 when the people of the neighbourhood come and see the demoniac sitting with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind they are *afraid*. They beg Jesus to leave the neighbourhood. The aspect of Jesus *leaving a place* or being *made to leave* the place where he has done a miraculous fact is often related to resistance against Jesus by those who are

⁵² Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 108, see also, n. 28 on p. 134.

affected by Jesus' acts of subversion and those associated with the structures which Jesus repudiates (Mk. 1: 45, 3: 6 & 7). It may be understood as an indication of the local inhabitants' 'fear of Jesus' 'uncanny power'.⁵³ 'Amazement' is often a reaction which arises among those who sense Jesus undermining the security of their conventional world (2:12).⁵⁴

If we understand the locals' reaction to Jesus in relation to the loss of the pigs, we can understand that he is not reckoned as 'a boon to the local community'.⁵⁵ Economic conjunctions with the healing can't be discounted taken the fact that Gerasa as a port city played an important role in the lucrative trade that the Romans maintained with the southern parts of Arabia and India.⁵⁶ In the territory under occupation it is possible that some 'profit out of oppressive foreign structures'.⁵⁷

The story of the Gerasenes can be interpreted as the story of the collaborators and colluders. The Gerasenes functioned as collaborators with the Roman rulers by resisting any subversion of the status quo. They were collaborators in maintaining the form of 'Roman peace'⁵⁸ which implied unquestioning and subdued acceptance of the rulers. Any open hostility or backlash against the occupiers were reproached vociferously and it may be possible the people did not want a backlash. They had adopted accommodative strategies by way of which they no longer resisted the oppressors. Their actions here can be understood as especially significant exercises in 'cultural hegemony'.⁵⁹ The collaborators or the colluders are caught up in the process of assimilation and transference. Their behaviour oscillates between tendencies of transference and assimilation. The phenomenon of transference had been their social coping mechanism whereby they had not

⁵³ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 144.

⁵⁴ John P. Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 143.

⁵⁵ F. Scott Spencer, *What did Jesus Do? : Gospel Profiles of Jesus Personal Conduct*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 217.

⁵⁶ H. C. Waetjen, *A Recording of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 116.

⁵⁷ Gabriel, 'The Gerasene Demoniac', p. 170.

⁵⁸ Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 334.

⁵⁹ S. M. Parish, *Hierarchy and its Discontents: Culture and the Politics of Consciousness in Caste Society*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. XXII.

resorted to open confrontation but had defected to a life style conforming to the colonial situation. Through assimilation they now replicate a hierarchy.

If we understand demon-possession as a coping strategy under colonial rule, the dramatic removal of that condition by Jesus may not only have 'disrupted existing social patterns of dealing with demoniacs, but it might also have been seen as a threat to an accepted mode of containing open hostility toward the Roman oppressors'.⁶⁰ The people could have been upset that the hostility towards the Romans, which was so far socially contained, could no longer be solely symbolic or contained because the man who was the embodiment of the resistive hostility had been reintegrated by Jesus into the community which was not symbolic but real. Thus, when the dynamics of their social pattern is threatened and subverted, the locals resist to Jesus's presence. Jesus's presence is perceived as a public danger.⁶¹ The locals feared that Jesus was interfering with their pattern of dealing with people who actively resist the occupation. There is a transition from the periphery to the centre. When the once alienated become part of the centre, the ones who are affected are those who thrive because of the hiatus between the centre and the periphery. From the text it is obvious that the Gerasenes had disassociated themselves from the demoniac earlier. Now the attempts of Jesus to re-associate the once alienated is at least inconvenient, if not overtly outrageous, to the extent that they resist Jesus' continued presence in the community because of the subversion of circumstances.

The character of the locals are significant for us as we can relate it to people and structures in India who actively resist the self-assertion and other affirmative strategies of the Dalits. Self-assertion of the Dalits is usually always met with hostility and stiff resistance by both the upper-caste people as well as elite Dalits. This leads to atrocities being inflicted on the Dalits who are self-assertive and who strive actively to move beyond their silent-suffering because self-assertion of the Dalits means a threat to the traditional social-order.

⁶⁰ C. S. LaHurd, 'Reader Response to Ritual Elements in Mark 5:1-20', in *BTB*, Vol. 20, (1990), (pp. 154-160).

⁶¹ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark*, (2nd edn.), London: McMillan, 1966), p. 284.

We cannot ignore the economic implications of a restructuring of social order with its associated fear of losing a much needed menial work-force and agricultural labourers.⁶² The attempts of the caste groups to sustain the degradation and enslavement of the Dalits have strong economic reasons. They are indispensable for agricultural operations and are the 'backbone of agraristic labour'.⁶³ G. A. Natesan clarifies the connection between the economy and the subjugation of the Dalits:

Without them agriculture would be impossible, the economy of Indian life would be most seriously upset, and anything like an organised revolt by them on western lines will undoubtedly mean ruin to the Indian society.⁶⁴

Thus, it is not difficult to understand why a transgression of their enforced-status is actively thwarted by the upper castes and local elites. Those who subjugate the Dalits do so because they recognise their indispensability not only for the Indian economy but also for their own livelihood as agricultural serfs and landlords. Thus, we can say that what this passage highlights is the vested interests of the 'local elite'.

Collaboration and collusion with casteism takes place in a many ways and not necessarily through atrocities against self-assertive and resistive Dalits. There is a 'conspiracy of silence' which deliberately ignores Dalit struggles, contributions and history.⁶⁵ Through its silence the Indian Church has manifested itself as a 'reactionary force to curb' the struggling Dalits.⁶⁶ The source of this silence is the urge to perpetuate the prevailing status quo.

The Indian Church has for long functioned as a collaborator and colluder with casteism and has accommodated caste-based discrimination in the Indian Church

⁶² Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity*, (Madras: University of Madras, 1995), p. 107.

⁶³ S. Manickam, *Conspiracy*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ G. A. Natesan, *The Depressed Classes of India*, (reprint) (New Delhi: Gitanjali Prakashan, 1977), p.181.

⁶⁵ V. T. Raj Shekhar, *The Black Untouchables of India*, (Atlanta, Ottawa: Clarity Press, 1987), p. 49.

⁶⁶ D. Manohar Chandra Prasad, *Dalit Christian Consciousness*, (Bangalore: Rachana Publications, 1994), pp. 1-3.

on the premise of the dichotomy between religion and social structures. The caste system was perpetuated within the churches unassailed and untouched.⁶⁷ The individual pietistic focus of Christianity has been on the 'other-worldly' aspects of religion because of which the struggles of Dalits get neglected in the mission of the Church.⁶⁸ There are many reasons why the Church has been collaborating with casteism. Upper-caste Christians tend to have a sacral view of caste-differences as being divinely ordered. Hence, they have difficulty in relinquishing casteism. Further the assumption that by accommodating caste the churches would appeal to the 'upper' castes, and the 'lower' castes would emulate them and join the churches, still exists.

Today the reasons are more towards holding on to the vestiges of power. Assertive tendencies by the Dalits would change the 'power equations' in the Indian Church and given their numbers in the Indian Church, it would be difficult for the upper castes to be in control, hence there is a sense of threat which evinces strategic thwarting of Dalit resurgence. The other reason is the common view that the Dalits are a liability for the churches. Engaging in their struggles for self-dignity and being in solidarity would mean that the churches have to evolve new mission strategies, and engage more critically with governmental and other administrative agencies to see that justice is administered. This may involve getting into confrontation with local elites and politicians, which may have serious repercussions. It is this sense of fear regarding confronting unjust structures and systems which makes the Church take a passive role in aligning with Dalit struggles for self-assertion and reclamation of dignity and respect.

Today there are many Dalit communities which are involved actively in struggles for justice. But they meet stiff opposition. Andrew Wingate in his research on *The Church and Conversion in the Tamil Area of South India* points to one example where a converted Christian Dalit tried to become elected to the *Panchayat* (local governing council). The *Reddys* (local non-brahmin upper castes) 'tried to block this by trying to ban converted Christians from the fields

⁶⁷ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance*, (Madras: CISRS, CLS, 1970), p. 256.

⁶⁸ Ayub Daniel, 'Approaches of Missions and Churches Towards the Indian Caste System', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 2, June, 1995, (pp. 5-10).

they traditionally used for latrine purposes'.⁶⁹ Contradiction of the traditional interests of the caste groups often results in violence. The police firing against Dalits protesting against the desecration of the statue of Ambedkar in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar in North East Mumbai on July 11 1997, which led to the killing of 11 people, is one example of a violent way in which Dalit protests are squashed.⁷⁰ In *Madurai*, when Dalits no longer accepted the disabilities imposed on them as a matter of course, and emphatically sought the translation of their legal rights to practice the result was an increasing conflict with the upper castes who organised opposition.⁷¹ The role of the Church here in situations like these, when the Dalits stood up for their rights has not been delineated by Dalit theology. An important issue which needs to be tackled is to tap the latent resistive urge of the Dalits and translate it as creative and constructive manifestations of struggle for co-operative and mutually-affirming communitarian life.

4 - A Critique of Notions of Pure and Impure

The implicit notions of purity and pollution reaches epistemological proportions in the story when the destruction of the enemy is couched in connotations of pure and impure. The reference to the unclean spirits being consigned to the pigs, reflects this preoccupation with purity and impurity. For the Jews the gentile occupiers were unclean and so their destruction had to be a cleansing which involved all defilement to be cleansed. The content of symbolic repudiation of the unclean spirit reflects the epistemic nature of notions of purity and pollution. The man's thinking of his oppressors seems to be constructed along notions of pure and impure. This is perhaps the reflection of the interiorised conflict of a Jewish man inhabiting a gentile region of mixed race. If we agree that the ongoing conflict within the man was also the conflict of defilement which accompanied

⁶⁹ Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion: A Study of Recent Conversions to and from Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), p. 62.

⁷⁰ Prakash Louis, 'Dalits and Priestly Formation', in *VJTR*, Vol. 64, 2000, (pp. 121-131), p. 125.

⁷¹ Andre Beteille, 'Caste and Political Group Formation in Tamilnad', in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.), *Politics in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), (pp. 71- 93), p. 88.

oppression, it is understandable that the same conflict constitutes the manifest content of his symbolic emancipation. This just illustrates that the epistemology of pure and polluted only serves a polemic purpose and cannot make communities engage with one another. The problem in such patterns of self-knowledge, which comprehends identity in terms of pure and impure, is that there is often an accompanying agency, which strives for the assertion of the pure as superior.

Dalit communities, though often the victims of notions of purity and pollution, nevertheless use the same notions as a medium of their symbolic resistive actions. One custom which prevails among the Dalit communities involves Dalits cleaning their streets using water mixed with turmeric in the highly unlikely event of a Brahmin passing through Dalit hamlets.⁷² It is nothing more than symbolic protest. However the undergirding rationale for this is the replication of the ideas of pure and impure followed by Brahmins themselves. Dalits use, as their idiom of protest, the very same notions of purity and pollution which are used in their discrimination. What I would like to draw attention to now is that the relationship between the oppressed and oppressor here is configured by way of notions of pure and impure. In that way the story can have resonances for Dalit communities who internalise notions of pure and impure and use that to construct and instruct their relationship with their oppressors. Whatever the reasons, notions of pure and impure serve to divide rather than aid engagement and hence should be rejected.

E - Conclusion: Critique of Symbolic Resistance

The text offers us space to interrogate the way the Dalits 'symbolise' the experience of oppression and struggle in highly constrained situations to create new identities and ideological bases for action. But coming back to the question of Jesus removing a 'coping mechanism' or even a tool of resistance from the oppressed, the passage throws new light.

⁷² See Elisha, 'Liberative Motifs in the Dalit Religion', (pp. 77-88).

Primarily, from the perspective of a Dalit reader, there seems to be a dialectic tension between the symbolic and real resistance present in the context. The demoniac has opted for a symbolic resistive tactic. A symbolic resistive tactic using a socially approved idiom is entirely understandable in a constrained life situation. However one has to acknowledge that the resistive tactic the demoniac has adopted is an acquiescent tactic. The demoniac avoids conflict and is given a socially prescribed space, tombs, to express his dissent. The identity he receives as a resister is a socially sponsored status. When resistance or identity is socially sponsored possibility of structural change is minimal because the ideology of the 'sponsor' is preservation and not transformation of the status quo.

The scenario in the story changes with Jesus' intervention. Jesus' emphasis seems to be on the primacy of community. In the Dalit situation we have seen how community is a prime source of resistance and survival. Further Jesus helps the man to move beyond his socially ascribed identity. From the fringes he brings resistance to the city. He moves beyond an acquiescent ideology of resistance to a transformative ideology. He is now to be at the centre sharing the news of the fall of the Legion and changing the social composition and structure of the society. The real realm was the context where the good news of liberation had to be spread. This acts as a catalyst for praxis. People's fear of the rulers are brought to the open. The people react with *amazement* at the man's proclamation of Jesus' liberative activity. This reaction, as we have already mentioned, is the reaction of people who recognise their conventional world being questioned and subverted. Thus the man, who because of his suppressed resistive urge confined himself to alienation and self-destruction, now becomes the catalyst of possible change. He is empowered to challengingly engage with the locals instilling the message of confidence and moreover by sharing the 'good news of liberation' deconstruct the absoluteness of the Legion.

The central motif of the story understood against its background is thus one of freedom from *resistance which is confined only to the symbolic realm*. This repressed resistance is the result of a basic tension between the urge for liberation and the internalisation of the overpowering nature of the oppressor. This story can also help us to critically question symbolic resistance. The problem with

solely symbolic resistance inspite of all its emancipatory potential is that it is symbiotically linked to the unconscious reinforcement of a weak self image. It involves a 'retreat' into the symbolic world. There is a concomitant element of negative conditioning which decides the remit of resistive-practice. I do not dispute the cathartic function of such symbolic resistive practice, however, as a mode of orthopraxis, it needs a radical redefinition. All tendencies to extensively romanticise symbolic resistance has to be critically analysed. However when such resistive practice serves a proleptic function it can become critical and constructive through its manifestation as orthopraxis.

