



A HISTORICAL STUDY OF DALIT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Theology, as has been seen, is not a product of God, but study about God by human beings, who reflect upon and interpret God's words based on the context from which they hail and the context to which they primarily prefer to respond. Conventionally, theology has originated mainly from the sources of scripture, tradition and reason which, in course of time, has extended to culture and life-experience of people. The formed practice of theology largely remains in the domain of elites and its responsibility is regarded mainly as being for the three main areas of academy, church and society. Considering these parameters for theology, Dalit Theology, as described, has been created by Dalit theologians who hailed from caste oppressed life situations. They countered Indian Christian theology for its westernised thought forms and Brahmanic insights and therefore sourced Dalit Theology from the life experiences of Dalits, the caste-victimised people. The major aim of Dalit Theology is to sharpen the theologically oriented faith perspectives of Dalits to challenge caste and transform society, both for Dalits and non-Dalits to live in God's image and in peace.

INTRODUCTION

Thus, Dalit Theology emerged as contextual and as a theology of liberation with the main characteristics not only of reflecting upon the oppressive situation of the people but also of motivating them theologically to involve themselves in action to bring about change in the oppressive status quo in order for the people to live in freedom. Since the change aimed at by liberation theology is more than purely spiritual and seeks to release the oppressed people from socio-economic and political bondage, Dalit Theology as a theology of. Thus, this

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research has highlighted three important concerns. One is that Dalit Theology has a large number of liberational themes, but as of now, they have not adequately engaged with the struggling Dalits. Second, these themes have the potential for motivating and encouraging the struggling Dalits to intensify their transformative actions.

Research Methodology:-

The flow of the Christian Dalit movement is flowing in different ways all over the world, so the historical research method has been used for this research.

Discussion of the Research Topic:-

Although the Christian Dalit Movement and Christianity are scientifically united, cultural, traditional and ideological thinking has changed over time, and in Asian countries, although the movement has improved health education and economic factors, it is important to understand the philosophy philosophically.

Research Hypothesis:-

- Christian missionaries have promoted the Christian Dalit movement.
- The Christian Dalit movement led to an ideological revolution among the grassroots throughout Asia.
- The Christian Dalit movement has helped to eradicate the caste system.

Research Objective:-

- To treat how the flow of the Christian Dalit movement has changed over the world over time.
- Understanding the Christian Dalit movement.
- The Christian Dalit movement brought about radical reforms in the lower castes.

What Is Dalit:-

The emergence of Dalit Theology in the Indian context and suggestions for its future directions. The term "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit "dal". It means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed and destroyed. In popular parlance "Dalit" refers to the "untouchable" population of India. Dalit Theology is a new strand which has emerged in the Asian theological scene. This theology began to take shape in the early 80's when A.P. Nirmal, then a faculty member at the United Theological College, floated the idea of "Shudra Theology." But now, Dalit theology has come of age and it stands by its own



uniqueness and creativity. At the outset it is appropriate that I explain the term "Dalit" because it has come into popular use in India only very recently. The etymology of the term "Dalit" goes back to the 19th century when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jyotirao Phule used it to describe the "outcastes" and "untouchables" as the "oppressed and crushed victims of the Indian caste system." In the 1970's the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term "Dalit" as a reminder that they were the deprived and the dispossessed section of Indian society and as a means of rejecting other names given to them with a paternalistic attitude. "Outcastes" in India have been known by different names such as: "Harijan," meaning children of Han (God) given by Gandhi; "Avarrias" meaning casteless; "Panchamas" meaning fifth caste; "Chandalas" meaning worst of the earth; "Depressed classes" given during British Colonial days, and Scheduled Caste given by the Indian Constitution. Recent Dalit protest movements in India have increasingly used the term Dalit to demonstrate the rejection of derogatory names given by outsiders and further, to refer to their pain, suffering and hope for liberation. James Massey, a prominent Dalit theologian captures the wide usage of the term Dalit as follows: Dalit is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for the recovery of their past identity. The struggle of these "outcastes" has given the term dalit a positive meaning. The very realisation of themselves as Dalit, the very acceptance of the state of "dalitness," is the first step on the way towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.