Romanticising Dalit culture can often be paternalistic and very often Dalit theorists and theologians have identified liberative characteristics as those which are pragmatic and not merely symbolic. Development of self-esteem, reflection on people's experiences, resistance to the tendency to internalise hegemonic cultures and engaging in struggle together are identified by Theophilus Appavoo as liberative practices as he explores the possibility of utilising Dalit experiences and culture for liturgical purposes.⁷³ The *cause* or *end* for which attention is focussed upon Dalit experiences and culture is as important for Dalits as their culture and experiences. 'The goal of any people's movement is to ensure that structural change takes place whether brought by themselves or on association with others. However nothing short of a structural change can really guarantee liberation for the people from the oppressive system which is deep rooted'.⁷⁴

For Dalit theology the theological process doesn't end with mere identification of the liberative aspects of Dalit religion and culture. Rather the theological process is completed when the liberative practices are cross-fertilized with the liberative aspects of the bible and result in praxis. Perceptions of victimhood are pertinent for the construction of ideological discourse of Dalit liberation.⁷⁵ However, these perceptions should not be considered as the completed praxis by themselves because there is no structural engagement. There is a need for a shift in configuration of resistance. However there are praxiological implications for the

⁷³ Sherinian, 'Dalit Theology in Tamil Christian Folk Music', pp. 233-253.

⁷⁴ Shiri, 'People's Movements', p. 120.

⁷⁵ See Raja, 'Living through Conflicts', (pp. 465-476).

Indian Church because symbolic resistance also brings out the paradox of the Dalits, where on the one hand there is *latent resistance* to the degrading identity forced on them, but on the other, their social and economic roles in the local community are to a large extent determined by the dominant group's actions to *suppress* their resistive urge. Hence, the Church's responsibility is to resist all attempts to thwart the self-assertion of the Dalits.

The challenge for the Indian Church from this story is to work to move beyond symbolic resistance to pragmatic involvement in social change and how to translate the arbitrariness of the manifestation of the Dalit liberative urge into concrete engagement with structural transformation. The sphere of real constructive resistive activity can never be divorced from the collective agency. Resistive practice in reality becomes delusion when it results in estrangement rather than engagement.

The Gerasene exorcism is the expression of Jesus' liberative power through a new idiom of re-engagement. The once periphery, the once alienated now constitutes the epicentre of the action of proclaiming liberation. What has so far provided an ideological, economic and social base for the accorded status of the man has been transgressed, to the 'amazement' of all those who have acquiesced to the existing status quo and may have derived their own identity and economic base from the former structure. There is empathy on the part of Jesus when he uses the same medium which the man was using for articulating his resistance - the medium of possession and exorcism. It is a dissent of hegemony in the symbolic realm. What is important is that Jesus subverts the contents of the medium in which the man was working out his own subjectivity. From a subjectivity of victimhood Jesus leads him to a subjectivity where he helps him to repudiate the hegemonic symbolic reign of the 'Legion' leading him to re-association and reintegration into communitarian life. In that way pragmatism characterises the praxiological efforts of Jesus.

Chapter - IX

A Dalit Reading of the Story of the Syrophenician /

Canaanite Woman (Mark 7: 24-30 / Matthew 15:21-28)

Introduction

In this chapter we will be dealing with the story of the woman, who is identified in Mark as a 'gentile, of Syrophenician origin', and in Matthew as a 'Canaanite'. The woman boldly approaches Jesus to secure healing for her daughter, whose 'predicament' is identified in both the gospels under the taxonomy of demon-possession. Though initially Jesus responds to the woman in a seemingly harsh manner, the story concludes with Jesus confirming the deliverance of the woman's daughter. Jesus relates the deliverance to the woman's words in Mark and the woman's faith in Matthew. The focus of both the Matthean and Markan versions of the story seems to be on the fact that Jesus agreed to a gentile woman's request.

Analysed in relation to the notions of purity and pollution this story is significant. Mark posits a link between this incident and Jesus' pedagogy in the previous section (vv.1-23) where he challenges the foundation of the Levitical distinction between the 'clean and unclean'.¹ But it has to be acknowledged that there is a problematic disjointedness between the essence of the previous passage and the way Jesus is presented in his encounter with the Syrophenician woman. Here Jesus is : a) 'almost churlish in his reluctance to help the Gentile woman', and b) 'erratic in the way in which he then changed his mind'.²

¹ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 181.

² Hooker, *Mark*, p. 182.

This seeming problem is accentuated partly by the assumption that Jesus always understood his messianic task to include the gentiles.³ However, in the present story Jesus is portrayed as one who initially understood his ministry as a mission to Israel,⁴ and only later moved away beyond this understanding.⁵ It seems as if the emphasis in this story is on the significant advance of Jesus' understanding of his mission and of the inclusive nature of the Kingdom of God (*basileia*), through his dialogue with the gentile woman. The image of Jesus that emerges from this story is of one who is sensitive to boundary issues and who, after initial reticence, is prepared to cross such boundaries.⁶

Uncleanness, compassion, faith and confrontation as argumentation feature in the story. Notions of purity and pollution are implicit in the story because of the woman's gentile identity. The widening of Jesus ministry to include gentiles brings an element of compassion in the story. Nevertheless I have chosen the story because of the emphasis on faith understood as human initiative and persistence amidst obstacles. This holds pertinence for the Dalits as a paradigm that faith in Jesus as liberator ought to result in initiative which incarnates such faith. The feature of confrontation as argumentation assumes a new dimension in this passage. Here the argumentation is against Jesus, and Jesus relents to the woman's words.

This story has profound implications for the task of identifying and addressing issues that hinder the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. It gives us space to articulate a bipolar-ethical imperative where there is impetus for praxis for both the dominant and the dominated. There are also elements in the passage which can help forge a partnership between Dalit theology and postcolonial theory. Some of these elements are the hybrid identity factor of the woman and Jesus, and the aspect of engaging with the 'Other'. The hybrid identity factor is implicit in the story because the woman and

³ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 182.

⁴ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 183.

⁵ See William Loader, 'Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in Mark's Tradition', in *JSNT*, Vol. 63, 1996, (pp. 45-61), pp. 49-51 and also Hisako Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7: 24-30)', in *In God's Image*, Vol. 23, No. 4, December, 2004, (pp. 50-53), pp. 52,53.

⁶ Loader, 'Challenged at the Boundaries', p. 49.

Jesus cannot just be identified as binary-opposites only. Neither are they homogenous in their identity, they are *each* a complex web of identities, a locus of dialectic convergence of both dominant identity and subaltern identity. Post-colonial theory, in contrast to the ideology of Dalit theology helps us to be perceptive to this hybridity which is a general empirical reality. The hermeneutical significance of this hybrid identity factor is that it opens up new challenges for praxis based on this inter-relatedness.

Also the aspect of engaging with the 'Other' has not found much theological value in Dalit theological circles. Though I understand the force of the argument behind Nirmal's plea for 'methodological exclusivism', I am thoroughly sceptical about the way this methodological exclusivism has condoned the ghettoization of Dalit theology. Postcolonial theory helps us to recognize the importance of engaging with the 'Other'. Postcolonialism also gives us a reading strategy called contrapuntal reading, where interpretations emerging from different backgrounds are read in juxtaposition.⁷ I suggest that the way forward for Dalit theology to engage more effectively in its struggle against caste discrimination is to identify aspects of non-Dalit Indian Christian Theology which are anti-caste. By giving more visibility to the critique of caste which is prevalent within the Brahmannical and caste-Christian theological circles, Dalit theology can be more effective in enlisting non-Dalits as partners in liberation. By attempting a contrapuntal reading whereby anti-caste resonances between Dalit theology and non-Dalit theology are affirmed, Dalit theology can also rectify the homogenously negative image that is ascribed to Indian Christian theological writings which are articulated using brahmannical and non-Dalit philosophies and ideologies.

⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah has attempted the first-ever contrapuntal reading by comparing the gospel compilations of Raja Rammohun Roy and Thomas Jefferson. See the chapter on 'Textually Conjoined Twins: Rammohun Roy and Thomas Jefferson and their Bibles', in his *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 9-59. Though he does not compare writings related to casteism in the above-mentioned work, what we have is a typology for a contrapuntal reading.

On the basis of the story we can discern various praxiological principles. To aid a praxis oriented interpretation of the story, it would be important to consider a few preliminary points.

A - Interpreting the Story in the Dalit Context: Some Preliminary Remarks

1 - *Understanding the Story in the Matthean and Markan Contexts*

This story would have held much pertinence to the readers of both Mark and Matthew. The descriptions of the woman as Syrophenician or Canaanite are intended for the listeners to whom the stories are addressed. While the Markan description - 'a Greek' - could be understood to mean a Hellenistic Jew, the addition 'a Syrophenician by birth' makes it clearer that 'the woman is a pagan from the area'.⁸ One also needs to comprehend the significance of the unprecedented redactional move that Matthew makes in his version of the story by naming the woman a 'Canaanite'.⁹ For the mind familiar with Israelite history this word is evocative of images of 'polytheism, sacred prostitution, and ethnicity beyond the pale'.¹⁰

As most of Mark's readers belonged to gentile backgrounds this story would provide them the 'reassurance that Jesus himself responded to the faith of a Gentile and gave her a share in the blessing of the Kingdom'.¹¹ In Matthew it is obvious that the

⁸ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 126.

⁹ Jim Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word in the Logos of Christ; or the Difference the Syro-Phoenician Woman Makes to Jesus', in *Semeia*, Vol. 75, 1996, (pp. 61-85), p. 63.

¹⁰ Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 64.

¹¹ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 183.

barrier which needs to be overcome is the 'division between Jews and Gentiles'.¹² Elaine Mary Wainwright who focuses on the Matthean version of the story suggests that in the light of the Matthean redaction the story can be understood in a rhetorical sense, as answering the question of the participation of women in religious activities in the Matthean community.¹³ Through the redaction process one can understand the narrative tension in the Gospel concerning the position of both Gentiles and women in the Jesus movement. The woman's persistence reflects the persistent struggle of women in the Matthean community amidst obstacles. According to Wainwright's reconstruction of the Matthean subtext, the characterisation of the woman has a rhetorical function, because, she both embodies the struggle of the community and the solution for the struggle. Thus:

Within the Matthean community, this story could therefore have affirmed the contribution of gentile women to the life of the community as well as legitimating women's participation in its liturgical and theological life. If Jesus so affirms the question of this woman who extended his understanding of his mission, so too must the community accept the active participation of women in its deliberations regarding its understanding of its mission and life style.¹⁴

Wainwright's reading emphasises that the recipients of the 'bread' of Jesus's *basileia* may involve marginal groups like women and gentiles.¹⁵ Wainwright's interpretation is in conformity with Fiorenza's reconstruction of the story where the woman 'makes a theological argument against limiting the Jesuanic inclusive table-community and discipleship of equals to Israel alone'.¹⁶ Fiorenza also finds clues to the 'historical leadership of women in opening up the Jesus movement to 'Gentile sinners' (Gal. 2:15). The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman makes women's contribution to one

¹² Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 138.

¹³ Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew*, (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), p. 49.

¹⁴ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, p. 243

¹⁵ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p. 161. Quoted by Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 80,81.

of the most crucial transitions in early Christian beginnings historically visible'.¹⁷ On the basis of the above analysis we can conclude that the passage can be connected to the inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry as well as to the breaking down of ethnic and gender barriers.

2 - Tyre and Sidon : Socio-economic Situation

One of the riddles besetting an interpretation of the passage is to understand Jesus' words to the woman: 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Mark 7: 27). In Matthew there are additional details like Jesus' refusal to answer the woman at all (Matthew 15:23) and the addition of the words, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24), before Jesus says 'it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Matthew 15: 26).

Situations like this which evoke a sharp response can be classified as a rhetorical form called responsive chreia.¹⁸ Scholars have often sought to soften the offence implicit the term. Hooker understands the term in that context as Jesus' challenge to the woman 'to justify her request'.¹⁹ Soares-Prabhu suggests that in the light of the generally unprejudiced nature of Jesus as well as his 'appreciative references' to gentiles (Matthew 8:10, Luke 13:29), this seemingly harsh refusal of the Syrophenician woman's request ... is to be read not as a racist insult but as a provocative challenge of the woman's faith'.²⁰

However, Gerd Theissen's socio-historical analysis of the economic relationship between Galilee and the regions of Tyre and Sidon gives us a fresh perspective to

¹⁷ Fiorenza, quoted by Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, pp. 80,81.

¹⁸ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 52.

¹⁹ Hooker, *Mark*, p. 183.

²⁰ Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, p. 158.

understand the verbal encounter between Jesus and the woman. Theissen's interpretation is that Jesus' language of children, bread and dogs can be understood as an aphorism about the asymmetries which prevailed between the Tyrians and the destitute Galilean peasants.²¹ David Catchpole opines that Jesus' sayings to the Syro-Phoenician woman is 'heavy with Galilean prejudice, fuelled by ingrained social, political, historical, economic and religious experiences and attitudes'.²²

In the context of the story the regions of Tyre and Galilee were both under Roman occupation and were the site of imperial control and oppressive colonial politics.²³ However, the economic implications of the imperial control were felt differently in Tyre and Galilee. Tyre was a wealthy trading city. Its source of income was its metal work, the production of purple dye and its vantage location as a port city, which aided extensive trade with the Mediterranean region.²⁴ Its financial stability was such that even the Jerusalem temple treasury was maintained in Tyrian coins in spite of the fact that the coins had the god Melkart on them.²⁵ While Tyre and Sidon were two of the wealthiest ports on the coast, Galilee constituted poor peasants who suffered a threefold oppression because of 1) Roman Imperialism 2) The Herodian monarchy which fawned on Rome, and 3) Temple politics in Judea.²⁶

Theissen links Jesus' language of bread, children and dogs to the economic relationship between the Tyrians and the destitute Galilean peasants. In spite of its thriving trading industry based on metal work and purple dye, Tyre had to depend on importing agricultural produce from the hinterlands of Galilee and the rural parts of the city, which served as 'the 'bread basket' of the metropolis of Tyre'.²⁷ This meant the exploitation of the Galilean peasants, as their produce was sold by the ruling class

²¹ Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), (Translated by Linda Maloney), pp. 66-77.

²² David Catchpole, *Jesus People: The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Community*, (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 177.

²³ Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 50.

²⁴ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 73.

²⁵ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 208.

²⁶ Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 50.

²⁷ Cited in Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 51.

of Galilee to the highest bidders from Tyre. This meant a constant shortage of food for the Galilean peasants, as most of their produce was exported to Tyre.²⁸ Moreover, the Galilean peasants couldn't compete with the rich Tyrians to purchase the food necessary for them. They were, to use a Marxian concept, 'alienated' from the produce of their labour.

As the story progresses one can discern that there is an implicit assumption and reflection of ethnic, cultural, and socio-political hostility between Jews and their gentile neighbours.²⁹ In this light one can understand the irony of Jesus' words. His words can be understood as reflecting on the economic and political relations between the Tyrians and Galilean peasants. Jesus' words can be interpreted as clearly affirming his solidarity with the cause of the Galilean peasants – the children to whom the bread rightfully belonged. By employing the metaphorical language of 'children' and 'dogs' he can be seen as emphasising the preference that the 'vulnerable' have in his ministry over the dominant. It can also be understood as chiding the Tyrians, and 'conscientising' the woman about the asymmetries which prevailed between Galilee and Tyre in their entitlement to food supplies. This interpretation by Theissen is also very helpful in appropriating the story in the context of the Dalit struggles for justice.

Even traditionally the regions of Tyre and Sidon were notorious not only for their 'gentile' identity but also for their oppressive and economically exploitative tendencies. One cannot neglect the perception and reputation that Tyre had among the Jews. Isaiah 23, Joel 3: 4-8 and Zechariah 9: 2-4 contain oracles against Tyre and Sidon. These oracles reflect hostility towards Tyre and Sidon, both powerful trading centres. In the light of these prophetic oracles the picture which emerges of Tyre and Sidon 'from a Jewish perspective' is of a Gentile people who achieved 'proud power

²⁸ Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 51.

²⁹ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 204.

and superior wealth by harshly oppressing their Jewish neighbours'.³⁰ Joel 3: 4-6 brings out the oppressive relationship as follows:

v.4) O Tyre and Sidon ... I will turn your deeds upon your own heads swiftly and speedily.

v.5) For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples.

v.6) You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks removing them far from their own border.

Thus, we can conclude that the implied function of Tyre and Sidon in Mark may be to focus attention on the image of the 'gentile economic oppressor'. So in my interpretation of the story in the context of the Dalit community's struggle for justice, it will be pertinent for me to accord hermeneutical valence to this dimension of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman, as it can help us to articulate models of justice which are 'consensual' and dialogical.

3 - The Ambiguity of the Identities of Jesus and the Woman

Both Jesus and the woman have fluid identities in the story. There are aspects of their identity which makes them dominant and marginal simultaneously. For example, in the light of the analysis of the oppressive economic relationship between Galilee and Tyre, Jesus belongs to the oppressed group as he identifies himself with the Galilean peasants. However because of his capacity to heal, as well as his own identity as a male and as a non-gentile in the text, he is portrayed as the dominant. He is the benefactor. Matthew appends the acclamation 'son of David' to the woman's pleas for mercy (Matt 15:22). This acclamation is usually used in contexts

³⁰ John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 17.

where requests for benefactions were made (Matt 9:27, 20:30,31).³¹ Thus, Matthew, while framing the woman as subordinate and weak, presents Jesus 'as having power, regardless of the historical and political situation of the people of Israel in this historical moment'.³² Jesus with his power of benefaction has the power to alleviate the woman's deprivation. Thus, he is not to be understood only as one who is deprived, rather he also occupies a dominant position in the encounter.

Similarly, the woman is also 'simultaneously at the boundaries of the privileged and the marginalized'.³³ The portrait of the woman which emerges in the passage is 'of a female resident of a bilingual (Greek or Aramaic) region harboring a minority mix of Jewish folk. As a Syro-Phoenician who is also a Hellene, and one whose daughter sleeps on a "bed" rather than a mattress (a detail evocative of status), the woman is subtly indicated as a well-to-do citizen'.³⁴ The term 'Greek' could also mean a member of the 'Hellenistic upper class of Syria, which consisted mainly of Greeks but also included many Hellenised natives'.³⁵ Her Hellenized and urban status (as we can discern from a socio-political reading of Jesus' aphorism about the bread) affirm her status as an elite. As a Tyrian who was dependent on the rural hinterlands of Galilee for agricultural goods the woman is the embodiment of a problem for Jewish people in the rural areas because food was liable to be passed to the urban area and away from the poorer Jewish areas where it was produced.

However, her marginal status cannot be ignored. Richard A. Horsely understands the identity of the woman as one who is doubly oppressed, a 'single mother' with a little child.³⁶ Her double description as a gentile (a Greek) of Syrophenician origin,³⁷ affirms her marginal status, because, understood from the Jewish perspective, she is

³¹ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 44.

³² Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15: 21-28', in *Semeia*, Vol. 78, 1997, (pp. 71-83), p. 75.

³³ Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 75.

³⁴ Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 67.

³⁵ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 126.

³⁶ Richard A. Horsely, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics and Plot in Mark's Gospel*, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001), p. 213.

³⁷ Malbon, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 44.

an unclean Gentile. Her daughter's possession augments the possibility of further stigmatization. This can be an important anthropological theological category as we exegete the text.

4 - Convergent Trajectories of Marginality: The Woman as 'Dog' and the Pariah 'Dog'

The identity of the woman, when understood against the prevailing laws of impurity, makes her an embodiment of impurity. As a pagan woman she 'is 'unclean' by birth, a foreigner and a female, and 'untouchable' because of her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit'.³⁸ Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, who attempts to recapture the resonances of this pericope from a South Asian Feminist perspective, connects it to the context of the cultural and ritual 'impurity' ascribed to women in South Asia:

Reinterpreting the encounter of the Syro-Phoenician woman and Jesus from a South Asian feminist perspective reveals many icons for women caught between understandings of purity and impurity... the definition of cleanliness still forms one basis for discrimination against and isolating women. The designation of what is clean and what is unclean is not a clinical diagnosis of one's surroundings. It is still embedded in cultural structures that determine who is clean and who is unclean.³⁹

She argues that the focus of the story is on the category of impurity since the racial and ethnic identity of the Syro-Phoenician woman denote 'uncleanness'.⁴⁰ Aruna

³⁸ Hisako Kinukawa, *Woman and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), p. 53.

³⁹ As cited in Aruna Gnanadason, 'Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-colonial look at the Syro-Phoenician Woman/Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective', in *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2001, (pp. 162-177), p. 169.

⁴⁰ Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, 'The Syro-Phoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Perspective', in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 102.

Gnanadason identifies the woman as a Dalit woman on the basis of her impurity.⁴¹ Japanese feminist theologian Hisako Kinukawa portrays Jesus as challenging the boundaries of purity and pollution and repudiating them by transcendence.⁴²

One can also, evocatively, capture strikingly similar resonances of marginality between the woman and the Dalits by focusing on the term 'dog'. As far as the text goes the term 'dog' resonates and reiterates her marginal identity - as a gentile. Such identity cannot be divested of its connotations of impurity. In Amrita Pritam's poem 'The Pariah' (of which I only quote the relevant parts), we can see how the term 'dog' and the term '*Pariah*', (which is the name of a prominent Tamil Dalit community) are used interchangeably:

I only remember
that Pariah
who entered our empty room
for some unknown reason.
And the door was locked outside
Three days later
when the deal was clinched
our house was sold.
We exchanged the keys for money.
The new owner
Was shown each room.
And in one of the rooms we found
The corpse of that dog
I have never heard that dog bark.
I only remember the smell of its corpse.⁴³

⁴¹ Gnanadason, 'Jesus and the Asian Woman', pp. 167-169.

⁴² Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p. 52.

⁴³ Amrita Pritam, 'The Pariah', in A.K. Ramanujan and Vinay Dharwedkar (eds.), 'Sixteen Modern Indian Poems', *Daedalus*, Vol. 118, No. 4, (Fall 1989), pp. 325-326. Quoted in Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 1.

Though the poet here maintains an ambivalence as to whether the poem refers to a 'Pariah' (as the title indicates) or to a stray dog *per se*, no such ambivalence prevails in the South Indian situation where the term 'dogs' are used as metaphors for Dalit communities. Clarke draws attention to this fact:

In South India there is a somewhat dexterously malicious conjoining of these two references. Thus, Dalits and dogs could be spoken of as being part of the same reference. This has its roots in the notion that Dalits are less-than human and ought to be kept outside the contours of the societal household, just as dogs (as is the general custom in rural India) are to be kept outside the living space of the human household.⁴⁴

Thus, the metaphor of the 'dog' evokes similar resonances of impurity and marginalisation which defines facets of the identity of the woman and the Dalits. This aids arguments for hermeneutical compatibility between the woman and the Dalits on the basis of a marginality based on impurity, invoked in the story through the metaphor of the 'dog'.

B - A Dalit Praxis-oriented Reading of the Story

The above mentioned points provide us with clues to interpret the passage relevantly to the Dalit context. On the basis of the above clues the following praxiological principles which can be relevant to the Dalit situation can be articulated.

⁴⁴ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 14, (n. 1).

1 - Praxis of Faith : Initiative and Persistence

Though Mark, in contrast with Matthew, doesn't use the word 'faith', the actions of the Syrophenician woman fit the definition of 'faith' in the context of the synoptic healing stories, namely faith as initiative and as persistence amidst obstacles. 'The focus of faith in Mark is trust that a request will be granted'.⁴⁵ The story bears testimony to the reputation of Jesus which has reached the Syrophenicians.⁴⁶ It is clear that the impetus for this faith in the healing stories is belief that Jesus is the source of healing.

It is significant that in the healing stories the word faith is mentioned in conjunction with human agency. The agency of the Syrophenician woman in the episode is hard to be missed. From a socio-cultural perspective one can also see in the woman's action a 'replication of honor in blood and kinship'. The honour codes expected blood and kinship groups 'to stick together and advance the common good of their kinship and group', through 'concerted cooperative action'.⁴⁷

The woman seeks out the secluded Jesus and, though Jesus rebuffs her initial request by invoking the 'powerful and degrading metaphor of dog', she persists on behalf of her daughter.⁴⁸ 'Her faith was such that it refused to be moved by the harshest of rejections even from Jesus himself. Jesus' affirmation of this faith functions as an affirmation of female power which was able to overcome extraordinary obstacles'.⁴⁹ In the Matthean text the word of deliverance has to be wrested from the constrained silence of Jesus. Jesus' '*a-logos*' (a refusal to speak, in Matthew) can be read as an attempt at silencing the woman.⁵⁰ However, by refusing the silence he imposes, the

⁴⁵ David Rhoads, 'Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman: A Narrative Critical Study', in *JAAR*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 1994, (pp. 343-375), p. 360.

⁴⁶ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Malbon, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 44.

⁴⁹ Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, p. 243.

⁵⁰ Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 64.

woman overcomes the obstacle by her persistence. Thus, there is also the motif of 'impediment-overcome' in the story.

In the Markan version of the story Jesus himself seems to be countering the woman, but Matthew partly transfers the motif of impediment from Jesus to the disciples in his version of the story.⁵¹ The fact that faith and impediment are 'associated motifs in the healing stories has to be taken seriously'.⁵² In the stories where Gentiles are mentioned there is unusual stress given to 'the motif of resistance overcome'.⁵³ Despite her unnamed and doubly marginal status as a gentile and as a woman, the Syrophenician woman shows commendable faith and initiative.⁵⁴ Though there is the articulation of clearly perceived awareness of boundaries and tensions between different cultures, the miracle stories themselves show that they are reaching out beyond socio-cultural boundaries.⁵⁵ What is significant is that although the woman seems to have grasped the marginal status accorded to her gentile identity, she overcame that impediment by approaching Jesus and persisting in her demands for her daughter's liberation. Her initiative and efforts are revolutionary.⁵⁶

This has direct relevance to the Dalit situation in India because 'obstacles' of various kinds act as deterrents to praxis. Thus, it is pertinent to emphasise that faith which does not acquire the form of initiative, and persistence in overcoming boundaries cannot always result in liberation. It is also interesting to note that the best illustration of the associated motifs 'impediment-faith', occurs where *representatives* come to Jesus'.⁵⁷ In a context where more people, institutions and organisations are acknowledging their role as partners in the Dalit struggle, what is needed is an empathetic-solidarity that persists until transformation is gained. Complacency and passivity thus do not fall under the ambit of faith in this context.

⁵¹ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

⁵² Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

⁵³ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 254.

⁵⁴ Anderson, 'Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter', in Anderson and Moore (eds.), *Mark and Method*, (pp. 103-134), p. 130.

⁵⁵ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 254.

⁵⁶ Meyers, *Binding*, pp. 203-204.

⁵⁷ Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

From the perspective of praxis, it is pertinent to understand 'faith' in terms of cognitive functions - as persistence and as initiative. What emerges from this story and in the synoptic healing stories in general is the primacy of the role of ordinary people in effecting transformation. People's initiative and persistence are prerequisites for transformation of the Dalit situation. They are an integral aspect of praxis. Unless the motivation for change comes from the oppressed people change cannot be achieved. With regard to the Dalit situation, the evidence of the results of persistence and people's initiative has been made manifest in many instances. For example, the two amendments in the text of the Indian Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 (popularly known as the 1950 Presidential Order), in 1956 and 1990 can be attributed to the initiatives of the civil society.

This presidential order in its pre-amended form decreed that 'no person who professes a religion different from Hindu, shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste'.⁵⁸ This criterion meant that all those Dalit communities who profess non-Hindu religions like Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity, were not considered as belonging to the Scheduled Castes (which is the constitutional term for Dalit communities), and hence could not avail the benefits of positive discrimination, which the constitution extended only to Hindu Dalits. But the persistent resistance put up by the Sikh community on behalf of Dalit Sikhs resulted in the 1956 amendment of the presidential order which included Dalit Sikhs in the category of Scheduled Castes. Thus, the benefits of positive discrimination were extended to Dalit Sikhs.