Indian Dalit Christian:-

Although Christianity is an egalitarian religion, the caste system found its way into it in India. Dalit Christians within the church were discriminated against and were denied powers within the ecclesiastical structure. Although Dalit Christians constituted approximately 70% of the Indian Christian population they were marginalized and ignored until recently. To illustrate this let me quote what Archbishop George Zur, Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to India said while inaugurating the CBCI (Catholic Bishops Conference of India) in 1991: Though Catholics of the lower caste and tribes form 60 per cent 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 the parish 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 per cent of the 10 million Christians in the South, less than 4 per cent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests. There are no Dalits among 13 Catholic Bishops of Tamilnadu or among the Vicars-general and rectors of seminaries and directors of social assistance centres. The situation in the Protestant Church is no different except that some Dalits have been elevated to Bishopric and other positions of power recently. Many Dalit Christian leaders refer to the thrice-alienated situation of the



Dalit Christians in India, namely, discrimination within the Church, discrimination by Hindu culture and discrimination by the State as they are denied Scheduled Caste status in the Constitution, and the related privileges which come with that status. At the outset it should be noted that the emergence of Dalit Christian Theology in India is intrinsically linked to more recent and significant developments within the Dalit Movement in India from the 70s. But before we go into that, a word about the history of Dalit Movement in India is in place. Dalit protest and resistance movements seem to have gone through several phases. Bhakti movements within Hinduism between 14th and 16th centuries symbolised low castes' aspiration for an egalitarian society and religion. The Bhakti movement stood for transformation of Hindu society and used religious resources to push forward the basic ideology that all persons were equal before God. However, the dominant castes co-opted it and transformed it into a reform movement within Hinduism. Moreover the British Colonial system dealt a decisive blow to the growth of the Bhakti movement. The destruction of the Jajmani system, communal ownership of landed property, by the British and introduction of legal land relationship changed the situation of Dalits for the worse. Jajmani had used traditional caste relationships for division of labour and had provided some material security for them, although it was an exploitative and unjust system. The entry of colonialism enabled Dalits to search for new means of protest and liberation. Some Dalits integrated themselves into the colonial system by joining the army or by serving as indentured labourers in British colonies. Others chose Sanskritization as a means of upward mobility.

States were expression of this self assertion movements. This took place at the turn of the 20th century. However, mass conversions to non-Hindu religions were the most prominent means of Dalit protest which began during the second half of the 19th Century. Many historians, such as John Webster, say that the modern Dalit movement was begun in and through the Christian conversion movements. Several opinions are expressed regarding the reasons for Dalit conversion to Christianity. They range from the spiritual to socio-economic. But there is a general consensus among scholars that, "the underlying motivation was the search for improved social status, for a greater sense of personal dignity and self respect, for freedom from bondage to oppressive land owners. A complete break with the past was impossible for Dalit Christians. But it is beyond doubt that Dalit Christians initiated a movement of Dalit power and cultural changes through conversion movement which included "alterations in perceptions of self and the world, in life-style, as well as the acquisition of enhanced resources for self-improvement and self-empowerment. Dalits in post-Independent India sought new avenues of liberation. One of the best examples of this new wave of Dalit emancipatory movement was the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra which popularized the use of the term Dalit. The Dalit Panthers saw caste as the major source by which their "humanity" was being virtually reduced to a state of "being no people. However, class analysis also was used as an effective tool to understand the plight of this downtrodden people.



Christian Dalit Philosophy And Its Flow:-

The structure of Christian theological knowledge in India, broadly constructed on dual predominant grounds namely the imperial-colonial and the colonized the Predominant Hindu Tradition. From the European context, Traditional Christian theological reflections, by and large worked its way through West Asian and European perceptions, experiences, interests, questions and needs. leaving less space for Dalit Theological Reflection and action. Indian Christian theology in the past has tried to work out its theological systems in terms of Vedantic Hindu dominant upper caste traditions. Its presupposition is that Indian culture is Hindu Vedantic and therefore Brahminical in nature. Adaptation or inculturation model excluded Dalits engaging into theological reflection and action. Thus both within the predominant frames of Indian (Brahminical construct) Christian Theology, and the European theology, Dalits are alienated theologically they were treated as no-people of God. The theological engagement of upper caste converts promoted a type of elitist theology: Church Structure-Centric theology Ecclesial imperialism. Liberation theology addressed Poverty as a pan Indian problem not necessarily from the specific focus of Problem of discrimination of Dalits. The exercise of liberation theology faced with resistance both from elitist theology by rendering it as not church-based. Moreover Liberation theology by its construct could not specifically address the Dalit Question, rather neglected of the Dalit Suffering from the yokes of Casteism, resulted in the Neglect of the Dalit theological expression. What are the characteristics of classical/traditional theology? The European imported Classical theology may be characterized as follows: Western Christian Classical Theology remains highly Euro-Centric, but claimed a sort of Universalism, by which it constructed a Pan-National Theological identity. But then it has been a handmaid of Western expansionism, and an ally, however unwilling to listen to the exploitation of other continents by Europe and America. Western Christian Classical Theology implicitly justified human hierarchy.

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