Similarly, in 1990 under the leadership of the then Union Minister of Welfare and Labour, Ram Vilas Paswan, 'neo-Buddhists' or Buddhists of Scheduled Caste origin, (Dalits who mass-converted to Buddhism under the leadership of Ambedkar) were also given Scheduled Caste status on the grounds that 'change of religion has not

⁵⁸ Cited in James Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights: With Special Reference to Dalit Christians', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 1-9), p. 6.

altered their social and economic condition'.⁵⁹ Massey acknowledges the role of two major catalysts for this change, namely:

- 1) The role played by Dalit leaders such as Ram Vilas Paswan,
- 2) The 'political necessity created by the Ambedkar centenary celebration in the mind of the non-Dalit political leaders'.⁶⁰

Massey discerns in these initiatives - of resistance, protest, and committed political action backed up with 'political will' - clues to actions which will 'pave the way for the establishment of a 'just society' or an 'alternate society' based upon the principles of justice, equality, freedom and equity as envisaged in the preamble' of the Indian Constitution.

'Here the role of civil society is very pertinent'.⁶¹ There is need for an 'active citizenry' in situations of inequality where the needs and interests of the minority are likely to be sidelined.⁶² Recognising the importance of an active citizenry in the transformation of society along egalitarian lines Duncan Forrester writes:

A democracy needs an active citizenry that is willing to put the common good before sectional and individual interests, and sometimes make sacrifices for the benefit of others, and for a greater good. Usually this is only possible when many people are gripped by a vision, and feel a sense of solidarity, shared destiny and mutual accountability. But it also depends on visionary leadership, for political leaders who have convictions which they can share and a vision, a dream, of the future of the society that is infectious, like Martin Luther King's, or Desmond Tutu's.⁶³

⁵⁹ Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights', pp. 6,7.

⁶⁰ Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights', p. 9.

⁶¹ Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights', p. 9.

⁶² Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth*, (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 180.

⁶³ Forrester, *On Human Worth*, p. 181.

It is significant that Forrester uses the examples of Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu. Historically various initiatives for social-political transformation have come from within the marginalized groups. The impetus for the wider society is to affirm solidarity with such struggles. To argue that initiatives for justice emerging from the oppressed groups are self-centred is to miss the point. Dalit struggles may seem to be sectional when they are carried on by Dalits. But, given their situation of marginalisation and oppression, it is a struggle for common good, for justice for all and egalitarianism. Thus, it is crucial that Dalits play a pro-active role in the process. But there is need for the wider citizenry to be involved in struggles for justice because only this can lead to effective change. Thus, the key praxiological imperative that the passage throws to us, which will be pertinent to the Dalit situation, is the need for initiative and persistence in working towards total transformation. It also implies that all possible avenues for Dalit emancipation should be utilised accordingly.

2) Subversive Praxis of the Syrophoenician Woman

The woman ruptures a few 'epistemes' of order and propriety where 'power' conceptually rests with Jesus. The way in which Jesus initially understands the woman could be attributed to the thought system which defined and labelled the 'Canaanites' in relation to a self-referential ideology of 'chosenness'. The Canaanites were, in the epistemic view of the Israelites, the impure other. The consistent association of the 'ideology of chosenness' with the 'promised land' (with its implications of the displacement of the Canaanites) – is iconic of this epistemic 'impure/pagan otherness'. One can see that this epistemology dominates the encounter between the woman and Jesus. Jesus, by referring to her community as dogs, seems to be reflecting this conceptual worldview in the early stages of his interaction with the woman. The function of such epistemologies is to maintain 'order'. In this particular story the power in the 'order' rests with Jesus, who is the 'Other' of the Canaanite woman - both as man and as non-Gentile.

Thus, her solicitation of Jesus, by encroaching upon his privacy (in Mark), is not only a demonstration of 'inappropriately assertive female behaviour,' rather it is a blatant affront to Jesus' honour status.⁶⁴ It can be interpreted as a blatant refusal to believe that she did not have the 'prescribed status' to approach Jesus. It is a refusal to conform to her labelled status as an 'inferior' who had to show deference in approaching Jesus. Her behaviour challenges in a subtle way both the conceptual as well as the social structures of relations between Jesus and the woman. The result of her encounter with Jesus is a disruption of the way of imaging her identity. The woman is undeterred by her labelled identity. She refuses to be ensnared by the dominant semiotics of social order.

Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz's attempts at re-reading the Matthean version of the story from the perspective of her own subjectivity as a Mexican-American, throws fresh light on the agency of the woman (though at the expense of identifying Jesus as the oppressor!). Locating the encounter within the broader framework of ideology of 'chosenness' which has so far informed the assumed priority of the Israelites over the Canaanites in the text,⁶⁵ Guardiola-Saenz embarks on a re-writing of the story from the reverse of history.⁶⁶ From this angle she argues that the 'Otherness' of the woman may have been co-opted by the totalitarian voice of the author and goes with her task of articulating the 'Otherness' of the Canaanite woman on the basis of her own subjectivity. Assuming that the woman is aware of her 'dispossession' she rereads the story with a spirit of dispossession, which she assumes 'the Canaanite woman had when she approached Jesus: a spirit of protest and reclamation'.⁶⁷ From this angle the voice of the woman is the angry voice of the 'dispossessed and the rebellious' and not the 'submissive whisper of the alienated'. We need to understand

⁶⁴ Meyers, *Binding*, pp. 203, 204.

⁶⁵ Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 70.

⁶⁶ Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 74. What she helps the readers to see is whether the first event 'could have been misread by the author by his insistence on a totalitarian voice'. From this angle she raises questions which help us to focus on the 'Otherness' of the woman rather than seeing her under the totalitarian lenses :

What if the Canaanite woman was aware of her dispossession? What if she was not begging Jesus for a favour but demanding restitution? What if she was not worshipping Jesus but defying him? What if I really recast the story?

⁶⁷ Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 69.

that Guardiola-Saenz in her re-appropriation of the story attempts to construct her own Otherness as well as the Otherness of the Canaanite woman. But the way she reconstructs the story helps us to understand the agency of the woman from the perspective of the victims:

She cannot and does not respect either human boundaries or divine boundaries that go against the human value of life. She breaks the boundaries of ethnicity, of the empire, of gender, of culture and speaks for her daughter... She represents to Jesus the wide world outside of the empire, the need of those who are oppressed by the empire. The Canaanite woman reclaims respectful treatment as Other under what she supposes is the new reign of equality: the βασιλεια, which has come to break the empires. Confronted with such a declaration of confidence and self-affirmation, witnessing the emergence of the Canaanite woman as his dialectic Other, Jesus can do no other than respond positively to the woman's request. Jesus understands her demand and moves back from what he thought was his mission to give the woman the place that she deserves at the table.⁶⁸

Ranjini Rebera who analyses the story from a South Asian Feminist perspective finds resonances between the Syrophenician woman's behaviour and modern South Asian women's refusal to accept rejection on grounds of impurity.⁶⁹ Rebera also interprets the woman's voice as power and relates it to the problem of gender-stereotyping and repressive socialisation where women's voices are suppressed. In such contexts the woman's discourse with Jesus has an emancipatory impulse since her actions understood from a South Asian feminist perspective would be 'unwomanly'. Thus the encounter can be understood as subversion of stereotypes.⁷⁰ The woman is posited as an icon for women today to claim the right to power, and is commended for her ability to use the '“power” of the weak' in a positive and life giving manner.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', pp. 78,79.

⁶⁹ Rebera, 'The Syrophenician Woman', p. 105.

⁷⁰ Rebera, 'The Syrophenician Woman', p. 105.

⁷¹ Rebera, 'The Syrophenician Woman', p. 107.

Understood from the Syrophoenician woman's perspective as an 'under dog' (literally!), an attack on conventional social codes constitutes an important part of the cultural ideology of marginalised groups because such social codes function as epistemological tools which are used by the dominant groups to shape the marginal groups and sustain and perpetuate the status quo.

Pertinent parallels can be drawn between the actions of the woman crossing the boundaries of social semiotics and the cultural ideology of the Dalits. Dalit thinkers (as has been already pointed out) have, as part of their process of liberation, considered constant attacks and conscious infringement of the semiotics of caste-order as an important component of their counter-ideology. Certain symbolic manifestations of this aspect of Dalit ideology has been the public burning of copies of the laws of Manu by Dalit ideologists. Such actions derive from the realisation on the part of Dalit thinkers that the strength which discrimination against the Dalits derives from the Hindu scriptures is 'the symbolic potency of such texts to define reality and represent the squalid and miserable conditions of the 'polluted' Dalits as natural and consistent with a *dharmaic* order'.⁷²

Similarly, we should pay particular attention to the example of Periyar E. V. Ramasami, popularly known as Periyar who was founder of the Dravidian Movement (*Dravida Kazhagam*) of Tamil Nadu. Periyar was a *Shudra*, non-Dalit 'low-caste', who launched a vociferous attack on Brahminic/Priestly religion. S. Robertson gives us details of the highly symbolic content of Periyar's vehement attacks:

During 1927-28, he campaigned for burning the Manu Dharma Shastra and in 1942, for burning Ramayana and Periya Puranam. In 1953 he broke images of Vinayaka (Ganesha). Periyar and his followers burned parts of the Indian constitution in 1957 because it encourages caste system. In the same year there was a great attempt to remove the title "Brahmin" from hotel name

⁷² Schwartz, 'Indian Untouchables' Texts of Resistance, (pp. 177-191).

boards. In 1960 Periyar burned pictures of Rama. In 1971 Periyar organised a superstition eradication conference in Salem. In this conference Rama's image was taken in the procession and was beaten by sandals. Hindu deities were obscenely portrayed. The effigy of Rama was burned publicly. Posters revealing the lust of and birth of Hindu deities were found everywhere. Many other photos depicted naked idols and erotic scenes from mythology.⁷³

Such actions have a deep, though often always polemic, emancipatory meaning. Here Periyar's intention was to make people to disrespect and disregard Hindu scriptures, which he considered had functioned as tools to enslave the so called 'lower-castes'. These actions have to be understood as overt rejection of the authority of Hindu scriptures and Hindu Gods and a refusal to allow them any 'normative-superiority'. Such visible affront dismantles all associated sacrosanct perceptions, which have so far inured the non-Brahmins to their ascribed inferiority. These are public symbolic acts.

I am not advocating the propriety of such sort of resistive and subversive strategies *per se*, rather my point is to draw attention to one notion that exists among anti-caste groups - that liberation from the enslaving tendencies of the caste-system is also linked with repudiating the validity and sacrosanct status ascribed to religious texts, icons and beliefs, which reinforce and reiterate the 'normativity' or even the 'sacrality' of caste-discrimination. I agree with the quintessence of this dimension of anti-caste praxis, while maintaining that the *manifest content* that this repudiation should take must not lead to further animosity and polarisation.

But not all of what the woman does can be outrightly classified as overt resistance. There are certain aspects in the story where the woman is portrayed as conforming to the code of social semiotics. Employing the titular address, 'Lord, Son of David'

⁷³ S. Robertson, 'Periyar E. V. Ramasami's Critique of Priestly Hinduism and its Implications for Social Reforms', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2 & 3, June & September, 2004, (pp. 10-29), p. 23.

signifies the woman as one who accepts the pre-eminence of Jesus.⁷⁴ In the grammar of patron-client relationships the woman's petitions for mercy can be characterised as 'a client's request for special "favour" or benefaction'.⁷⁵ Here we find the twin elements of submissiveness and defiance that constitute subaltern mentality being acted out by the woman.⁷⁶

From this perspective, I am of the opinion that the woman's response to Jesus' initial harsh verbal reply reflects a subtly-nuanced refusal to accept Jesus' position of referring to her as a 'dog' and rejecting her needs. Though it seems as if the woman herself has internalised the quintessence of her identity in terms of 'dog-ness', in fact what her reply reflects is that she understands it more in terms of 'where Jesus is from' i.e. Jesus' own perspective as an Israelite male. A simpler interpretation of her words would mean, 'Yes, that is what you think, but can't you see those in need outside your own people'. The resistive element in her reply is that she seems relatively unperturbed by how Jesus labels her, in comparison with her own restlessness to acquire healing for her daughter. It seems as if she has downplayed the 'seriousness' of Jesus' words.

3 - Jesus as a Finally Teachable Man: The Ethical Imperative of Unlearning

I agree with David Rhoads who argues that the encounter of Jesus with the Syrophenician woman facilitated a genuine change of mind in Jesus. This is one occasion in Mark where we get the picture of Jesus losing an argument, and more

⁷⁴ Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 75.

⁷⁵ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 135.

⁷⁶ Gautam Bhadra, 'The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharma', in Ranajit Guha, (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 5. Cited in Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 130.

significantly to someone who is not only a foreigner but also a woman.⁷⁷ The consequence of this encounter of wits is that Jesus ‘relents from his initial reluctance to help the woman and pronounces her daughter free of the demon’.⁷⁸ Jesus who begins the scene with the assumption that ‘the Kingdom is for the Jews now and only later for the Gentiles ...ends the scene with a willingness for the gentiles to benefit significantly from the kingdom even now’.⁷⁹ Meyer’s comment helps us to understand the story as an example of status equalization:

Jesus allows himself to be “shamed” (becoming “least”) in order to include this pagan woman in the new community of the kingdom; so too Judaism will have to suffer the indignity of redefining its group boundaries (collective honor) in order to realize that gentiles are now welcomed as equals.⁸⁰

Understood in this light, the praxiological implications of this example of Jesus, provocatively posit various challenges for the Indian Churches. First is the humility for dominant groups to suffer the ‘indignity’ of redefinition of group boundaries. In a context where churches can degenerate into caste-based ghettos, welcoming the ‘Other’ as an equal can be a disturbing irruption. PHEME PERKINS is of the opinion that ‘this story challenges Christians to examine how they treat ‘Gentile’, persons from other racial or ethnic background in their midst’.⁸¹

From another angle the story presents the paradigm of Jesus as a teachable man. It portrays Jesus as one who doesn’t absolutise his own assumptions. He is willing to learn from the woman and re-image his identity as necessary. Japanese feminist theologian Hisako Kinukawa identifies Jesus in Mark as one, who, ‘having spent his whole life in the culture of honour / shame which was fully male-oriented, and which

⁷⁷ Bryan Christopher, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel and its Literary and Cultural Settings*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 97.

⁷⁸ Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 117.

⁷⁹ Rhoads, ‘Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman’, p. 360.

⁸⁰ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 204.

⁸¹ PHEME PERKINS, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, in *NIB*, Vol. VIII, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp. (609-733), p. 611.

expected women to bear all the shame... did not take initiative until women prepared him by stages to break down the boundaries'. Kinukawa is of the opinion that the woman's effort is motivational and persuasive in enlarging Jesus' ministry to encompass gentiles. I agree with her in identifying the woman as one among those who 'led Jesus to become a responding "boundary breaker"'.⁸² Another writer Sharon H. Ringe, dealing with the Markan version of the story, also draws our attention to the women's ministry *to* Jesus.⁸³ Using the language of gifts, Ringe portrays the effect of the woman on Jesus as follows:

...she seems to have enabled him to act in a way apparently blocked to him before. Her wit, her sharp retort, was indeed her gift to Jesus—a gift that enabled his gift of healing in turn, her ministry that opened up the possibility of his.

Here Jesus himself must learn about being that sort of Christ from one of the poorest of the poor and most despised of the outcast ... her gifts and her ministry become the vehicle of the gospel to Jesus and to us...⁸⁴

From this angle we gain a perception of the agency to the woman in helping Jesus to respond to the situation differently. The woman's act enables Jesus to become a channel of the redeeming presence of God in the situation because her dialogue with him facilitates a new insight to the situation.⁸⁵ Jesus emerges from the conversation as 'a finally teachable man' who has gained new insights on the meaning of his 'messiahship'.⁸⁶

⁸² Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p. 139.

⁸³ Sharon H. Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story', in Letty M. Russel (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), (pp. 65-72).

⁸⁴ Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story', p. 72.

⁸⁵ Ringe, 'A Gentile Women's Story', p. 71.

⁸⁶ See Wainwright's revised treatment of the story in 'A Voice from the Margin: Reading Mathew 15.21-28 in an Australian Feminist Key', in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), (pp. 132-153). Ringe revised her version in 'A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited', in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), (pp. 79-100), p. 99.

The image of Jesus as a 'teachable man' holds ethical imperative in contexts where there is a reluctance to learn from the other. One example can be found in what Kancha Illaiah calls as 'intellectual untouchability'.⁸⁷ While writing with 'passionate anger', about how 'a mind that is trained in the domain of the spiritual fascist culture like that of Hindu culture never appreciates the discoveries of its adversaries', Illaiah says:

The brahmanic Hindus treat even the books written by Dalitbahujans as untouchable. Historically, not only the Dalit body but also books written by Dalit and OBC scholars remain untouchable. That was the reason why untouchability has been imposed on Ambedkar's theoretical writings for a long time in India. Intellectual untouchability was/is more dangerous than physical untouchability. The Dalitbahujan life has not been allowed to figure in school textbooks. Their writings were not rejected with a critical assessment but were rejected with mere contempt even before reading.⁸⁸

In such contexts the challenge is for the dominant to be open to the challenges posed by Dalit academia. Even within the churches there is need for the dominant to be open to the voices of the marginalized and unlearn some traditional attitudes which stress on the identity of Dalits as 'inferior'.

4 - Resistance of Jesus

On the basis of the analysis of Theissen, the Syrophoenician woman can be understood as being dominant especially in the way she is represented as an affluent, Hellenistic citizen of a city which was oppressive towards the Galileans. Understood from this angle can we understand the woman's solicitation of Jesus as representing a

⁸⁷ Illaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu*, p. 141.

⁸⁸ Illaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu*, p. 143.

‘desperate fetishizing of the spiritual power of the weak who are otherwise despised in everyday life’? Can Jesus’ refusal of the woman’s request be understood as ‘an act of resistance to yet one more appropriation of the resources of the oppressed by the powerful’?⁸⁹

Instances where the dominant communities find something worth appropriating from the marginalised communities whom they otherwise despise and oppress can be found even in the Indian caste situation. One important occupation of some major Dalit communities in India, like the *Paraiyars* in Tamil Nadu and *Madigas* in Andhra Pradesh is funeral drumming. It is a ‘forced labour thrust on Dalits’ and usually the remuneration they receive is a pittance, and sometimes only arrack or toddy to drink.⁹⁰ The role of the funeral drummers is considered as irreplaceable even for the funerals of the dominant castes.⁹¹ Because of their indispensability as funeral drummers, the upper caste people ‘are said to entice the Paraiyar drummers with ‘more money and more rice’ so that they do not reject this important ritual component of the caste funerals’.⁹²

There have been various ways in which Dalits have shown resistance to this sort of appropriation of their resources by upper castes. Dalit communities along with social activists in Tamil Nadu have considered ‘collective resistance by withholding the services of drummers for caste funerals’ on the basis that funeral drumming reinforced stereotypes of Dalits as impure and inferior. One consequence of this was

⁸⁹ Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, p. 68.

⁹⁰ Godwin Shiri, ‘The Wide Prevalence of Traditional Occupations Among Christian Dalits – A Sign of Continued Oppression’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 2, June, 1995, (pp. 25-37), p. 29.

⁹¹ This is because drumming at funerals is believed to:

a) ‘bid and contain the spirit of the dead person’, which is believed to hover around the house awaiting an opportunity to occupy some familiar person or place, and guide it to the cemetery - the ‘space destined for the spirits of the dead’, and,

b) keep other demons / malevolent spirits away. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 116,117.

⁹² Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 116.

that it enabled the drummers to increase their bargaining power and fee for their performance.⁹³

In course of an ethnographic field research in *Thondan Thulasi* village of Tamil Nadu, I came across an incident where a community of Dalit Christians broke their drums and gave up funeral drumming because it symbolized that the Dalits were 'impure'.⁹⁴ Though initially it resulted in tensions between the Hindu and Christian Dalits, the matter was resolved when it was agreed that funeral drumming gave them a resource on which the upper-castes were dependent. And as the agency for deciding to play or not lay with the Dalits, drumming gave them a resource on the basis of which negotiations between Dalits and non-Dalits could take place.⁹⁵

The modes of resistance differ. In situations where the Dalits are in a economically 'stable' position independent of the Upper castes, they can refuse to play or even make a 'symbolic break' from the profession (like the Dalit Christians of *Thondan Thulasi*), in other contexts 'bargaining' can be a mode of protest. Nevertheless, the point is that the Dalits recognise their indispensability and agency in the situation and appropriate them in a way they consider beneficial.

5 - Praxis of Engagement: From 'Missioning to' to 'Missioning with'

Another important point for Christian praxis which emerges from the passage is that the passage cannot be understood as merely Jesus' mission *to* the woman. It is also a

⁹³ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 135, (n. 40).

⁹⁴ Another reason for this reaction by Christian Dalits can also be attributed to the fact that most Christians in the area were employed as technicians and factory workers in institutions and medium scale industries in the nearby towns. Hence they were facing upward economic mobility, which meant that they had concrete-roofed houses, some better than non-dalits. Their children also attended English-medium schools in the nearby towns. However in the village, they were being still considered as inferior, which they assumed was because some Dalits continued in funeral drumming.

⁹⁵ However for the Dalits who worked as labourers in the fields owned by upper-caste landowners this was a difficult situation.

story where the woman and Jesus engage *with* each other to secure healing for another. Both are joined in a solidarity of compassion and their mission is carried on mutually and procedurally. The praxiological impetus which emerges from the passage is - to 'Mission *with*' the various others.

In the Markan version of the story we can see that the word of liberation emerges from the woman and not Jesus. Jesus himself acknowledges the value of her words. On his part he seems to just confirm the miracle. Using Postcolonial discourse theory Jim Perkinson in his analysis of the passage raises an important question : in a context where there seems to be a messianic word that is not simply Jesus' own, 'how are we to interpret a word of saving deliverance when it is spoken against the Word of saving deliverance?'⁹⁶ Perkinson's concern is the strategic denial of soteriological value to the woman's voice. He finds in the Markan text evidence for a 'minute disruption in the witness of the gospel to Jesus as the entire locus of salvation'. He brings out the 'peculiar undecidability' associated in situations where the liberating word emerges from the other:

On the one hand, it represents a word of the "not-Christ" that begs to be embraced by Christians as a "christic" word. But it does so solely on the basis of its *performance* and not in its credentials or claim of identification with Christianity. On the other, to the degree such an intervention effects a "real" moment of deliverance or healing, it cannot be entirely screened off discursively as somehow absolutely different from the salvation associated with Christ. Its value may be soteriological even though its author is not clearly Jesus.⁹⁷

One can neither appropriate the salvific word from the other as 'a form of anonymous Christianity' nor entirely differentiate it as 'other'. Rather the challenge which the pericope throws is 'to struggle to read and act alongside of those others in pursuit of

⁹⁶ Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 63.

⁹⁷ Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 82.

words of hope and healing wherever such are spoken.’⁹⁸ The call in this passage is to work with others who are involved in similar agendas of justice and liberation. The dialogical model of mission which emerges is pertinent as a typology for the Indian Church.

There have been tendencies to interpret this passage in to fit into the salvation history theme of Christian mission to the ‘gentiles’. One should be cautious in interpreting this story as a mandate of the Church to evangelise the ‘gentiles’. There is little evidence in the passage to suggest that Jesus’ mission to the woman leads to her conversion. She doesn’t become a follower of Jesus after the healing. Jesus recognizes the woman’s need as an end in itself, and not a means to his own end. Dube ⁹⁹ and Pui-lan¹⁰⁰ pay attention to the religious difference of the woman, when interpreting the passage - she does not become the object of Jesus’ evangelism. Pui-lan points to a reading which offers scope for inter-religious dialogue which recognises the otherness of other faiths. These readings while allowing space for interfaith dialogue, pose a constructive critique to all proselytising tendencies.

An ecclesiocentric reading of this passage has the potential to deter ‘any meaningful dialogue’ with members of other faiths.¹⁰¹ The history of Indian Christianity has shown that very often Dalits have been branded as ‘rice-christians’. Christian missions have never been unambiguously free from the temptation of considering the Dalit situation of deprivation as an opportunity for proselytism. The primacy of ‘spiritual liberation’ over ‘material and physical liberation’ has been emphasized to validate this position. One practical implication of such an attitude is the estrangement of the Christian Church from secular organizations involved in the Dalit cause on the basis that the mission of the Church is ‘qualitatively different’ from the mission of secular organizations. Thus, while appropriating the passage for the Dalit

⁹⁸ Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, p. 82.

⁹⁹ Musa W. Dube, ‘Readings of *Semoya*: Batswana Women’s Interpretations of Matthew 15:21-28’, in *Semeia*, Vol. 73, 1996, (pp. 111-130).

¹⁰⁰ Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 82.

¹⁰¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, ‘The Syrophenician Woman’, in *Expository Times*, Vol. 98, October, 1986, (pp. 13-15), p. 14.

situation it is important to acknowledge that the imperative emerging from the passage is to 'mission *with*' rather than to 'mission *to*' (mission understood in the sense of proselytism).

The challenge of working with the 'Other', which emerges from the passage offers us theological impetus, which can be translated as the co-operation of the church with secular organizations, whose understanding of mission is different from the Church's. 'In the challenging task of empowerment of Dalits - including Dalit Christians - all possible alliances should be formed with other like-minded movements and groups irrespective of whether they are religious or secular; Dalit or non-Dalit'.¹⁰² The Telugu Dalit Christian poet Gurram Jashuva, also appealed to various religious traditions and ideologies like Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Humanism to 'bring together the liberative visions and values from their scriptures and to share their spiritualities towards building a new humanity knit together by God's love, justice and peace'.¹⁰³

6 - Praxis as Consensual Model of Justice

If one looks for a 'concept of justice' in the story, it can be found in the fact that both Jesus and the woman dialogue about their 'rights' and critique the other. If we understand the story accepting Theissen's socio-historical picture of colonial economic relations, we can see both Jesus and the woman engaged in the question of justice. Jesus puts forth his argument for his solidarity with the Galilean peasants. Jesus is concerned about the Galileans who have scarce food to live on and critically reveals the dominant relationship of the Tyrians over the Jews through his words.¹⁰⁴ Against the background of the economic relations between the Galilean peasantry and the regions of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus words could mean: 'First let the poor people in

¹⁰² Shiri, 'People's Movements', p. 129.

¹⁰³ Prabhakar, 'Women and Gender Equality', p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 52.

the Jewish rural areas be satisfied. For it is not good to take the poor people's food and throw it to the rich gentiles in the cities'.¹⁰⁵

From the woman's angle, she seeks 'to defend the "rights" of her people to the liberating power of Jesus' exorcism ministry'.¹⁰⁶ The woman brings to Jesus' attention her own representation of reality. While she helps expose the arbitrariness of the 'chosen' ideology and counters Jesus' claim to exclusivity,¹⁰⁷ she on her part shows perceptivity to the prevailing asymmetries and clearly distances herself from the oppressive traders. By acknowledging herself also as one in need she identifies herself not with the oppressive traders who benefit from the bread that is 'snatched' away from the children to whom it belongs, rather she stresses her desire to be included in the household, where surplus food is shared and, more importantly in this context, where no one is deprived.

From Jesus' statement she discerns Jesus' concern for the 'others' in Galilee. 'She acknowledges the primacy that the Galilean peasants ought to have', at the same time, she also awakens Jesus to recognise her among the 'others' in the society of Tyre.¹⁰⁸ Her plea is for 'Jesus to be consistent in putting the primacy of the marginalized wherever they are and showing an egalitarian spirit toward those who are destitute'.¹⁰⁹ The woman challenges Jesus on the basis of his own convictions of the primacy of the needy. The verbal riposte of the woman to Jesus' response to her initial pleas provides the strategic twist to the story. The woman's response is in the form of 'a reiteration that contests Jesus' words in the name of his own iterated values'.¹¹⁰ In order to leverage his refusal of the woman's request, Jesus invokes the 'little ones': 'it is not right to take what children need and – while they are still hungry- give it to "dogs" '. As a response, by deploying the image against the content, the woman capitalizes on the positive valuation given to children and presses

¹⁰⁵ Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 75. Cited in Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 67.

¹⁰⁶ Meyers, *Binding*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁷ Rebera, 'The Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 106.

¹⁰⁸ Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 52.

¹⁰⁹ Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', pp. 52,53.

¹¹⁰ Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 75.

forth the cause of her own child.¹¹¹ The woman creates what seems like ‘solidarity in littleness’ by linking up puppies (which is the literal meaning of the word Jesus used for dogs) with the diminutives for crumbs and children.¹¹² In the process she ‘opens up room for her own daughter in the privileged position he (Jesus) accords to the most vulnerable’.¹¹³ She is also a needy person and, in the same way that Jesus identifies himself in solidarity with the destitute Galilean peasants, she wants Jesus to be benevolent towards her and address her need.

It is obvious that at the end of her brief encounter of challenge and riposte with Jesus there is a subversion of her assumed identity. The favourable reply that Jesus gives her is now affirmative. There is a reversal of equilibrium of power.¹¹⁴ The good news of the story is that by conceding to her request and healing her daughter Jesus confirms their status as ‘children’. In Pokorny’s words ‘the puppy became a child’.¹¹⁵ By attributing the reason for his change of stance to her ‘words’, Jesus acknowledges her agency in the transformation. She acts boldly and is rewarded by Jesus.¹¹⁶ She actually wins Jesus over.¹¹⁷

One can discern a persuasive and consensual model of justice in the story. What we are looking at is similar to ‘what Habermas calls as the ‘ideal speech situation’ in which no one is inhibited by fear of threat or status from sharing fully in the search for agreement and in which each participant may introduce any considerations desired’.¹¹⁸ Forrester in his analysis of Habermas points out that Habermas’ ‘community of discourse in the ideal speech situation is in a real sense a model of what justice means’. According to Forrester:

¹¹¹ Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, p. 75.

¹¹² Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, pp. 75,76.

¹¹³ Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, p. 76.

¹¹⁴ Kinukawa, ‘The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman’, p. 53.

¹¹⁵ P. Pokorny, ‘From Puppy to the Child: Some Problems of Contemporary Biblical Exegesis Demonstrated from Mark 7:24-30/Matt 15.21-8’, in *NTS*, Vol. 41, 1995, (pp. 321-327), p. 327.

¹¹⁶ Anderson, ‘Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter’, p. 131.

¹¹⁷ Pokorny, ‘From Puppy to the Child’, p. 328.

¹¹⁸ Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 171.

A just society is one in which there is minimum of coercion and the maximum of attentiveness to what each person and group has to contribute and to say, a society where manipulation and ideological control are systematically discountenanced, where people are able to relate freely and openly to one another, where people learn to speak the truth in love.¹¹⁹

According to Forrester, though unarticulated, these features are implicit in Habermas. The interaction between the woman and Jesus has this kind of a situation, involving participation and dialogue. All elements of coercion are gradually minimised and attentiveness to the other is maximised. Both emerge as transformed subjects. Through the process of dialogue their identities have been re-imaged and re-understood. The important lesson that they both learn from their encounter is 'priority for the needy'. Seen from the angle of the researcher it is a story where the barriers of ethnicity, gender, region and religion are broken, exclusivity is questioned and justice is redefined as attitudes are transformed.

This model of justice, as consensual and procedural, can be paradigmatic in the caste-context where the rights, desires, afflictions and aspirations of all are shared and communities decide consensually, with minimum coercion, appropriate manifestations of justice. This involves the willingness of both groups to listen to each other and consider the other's voice seriously. There is sufficient impetus in this interpretation for engaging with the other in the struggle for wholeness.

¹¹⁹ Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 173.

C - Implications for Dalit Theology

1 - The Other within the Other¹²⁰ : Hybrid Identity

Having trawled through the various interpretations of the story one should note that there is an ambiguity in the way the woman's identity is represented. The various interlocutors of her identity namely race, gender, ethnicity, economic status place her 'simultaneously at the boundaries of the privileged and the marginalised'.¹²¹ Drawing attention to the presence of 'the Other within the Other', Kwok Pui Lan cautions against a reductionist approach in appropriating the identity of the Syrophoenician woman:

We may be tempted to identify with her Otherness as a racial minority, as a woman or as the contemporary marginalised, without recognizing our own privileges and our own potential to exploit others. The Other is never a homogenous group, there is always the Other within the Other.¹²²

Attention to the aspect of 'the Other within the Other', though important, is often a neglected aspect of Dalit Theology. A uni-dimensional view - of caste communities as the dominant, and Dalit communities as the dominated - has predominantly influenced much of Dalit theology. The ambiguity and possibilities which hybrid identities posit have not been fully analysed or sufficiently appropriated by Dalit theologians. This is one reason why much of Dalit theology has been articulated focussed on binarism. Postcolonial theory helps us to recognise hybridity as a reality and work through this hybridity.

¹²⁰ Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 82.

¹²¹ Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 75.

¹²² Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 82.

Illaiah a secular Dalitbahujan ideologist and political theorist staunchly proposes that focussing on the binarism between Hindu caste-communities and Dalitbahujan alone can provide the appropriate methodology to subvert the hegemonic influences of caste Hinduism.¹²³ Responding to criticism about the problems with such 'notions of binary opposition', Illaiah writes:

Those who are uncomfortable with the 'notions of binary opposition' would only end up in more and more confusion. The notion of what they call multidimensionality is capable of producing and reproducing Brahminism in each sphere, and there would not be any major opposition to its hegemony. The Dalitbahujan strength lies in locating the core of binary existences. Those Dalitbahujan scholars who let themselves be confused for three thousand years by falling into the trap of multidimensionality could never set a theoretical agenda of their own till Ambedkar came on the scene. He saw binaries through the prism of caste in Indian history as Marx saw the binaries in the west through the prism of class.¹²⁴

I agree that focussing on binarism can give a suitable methodological framework that can free Dalit culture from the reification of 'inferiority' imposed on it by caste Hinduism because it has the potential to 'rudely awaken' caste Hindu consciousness to the 'reality' of the oppressive, dehumanising and exploitative aspects of its religion, as understood by the Dalitbahujans on the basis of their subjective experiences. This inordinate accentuation of the positive dimensions of Dalit culture can also help to balance the 'history of vilification' directed against the Dalits.¹²⁵

However, I am sceptical about the potential of the bipolar methodology to move beyond ideological and theological ghettoization. Also the blind spot of this foundational bipolarity is the lack of perceptivity (probably a deliberate

¹²³ Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu*, see chapters on 'On being an Un-Hindu Indian', 'Dalitization not Hinduization'.

¹²⁴ Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu*, pp. 151,152.

¹²⁵ Clarke, 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain', p. 39.

methodological stance) to recognise the points of intersection between the Dalits and caste-Hindus.¹²⁶ We also need to question whether the argument for stereotyping one religion or culture as the ideal while polarising its 'Other' antithetically, can be sustained on the basis of empirical analysis. On this Sathianathan Clarke queries as follows:

While such constructions may facilitate the morale of a particular community, whether this is ever true of social life in any setting is quite another question. In many ways the foundational bipolarity model advances an essentialist dialectic which construes essence as always appearing in binary forms. However, the further suggestion that these binary representations do take on such neat communitarian dualisms is highly debatable. Any discerning student of Indian society would have to contend with the random, arbitrary and ambiguous manifestations of meritorious and degenerate beliefs and practices in all sections of human community i.e., Dalit and Caste alike.¹²⁷

As we have already pointed out, Dalit theologians, more often than not, have exhibited a tendency to focus on the identity of the Dalits only as 'victims of the caste-system'. They have maintained relative oblivion to the aspect of Dalits as 'oppressors', within the reality of intra-Dalit hierarchy. Intra-Dalit hierarchy and divisions between Dalits have often been critiqued by Dalit theologians not on the basis of their 'ontological wrongness', (which definitively characterises Dalit critique of caste-system), but on the basis of their functional demerits, i.e. on the basis that such intra-Dalit divisions thwart Dalit solidarity and the possibility of a 'unified' Dalit front, which is a strong resource for Dalit struggles.

¹²⁶ In his critique of such foundational bipolarity Clarke says:

The most serious problem with the foundational bipolarity model has to do with recent rejections of structural and substantive dualism. In spite of the geographical and social world that divide the Dalits from the Caste communities, one cannot be blind to numerous ways in which these two communities interact economically, socially and politically. The relation between the two religions is no doubt restricted by many injunctions and conventions; and yet there are points at which they intersect. Clarke, 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain', p. 38.

¹²⁷ Clarke, 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain', pp. 38,39.

One way in which Dalits and non-Dalits can work with each other is to recognise the soft boundaries that exist between Dalits and non-Dalits. The Indian caste system is so complex that inspite of cardinal differences there are points of interrelatedness between the religious world of the caste-communities and Dalit communities. Dalit religion cannot be glorified 'as being completely independent of and, thus, at all points contradictory to caste Hinduism'. Though the binary structure of opposition, 'of subject-object, foreign-native, colonizer-colonized, self-other, and Hindu-Dalit', is useful to analytically dissect the problem it seldom does 'justice to the complexity of the relationship between caste Hindu and Dalit religion'.¹²⁸

Abraham Ayrookuzhiel has pointed out interesting possibilities that this type of interrelatedness holds for Dalit praxis. One the basis of a study based in the South Indian state of *Kerala*, Ayrookuzhiel notes that in the course of historical developments, Dalits and caste-Hindus have 'a number of religious commonalities ... in the form of common god symbols, common religious festivals, common places of worship, common rituals and common places of pilgrimages'.¹²⁹ On the basis of this commonality he proposes an interesting typology for praxis, which 'takes advantage' of such relationality:

...it is sufficiently clear that the religious heritage of the dalits is something which is acceptable to the caste Hindus though it challenges them. We have to give visibility to the challenge lest they continue to subordinate them in a traditional manner. Such a challenge will bring about the necessary pressure for a second Hindu renaissance. Since Dalit tradition is historically bound up with the caste Hindu tradition it will not be easy to resist the pressure from inside. Here the dalits are asking for change as insiders. Given the political weightage of the dalit community in India it will be difficult for the caste

¹²⁸ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 126.

¹²⁹ Ayrookuzhiel, 'A Proposal', p. 23.

Hindu to resist their demands. A process of change in this way will be in the spirit of dialogue of religions.¹³⁰

In the Dalit theological context, and especially when the researcher is sympathetic to 'the Dalit' cause, it is easy to opt for a hermeneutic of binarism and homogeneity. The problem with this hermeneutics is that it is antithetical to the one important dimension of the purpose of Dalit theology, which is the breaking down of structural boundaries. Moreover the consequences of such hermeneutics can be further estrangement rather than the constructive possibility of engagement. We can even argue that Dalit theology through its ideology of binarism has the potential to replicate-in-reverse the attitudes it seeks subvert. Its potential to curtail dialogical interaction and mutual interdependence between various communities implies that it is not the way forward to a society marked by the cessation of hostility and hatred.

2 - Engaging with the 'Other'

The mutual interaction between the woman and Jesus provides us a key to the hermeneutical appropriation of the passage with a praxis-oriented thrust. One should not ignore the reciprocity involved in the miracle. Both Jesus and the Syrophenician woman received and learned something from the interaction.¹³¹ 'The Syrophenician woman rattled the exclusive ethnic zones erected around communities at the time. In her persistence and assertive dialogue with Jesus, she not only got her daughter restored to life but also helped Jesus to broaden his particularistic and culture-bound understanding of people who were outside the Jewish fold'.¹³²

Both the woman and Jesus have indispensable value in the story. The woman needed Jesus, she recognized him as the source of healing. However, in the process of her

¹³⁰ Ayrookuzhiel, 'A Proposal', p. 28.

¹³¹ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 237.

¹³² Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 238.

engaging with Jesus, she helped Jesus to gain new insights into the nature of his mission. Seen from any angle the challenge is for mutual co-operation. Points of convergence allow for people to work together and it is important to identify those convergent theological trajectories. In the story of the Syrophenician woman the convergent matrices which unite the woman and Jesus in a common purpose are the primacy of the needy, and pro-active passion for the deprived. But only through a process of interaction and dialogue do they recognise these aspects of convergence. Thus, the story can be praxiologically appropriated as a prototype for identifying convergent trajectories which can unify different communities and groups in a commonality of purpose.

Mutual openness and willingness to learn from the 'Other' is key to the transformation of caste-relationships and emancipation of Dalits. The paradigm of Jesus who is clearly open to learning from the other is the paradigm that holds pertinence for the Dalits and non-Dalits to learn from mutual interaction.

This story is not only about the widening of Jesus' understanding of his own mission, nor of the inclusive nature of Jesus' mission, but also about Jesus' willingness to learn and change in his interaction with someone who doesn't share the same religious and ethnic orientation as his. Learning from the 'Others' and engaging with the 'Others' have definite praxiological implications for Christian involvement in the Dalit struggle. It can be translated as a call to many groups and organizations to engage with one another - the Church to engage with secular organizations, Christians with non-Christians, Dalits with non-Dalit Christians etc. There are a lot of 'Others' in Dalit theology. The 'Others' are the non-Christian Dalits, secular organizations, non-Dalits, and non-Dalit theologies. Dalit theology has to take into serious consideration the prospects of a dialogical engagement with these 'Others' to be effective in its praxis.

One of the main challenges of Dalit theology is that it lacks sufficient theological impetus to learn from the non-Dalits. I understand that any proposal to open itself

fully to non-Dalit influences is fraught with its own risks, not the least being the legitimate fear of theological co-option and ideological subsumation. This was the reason why Nirmal pointed out the need for 'methodological exclusivism' in the way Dalit theology is articulated.

J. Jayakiran Sebastian, upon an analysis of the different strands of A. P. Nirmal's writings, locates Nirmal's desire for methodological exclusivism within Nirmal's quest for relationality at various levels and various issues and themes. Pointing to Nirmal's call for a movement 'away from the idea of imperial unity ... to relationality that will respect the integrity and differences of many and yet keep them related to each other', Sebastian points out:

This raises the question as to whether Nirmal meant that one ought to move in the direction of some kind of reconciliatory theology, or whether Nirmal was setting forth yet another challenge before us - that of creatively exploring the interrelationship and interaction between Dalit theology and other forms of theologizing, as well as between Dalit and other communities, including those communities whose present 'status' was achieved, at least in part, through the use and abuse of Dalit peoples.¹³³

Sebastian's conclusion is that Nirmal's call is for 'a recognition of the ambivalence of all inter-relationality, where the process of creative exploration is not content to set attainable goals, but rather to recognise that the ongoing quest for informed relationality is itself the goal'. Though Nirmal's search for theological relationality is fraught with ambiguity and is not as straight forward as his call for methodological exclusivism, Dalit theology should overcome its theological ghettoization and explore the liberative dimensions of other non-Dalit theologies.

¹³³ J. Jayakiran Sebastian, 'Creative Exploration: Arvind P. Nirmal's Ongoing Contribution to Christian Theology', in *BTF*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, December, 1999. (pp. 44-52), p. 48.

Nevertheless theologians have cautiously probed the question of the need for Dalits and non-Dalits to engage with one another. In his article 'Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead', K. C Abraham points to two tasks which lie ahead for Dalit theology. The first concerns the solidarity of Christian Dalits with Dalits of other religious orientation.¹³⁴ The other task he mentions is located within an overarching vision 'to evolve a pluriform community which allows different identities to flourish'. His concern pertains to the tension between - fidelity to this vision of a pluriform community, and, the ongoing struggles of the Dalits for identity and justice. Abraham points out the theological implications of this tension:

Without this common vision our individual identities when affirmed as mutually exclusive will destroy human community. Perhaps this aspect should receive further attention by Dalit theology and by all contextual theologies. While we reject a universalising tendency in sectarian theologies, especially those that come out of dominant groups, we need to keep the dialogue open in such a way that there is scope of learning from others. This is an inescapable demand of being faithful to the one gospel.¹³⁵

Dalit theology hasn't really opened the discursive space to interact with other non-Dalit theologies. Its attitude towards other theologies has been one of broad generalisation that such theologies are anti-Dalit. Lott draws attention to how Hindu

¹³⁴ According to Abraham:

The discussion on identity should also take into consideration the solidarity of Christian dalits with dalits in other religions. There are many common concerns and traditions. They are now divided; each group has developed its particular form of sub-culture. But without suppressing such individual Dalit identities, how can we build a common front? Here theology faces a special problem. A dalit theology is based on Christian symbols and language. How do we evolve a common language? Are there insights from other traditions which we must integrate into our theological formulations? Is there a Dalit hermeneutics that can commonly be applied to different dalit traditions? K. C. Abraham, 'Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead', in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1 & 2, March & June, 1997, (pp. 36-47), p. 46.

¹³⁵ Abraham, 'Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead', p. 46.

theologies, in particular the *Vedantic* systems,¹³⁶ which have been ‘explored earlier by a few Christian theologians (especially Catholics) as possibly providing an appropriate framework for Indian Christian reflection’, with the emergence of Dalit consciousness are now seen as forms of dangerous Brahmanic hegemony. ‘Anything Vedic is now seen as irrevocably linked with Brahmanic hierarchical dominance’.¹³⁷ In this context of ‘the struggle between the indigeneity of the ‘little tradition’ and the powerful hegemonic norms of a dominant culture and its social embodiment’, Lott reminds us about the arbitrariness of homogenizing:

But the homogenizing process is never completely successful. Cultural impact is never merely one-way, and along with the unexpected outposts of resistance and insurgency that remain, there are also surprising insights to be found within the larger systems. The task remains, therefore of uncovering these struggles and thereby countering all our cultural assumptions.¹³⁸

One way of dealing with this problem at the theological level would be to focus on contrapuntal hermeneutics. Contrapuntal hermeneutics involves a reading strategy whereby different interpretations undertaken in different backgrounds are read in juxtaposition. The readings complement each other and help us to identify issues with greater depth. There is a need for creative exploration along the lines contrapuntal hermeneutics between Dalit theological articulations and non-Dalit theological articulations.

Various examples of liberative dimensions which enjoy commonality with Dalit theology can be found within the theologies articulated by non-Dalit theologians. Indian Christian theologian K. P. Aleaz, exhibiting robust theological optimism, has explored the possibility of the convergence of Dalit and Advaitic (philosophy of non-dualism) theologies. Aleaz’s attempts are to demonstrate that Advaitic theology is

¹³⁶ The sub-schools of one of the six orthodox Hindu visions or philosophies. Eric J. Lott, ‘Hindu Theology’s Forgotten Struggles’, in Israel Selvanayagam, (ed.), *Moving Forms of Theology: Faith Talk’s Changing Contexts*, (Delhi: ISPCK:2002), (pp. 76-83), p. 76.

¹³⁷ Lott, ‘Hindu Theology’s Forgotten Struggles’, p. 76.

¹³⁸ Lott, ‘Hindu Theology’s Forgotten Struggles’, p. 83.

not anti-dalit theology and that Advaita can provide deeper foundations for Dalit theology.¹³⁹ Aleaz concludes that Dalit theology 'need not necessarily represent a discontinuity with Brahmannic Indian Christian Theology. There is a Dalit-Advaita Vedantic continuity possible in Indian Christian Theology'.¹⁴⁰

Though I do not fully agree that 'Advaita can provide deeper foundations for Dalit theology', because the foundations of Dalit theology need to be based on the Dalit experience, culture, forms of resistance and protest, I consider that Aleaz's proposition holds valence in the Indian theological context. This is because it opens the possibility of reaching out to other forms of theologizing, free from 'prejudices' and finding points of convergence which can later be validated as starting points of 'mutual-praxis'.

For example Swami Vivekananda's vedantic understanding of Jesus as a *Yogi* - one who realised himself as God in his Spirit through renunciation of ego-consciousness,¹⁴¹ has implications for the Dalit struggle because renunciation of ego-consciousness is vital for transformation of people's attitudes to caste. Brahmabandhab Uphadyaya's interpretation of the fourth gospel on the basis of *advaita* (philosophy of non-dualism) argues that the goal of human life is 'to know

¹³⁹ K. P. Aleaz, 'The Convergence of Dalit-Advaitic Theologies: An Exploration', in *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 361, No. 1, (pp. 97-108), p. 97.

¹⁴⁰ Aleaz's findings in his own words are as follows:

There is a Dalit-Advaita vedantic continuity possible in Indian Christian Theology. Dalit theology can function as a counter theology as other people's theologies are, but it is a converging theology as well due to the Advaita Vedantic-Dalit convergence. Dalit theology can follow a methodological exclusivism where primacy of the term 'dalit' is conceded, but this can be done side by side with conceding the primacy of One Brahman-Atman as well. Dalit theology can be a theology from below, a prophetic theology and a political theology as Advaita theology also can be all these. Dalit theology together with Advaitic theology affirm the basic unity between thought and action and consider all knowing as praxiological. The convergence of Dalit-Advaitic theologies affirm the interrelation between philosophy and sociology; if people's experience is the focus of sociology, human persons are an integral part of the theory of reality (metaphysics) which is a significant aspect of philosophy; it is through social realities philosophical propositions are arrived at. See Aleaz, 'The Convergence of Dalit-Advaitic Theologies', p. 104.

¹⁴¹ Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology*, p. 56.

God as he is...to be like him and to be united with him'.¹⁴² This enjoys commonality with the ethical imperatives which emerge from Dalit theology which is to know God as the suffering Christ, to follow the example of Jesus Christ and be united with Jesus Christ by being in solidarity with suffering humanity. The challenge ahead for Dalit theology is to affirm the commonalities as a common starting point for praxis.

One should also seriously re-consider the Dalit understanding of the theology of Appasamy. Appasamy presented Christianity as *Bhakti* religion which was popular among 'lower-castes'.¹⁴³ For Appasamy selfless love is the nearest equivalent of *Bhakti* than faith and devotion. It is only through a selfless love or *Bhakti* that one can attain *Moksha* or Liberation / Salvation and know Christ.¹⁴⁴ Appasamy used the *visistadvaita* or modified non-dualism, in his exposition of the *Bhakti* tradition to develop his Christology.¹⁴⁵ According to Appasamy the union of Christ with God is moral or ethical and this is the paradigm which should dictate the attitude/relationship of the *Bhakta* (believer) to the Divine. Only through a unity of purpose with God can a believer be in union with God. The ethical imperatives of these dimension of Appasamy's theology have a lot in common with Dalit praxis, which seeks to identify the verity of Christian faith on the basis of its conformity to the paradigm of Jesus Christ, whose actions are believed as reflecting the ethics of reign of God.

In what can be directly relevant to Dalit theology, Appasamy affirmed the image of Christ as one who underwent suffering. He rejected the Hindu theistic doctrine of impassibility. Though he adopted the *Bhakti* tradition to articulate his Christology, he recognised that in Hindu *Bhakti* 'the suffering aspect of God is undermined and discounted for the *ananda* (joy) of God'.¹⁴⁶ The unique contribution of Christianity to India according to Appasamy is to reaffirm that Jesus' sufferings, though acute, were not the result of sin. This is a subversion of the dominant idea of *Karma* under

¹⁴² Cited in Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, p. 42-43.

¹⁴³ A. J. Appasamy, *A Bishop's Story*, (Madras: CLS, 1969), p. 12. .

¹⁴⁴ See. A. J. Appasamy, *What is Moksha? A Study in the Johannine Doctrine of Life*, (Madras: CLS, 1931), pp. 1 ff.

¹⁴⁵ Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology*, pp. 59 ff.

¹⁴⁶ D. W. Jesudoss, *What is Man? Theological Attempts and Directions Towards the Formation of an Indian Christian Anthropology for Today*, (Madras: GLTCRI, 1986), pp. 3 ff.

which an Indian usually connects suffering with sin.¹⁴⁷ Repudiation of the doctrine of *Karma* has profound implications for Dalit theology, because the doctrine of *Karma* has played such an instrumental role in enslaving the Dalit communities. The suffering aspect of Appasamy's Christology as well as the ethical and moral dimensions of the *Bhakti* and *advaitic* traditions haven't become the focus of Dalit theologians' engagement with Appasamy's theology, rather what has been focussed upon is the fact that he uses 'brahmannic philosophical concepts' to articulate his theology. A movement away from such prejudices will pave the way for a mutual-learning process between Dalit theology and non-Dalit theology.

George Matthew Nalunnakkal has also pointed out the need for Dalits to work in solidarity with tribals, especially with regard to their right to land, in the light of their submerged identity as the indigenous or original inhabitants. He points out that land can be 'the most important factor' that can unite Dalits and tribals. Making land a common ideological platform can will help tribals and Dalits to counter all developmental projects which destruct the very home of the tribals, as well as challenge the structures which render Dalits as landless labourers. Exploring the question of land and ecology will also go a long way in correcting the existing limitations of Dalit theology, namely its neglect of eco-concerns and its anthropocentrism.¹⁴⁸

D - Conclusion

On the basis of our analysis we can delineate the following praxiological principles for Dalit theology. Dalits need to be pro-active in their attempts for transformation. Praxis should take the form of initiative, subversion, persistence and resistance. In interaction with postcolonial theory we also can propose that it is imperative for Dalit

¹⁴⁷ Jesudoss, *Man*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ George Mathew Nalunnakkal, 'Search for Self-Identity and the Emerging Spirituality: A Dalit Theological Perspective', in *BTF*, Vol. XXX, Nos. 1 & 2, March & June, 1998, (pp. 25-44).

theology to move away from binary and bipolar models of theologizing and seek models of convergence and interdependence in the articulation of its theology. Dalit theology needs to acknowledge and bear in mind the complexity of Dalit identity and recognise that aspects of fluidity and hybridity constitute Dalit identity, Dalit religion and Dalit existence. This will help in evolving inter-relational modes of praxis which can engage non-Dalits as co-partners in liberation. There is need for contrapuntal reading strategies in Dalit theology to recognize the liberative aspects of non-Dalit interpretations. This can also provide as a basis for a mutual critique of casteism. This will pave the way for a praxis of mutual engagement, where both Dalits and non-Dalits can become partners in the struggle for justice and equality.

Chapter – X

Conclusion

The point of departure for this thesis was the recognition that the growing influence of Dalit theology was incompatible with the praxis of the Indian Church which was passive in its attitude towards the oppression of the Dalits both within and outside the Church. The theological reasons for this lacuna between Dalit theology and the Church's praxis, it has been suggested, lie in the content of Dalit theology, especially the biblical paradigms explored, which do not offer adequate scope for engagement in praxis. As a result it was proposed to explore the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm, which could enhance the praxis-potential of Dalit theology.

In drawing this study to a close this chapter attempts to combine a *summary* and a *synthesis* of the major findings of this dissertation in order to evaluate the suitability of the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. The following furnishes the line of thought and argumentation followed in this thesis:

One of the main reasons for proposing the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology was the assumption that 'notions of purity and pollution' were foundational for the discrimination against the Dalits in the Indian context. This assumption was tested in the second chapter of the thesis. This chapter which constituted the first section of the thesis – *Notions of Purity and Pollution and the Dalits* – investigated the validity of premising the caste system and especially the discrimination against the Dalits within the framework of notions of purity and pollution. On the basis of an analysis of anthropological sources it was concluded that in spite of the inconsistencies in empirical operation and the weakening of notions of purity and pollution in the urban context it is still valid to premise the Indian caste system under notions of purity and pollution. It was also concluded that

notions of purity and pollution were central to the discrimination against and marginalization of the Dalit communities. Attention was also drawn to the prevalence of internal hierarchy within Dalit communities on the basis of notions of purity and pollution.

Another reason for proposing the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology was its potential to reduce the gap between Dalit theology and the possibility of practical action. Since it was necessary to identify the reasons which curtail the practical feasibility of Dalit theology, the second section of the thesis – *A Critical Assessment of Dalit Theology* - consisting of chapters 3 and 4, delved into the background for the emergence of Dalit theology (chapter 3) and critically assessed the reasons for the lacuna between Dalit theology and praxis (chapter 4). An important aspect of chapter 3 was identifying the praxiological framework of Dalit theology and assessing the relationship between the theological content of Dalit theology and this praxiological framework. The following were identified as the main features of this praxiological framework:

- i) Dalit liberation, envisaged in terms of a dialectic between identity affirmation and liberative social vision, was recognized as the goal of Dalit theology.
- ii) The agency for this liberation rested not only with the Dalits alone but also in partnerships with non-dalits and other like-minded groups. Therefore a praxis of partnership was envisaged.

However, when the theological content of Dalit theology was analysed in relation to this praxiological framework it was found out that Dalit theology predominantly focused on identity affirmation of the Dalits. The liberative social vision of Dalit theology, though not entirely neglected, was confined to the issue of the non-Dalit Church's solidarity with the Dalits following the model of Christ's solidarity with the outcasts of his day. There was a vagueness about the role of the Dalits in the liberation process.

The fourth chapter critically analysed the theological content of Dalit theology in-depth in the light of the gap between Dalit theology and praxis. A few factors were identified as having the potential to curtail the praxis-potential of Dalit theology.

Firstly, it was recognized that Dalit theology does not offer an appropriate ethical framework to guide Christian responses to notions of purity and pollution which are foundational for the discrimination against the Dalits. Hence caste discrimination continues within the Churches. Secondly, by focusing only on the praxis of the non-Dalit Church, Dalit theology has not recognized and affirmed the agency of the Dalits in the process of liberation in a concrete manner. Considering the fact that Dalits not only constitute the majority of the Indian Church, but also have more reasons for engaging in liberation struggles against caste discrimination, the failure to focus on the role of the Dalits in liberation considerably reduces the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. In connection with this the need for biblical paradigms which affirm the agency of the Dalits in the process of self-liberation was pointed out. Thirdly, it was argued that the inordinate emphasis on suffering in Dalit theology's epistemology of pathos had the potential to lead to masochistic resignation and a Dalit Christology which predominantly concentrated on the image of the suffering servant had the potential to reinforce feelings of inferiority within the Dalits. Thus, it was argued that Dalit Christology and the epistemology of pathos were praxiologically impotent. Fourthly, the lack of a bi-polar ethical imperative which had the potential to facilitate a praxis of partnership was recognised. Fifthly, the inefficacy of the Deuteronomic creed as a theological paradigm for Dalit theology was pointed out on the basis that the history of the Dalits is more in conformity with the plight of the Canaanites and other original inhabitants of the land who are dispossessed by the Israelites. Moreover, as a paradigm which replicates subjugation, the Deuteronomic paradigm offers potential for polemic rather than partnership between the Dalits and non-Dalits. Finally the hermeneutical incompatibility of a predominantly concept-based Dalit theology with a performative, oral and narrative-based Dalit world was recognized as an important reason why Dalit theology was not influential within Dalit communities.

In the light of the findings of the previous two sections the third section of the thesis – *Synoptic Healing Stories as an Alternative Biblical Paradigm for Dalit Theology* – comprising of chapters five and six, explored the synoptic healing stories as an appropriate alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. Chapter five argued for the validity of the proposal to utilize the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology on the basis of the scope which the stories allowed for hermeneutical appropriation in the Indian caste context as well as their potential in offering a corrective praxiological thrust to Dalit Theology.

The sixth chapter identified four salient features of the synoptic healing stories namely touch, faith, compassion and conflict / confrontation, which could constitute the ethical framework on the basis of which a Christian response to notions of purity and pollution could be evaluated. While the feature ‘faith’ could be identified as the actions of the oppressed in the form of initiative and persistence, the other features touch, compassion, conflict and confrontation were identifiable with Jesus’ actions. These four features were later analysed in relation to the motif of boundary-transcendence. Effort was made to identify the interplay of these four features within the context of select healing stories.

The fourth section of the thesis - *A Praxis-Oriented Dalit Reading of Select Healing Stories* - comprising of chapters seven, eight and nine interpreted three select healing stories with the intention of deriving praxiological principles which can be relevant to the Indian context.

The seventh chapter analysed the story of the leper found in all the three gospels in relation to the motif of boundary transcendence. The presence and function of the four features were analysed. The instrumentality of each of these features in enabling a transcendence of the social, psychological and political boundaries which reinforce the status quo was discussed. Both Jesus and the leper emerge as boundary-breakers in the story. Specific attention was paid on the need for a transition in Dalit Christology from a suffering Christ to a liberating Christ. Implications for a

liberative Dalit Christology were drawn in continuity with the image of Jesus who in this story subverts the purity regulations and empowers the leper to become a confronter of the structures which uphold the status quo.

The eighth chapter focused on the issue of the agency of the Dalits in self-liberation in the light of the story which is identified in Mark and Luke as the story of the Gerasene demoniac and in Matthew as the story of the Gadarene demoniacs. Attention was paid to the story as reflected in the gospel of Mark. Recognizing the resistive element in possession in contexts of oppression enabled an analogical hermeneutical engagement with Dalit forms of resistance. Insights for a praxis of resistance were drawn on the basis of an allegorical interpretation of Jesus' exorcising actions. In the light of the Dalit experiences where symbolic resistance by itself was not effective for transformation, the need for a dialectic balance between symbolic and real resistance was brought out and it was argued that symbolic resistance functioning as a proleptic to pragmatic and concrete liberation was important for the Dalits. The primacy of solidarity and community for Dalit resistance to gather momentum, and the need to radically deconstruct the images of the oppressors which perpetuate inferiority were also identified as the praxiological principles which emerge from the story. The story also offered scope for a discussion on the issue of collaboration and collusion with the caste-structures, which is another pertinent issue in the Church's praxis.

The ninth chapter interpreted the story of the Syrophenician/Canaanite woman in relation to the praxis of partnership envisaged by Dalit theology. Drawing upon the insights available from postcolonial readings of the bible as well as other contextual-perspectival readings the implications of the actions of Jesus and the woman were analysed. The image of Jesus as a teachable man, the convention-subverting initiative and persistence of the woman, and the consensual mode of negotiations between the woman and Jesus were identified as having paradigmatic force to forge a praxis of partnership in the Dalit context. Critical attention was drawn to the manner in which Dalit theology views Dalits and non-Dalits in binary terms. Drawing

attention to the hybrid identities of the woman and Jesus which emerge in the story, the potential of the story to offer space for analyzing the complexity of Dalit identity was discussed. Some praxiological possibilities for a creative and constructive deployment of the hybridity of Dalit identity were pointed out. A praxiological principle of mutual engagement and openness to the 'Other' was identified from the interaction between the woman and Jesus. When this principle was applied to the Dalit context, the problems involved in the relationship between Dalit theology and other non-dalit contextual theologies were highlighted. The need for Dalit theology to transcend 'theological ghettoization' and to engage in contrapuntal hermeneutics was also pointed out.

From the findings of the above nine chapters it can be concluded that the proposal for appropriating the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology makes the original obstacles that seemed to inhibit the praxis potential of Dalit theology seem much less formidable. Moreover as the synoptic healing stories have the ability both to espouse issues which are integral to the question of praxis and to articulate paradigms which make the Indian Christian involvement in practical action possible, we can conclude that the synoptic healing stories can function as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology and can enhance its praxis-potential significantly.

On the basis of our interplay between the Dalit context and the synoptic healing stories, it has become obvious that the four constituent features of the ethical framework identified for Christian praxis in this thesis – touch (understood as defiance of the rules of social semiotics), faith (understood as initiative and persistence), compassion (understood in cognitive, affective and volitional terms) and conflict/confrontation - are present and operant either implicitly or explicitly, in various contextually-concrete and specific forms, in secular Dalit praxis where significant transformation has been made possible. Thus, there is evidence for the practicability of the ethical framework delineated in this thesis in terms of the

possibilities it posits for Christian praxis. This further strengthens the argument that the synoptic healing stories can enhance the praxiological potential of Dalit theology.

Synoptic Healing Stories and the Future Possibilities for Dalit Theology

Making the synoptic healing stories the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology and focusing on the notions of purity and pollution also offers other interesting future possibilities for the praxis of Dalit theology.

Sensitivity Towards Dalit Women's Experiences: A Paradigmatic Theological Shift

Though Dalit theology is ideologically pro-women and Dalit religiosity consists of matriarchal deities, Dalit theology does not pay adequate attention to the issue of Dalit women,¹ who are often referred to as the thrice alienated ones - being alienated on the basis of their caste, class, and gender.² There is a sense of hegemony in Dalit theology when it obfuscates the uniqueness of women's experience in its theological articulation by homogenising Dalit experiences to imply Dalit male experiences alone. Dalit Christian women occupy a marginalised status within the Church,³ and suffer from discrimination, lack of adequate representation, and denial of full participation in the church.⁴ However, no attention is paid to this discrimination. Making synoptic healing stories as the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology can not only offer scope to address notions of purity and pollution which are foundational for the discrimination against women on issues like women's ordination,⁵ sexual

¹ Gabriele Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth: Hopes and Fears Facing Feminist Theology*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), p. 242.

² See Aruna Gnanadason, 'Dalit Women -The Dalit of the Dalit', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, (pp. 129-138) and Ruth Manorama, 'Dalit Women: Downtrodden among the Downtrodden', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 159-167).

³ Melanchton, 'Dalit Readers of the Word', p. 48.

⁴ Monica Melanchton, 'Indian Dalit Women and the Bible', in Ursula King and Tina Beattie (eds.), *Gender, Religion & Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, (London: Continuum, 2004), (pp. 212-224).

⁵ D. Rebecca Sangeetha, 'Women's Ordination and Biblical Hermeneutics', in *In God's Image*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2004, (pp. 29-32), p. 29.

freedom,⁶ and women's general social status, but they can also help foster greater sensitivity to the specificity of women's experiences (the haemorrhaging woman) and can open space for an affirmation of Dalit women as agents of liberative praxis (the Syrophoenician woman). This is pertinent in the Indian church context where the role and contribution of Dalit women in their family, church and society are often unacknowledged.⁷

Dalit Theology and Intra-Dalit Hierarchy

One more issue which has come under critical scrutiny but has never been dealt with theologically is the issue of intra-Dalit hierarchy. Dalit Christians have been self-deceptive and hypocritical in declaring that they cease to belong to any caste as Christian Dalits. Calling such declaration a 'white lie', Wilson points out that Christian Dalits not only scrupulously practise sub-casteism but also 'entertain a false superior attitude in relation to the non-Christian Dalit sections'.⁸ On the basis of my own experience in the Vellore Diocese, where I come from, Christian Dalits by their access to education and industrial employment have distanced themselves from the Hindu Dalits who still work as agricultural labourers and funeral drummers. In the incident that I have mentioned in pages 135 and 136 of this dissertation, the actions of the Christian Dalits of Thondan Thulasi village in Tamil Nadu state who broke the *paraimolam* or the Dalit drum of their Hindu counterparts is a conscious effort aimed at distancing themselves from professions considered to be polluting. In certain cases, as we have seen in the second chapter, Dalits claim superiority over other Dalits on the basis of higher purity. Synoptic healing stories, because of their potential to address purity and pollution offer the possibility for Dalit theology to address the issue of intra-Dalit hierarchy critically.

⁶ Kumud Pawde, 'The Position of Dalit women in Indian Society' in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*, (pp. 143-158), p. 154, Also see L. Jayachitra, 'Is Virginity an Issue only for Women', in *In God's Image*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2004. (pp. 35 – 39), p. 36.

⁷ See also Mary Schaller Blaufuss, 'Unexpected Agents of God's Grace-ful Mission: Women's Participation in Christian Mass Movements in India', in George (ed.), *The God of all Grace*, (pp. 441-451).

⁸ Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, p. 163.

Before I conclude it would be worth acknowledging that the origins of this thesis lie in my own personal discontentment at Dalit theology's failure to be effective in a practical manner. I must add, however, that my own experience of having had access to education, and belonging to a family which had a respectable and influential position in church circles in a pre-dominantly Dalit Diocese has given me the freedom to articulate my passion for Dalit liberation in a way which is different from many of my friends in other Dioceses. My own experiences of friends who have been vehement in their affirmation of Dalit theology while at theological college but have become passive while working in parishes where caste-discrimination is rife is an indication of the constraints faced by those who take the task the translating Dalit theology into practice seriously. My clergy friends in other Southern Dioceses fear that the price they may have to bear for their commitment to the Dalit cause may vary from an appointment to a remote area with little access to education for their children to denial of promotion. Thus strategies to silence 'activist-clergy' are well in place which makes the task of Dalit liberation daunting. In a context where such a conspiracy of silence continues the attempts towards Dalit liberation, justice and equality demand sacrifice. Thus, the role of the Indian Church to make the cause of Dalit liberation a sincere priority is a necessary complement to the revision of Dalit theology. It is only through this partnership that transformation is possible.

As I look back at this dissertation I am also aware of the fact that there will be obvious limitations to an approach which proposes a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology focusing predominantly on the issue of praxis. Certain issues have not been exhaustively dealt with - like the question of the role of Dalit identity politics in social transformation. Though this thesis has briefly demonstrated the complex and hybrid nature of Dalit identity, the problems and possibilities of deployment of Dalit identity in the 'clash of caste identities' in the Indian context has remained outside the ambit of this study, and remains a fecund area for future research. Though this study has sought to demonstrate the liberative prospects of the hermeneutical partnership between Dalit theology and postcolonialism, attention to the tensions accompanying that partnership has not been dealt with and is confined to the future agenda of Dalit

theology. Therefore risking ennui I reiterate the familiar cliché that my research opens up fresh possibilities for future research in the area of Dalit theology.

In conclusion it can be said that this study has been an exercise in critical self-reflectivity for Dalit theology. In the light of the widening gap between Dalit theology and praxis the study attempted a reconfiguration of certain areas of Dalit theology using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm. The study demonstrated that resourcing the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology had the potential to enable Dalit theology to become truly emancipatory in its practice.

With the synoptic healing stories as its biblical paradigm Dalit theology can be re-perceived as a concrete and context-specific expression of the Christian faith, which can stand, in the words of Forrester, 'as more than an empty husk of unfulfilled expectations and a bastion of group interests'.⁹ Through this revised Dalit theology Indian Christianity can give shape to and sustain hope - 'the kind of hope that strengthens and comforts the weak and vulnerable, that disturbs the comfortable, and rouses the complacent...the kind of hope which makes reconciliation and community possible' and without which Dalits and non-Dalits are 'doomed to internecine strife and suspicion'.¹⁰

⁹ Duncan B. Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology*, (London / New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 146.

¹⁰ Forrester, *Theological Fragments*, p. 146.

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