

**TOWARDS A PRACTICAL DALIT THEOLOGY:  
A STUDY ON THE STATUS AND RELEVANCE OF DALIT THEOLOGY  
AMONG GRASS ROOTS DALIT CHRISTIANS IN THEIR STRUGGLE AGAINST  
CASTE OPPRESSION**

**by**

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## **Thesis Abstract**

This study seeks to develop a more practical and praxis-driven approach to Dalit Theology and its engagement with grassroots Dalit Christians. Dalit Theology is contextual and liberative. It emerged as a counter to Indian Christian theology, which ignored the caste affected life experience of Dalits, who form the majority in the Indian church. It aims to go beyond the merely spiritual in seeking to empower Dalit people and transform society.

However, the well reflected and articulated liberational theological themes of Dalit Theology seem to remain mostly within academia and the ecclesia. They have not adequately engaged with grass roots Dalit Christians who face severe discrimination and constant struggle against caste oppression. Therefore, this study is an attempt to analyse the status and potentials of Dalit Theology among grass roots Dalit Christians as a motivational force and to offer a methodological framework to enlarge Dalit Theology as a Practical theology of liberation.

The construction of Dalit Theology as a Practical theology of praxis among the grass roots hopes to facilitate the process of bringing about change in their personal life and the formation of a transformed society for both Dalits and non-Dalits to lead a caste-free life.

## **DEDICATION**

**I dedicate this work to the grass roots Dalit rights activists who spare their time  
and energy for regaining the dignity of Dalits**

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### **Abbreviations**

AFDCL	Alternative Forum for Dalit Christian Liberation
BT	Black Theology
CDLM	Christian Dalit Liberation Movement
CISRS	Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
DCLM	Dalit Christian Liberation Movement
DT	Dalit Theology
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
TTS	Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai
UTC	United Theological College, Bangalore
WCC	World Council of Churches
WT	White Theology

## **Chapter One – Introduction**

### **1. The background and rationale for this research**

I have been a Dalit rights activist for about three decades, engaged in motivating and mobilising Dalits against caste-based oppression. I am also a Christian, and came to explore the world of Dalit Theology via the Christian faith. The definition of this theology and particularly its status as a practical theology will be discussed in greater detail later. My underlying contention, however, is that it seems to me that thus far in its short life Dalit Theology has remained a theology of church leaders and academics and, if this is so, Dalit Theology should develop beyond its current limitations. Theology should be a *shared Christian praxis* among the faith community and should not necessarily remain only an abstract enterprise or an intellectual discourse restricted to the academy and the ecclesia. Christian Dalit Theology is broadly known as contextual, liberative and practical in the sense that it places emphasis on the life-experience of Dalits with the aim of transforming caste oppression (Devasahayam, 1997a p 271-275). In my view, these theological ideas and insights, reflected and articulated out of the lived experiences of well-educated Dalit theologians, should not constitute a practical theology only by virtue of their origins in Dalit suffering or by its source in the caste affected life experience of Dalits, but should also develop as a ‘shared Christian praxis’ by engaging with ordinary grass roots Dalit Christians, who are in struggle, in order to inspire them further and intensify their struggle against caste oppression. As Groome describes, *shared Christian praxis* facilitates the process of a faith community involving

itself in a participative dialogical pedagogy. It uses the strength of a Christian vision to evolve a renewed praxis with an intent to bring change (Thomas H Groome, 1991 p 135).

Lately, I have been in close touch with Dalit Christian activists in the state of Tamilnadu who are struggling to challenge caste oppression inside and outside the church, both locally and nationally. Dalit Christians suffer a four-fold oppression: by non-Dalit Christians, by non-Dalits of other faiths, by the prejudicial treatment meted out by the state, and by Hindu fundamentalist groups. Observing these Tamil activists, I noticed that they were seemingly motivated and inspired more by the secular ideology and strategy of Ambedkar,<sup>1</sup> the icon of Dalits, and other Dalit political leaders, than by their faith perspective. While there is nothing wrong with combating caste discrimination from a secular perspective, my observation and suspicion raises the question of why Dalit Christian activists are not more clearly and sufficiently inspired by the themes and concepts of Dalit Theology, as Dalit Theology is said to have been 'conceived in the context of struggles against casteism and aspirations for social justice both in the church and society' (M.E.Prabhakar, 1988 p 2).

*Prima facie*, if grass roots Dalit activists are engaged with Dalit Theology, its theological insights, characterised as liberational, should help them to shape their faith

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<sup>1</sup>Ambedkar, a born Dalit, emerged as the first National leader from the oppressed community. He was a contemporary of Gandhi. He faced caste discrimination and challenged caste and Hinduism. He studied in the USA and UK and became the Chair of the committee framing the Indian Constitution. He served as a Minister in the Indian Government. He attended the Round Table Conference in London where he raised the issue of caste and the Dalits. He wrote many books and his speeches were powerful. He embraced Buddhism before he died and is the icon for Dalits. His slogan is 'educate, agitate and organise'. Today in India, he is seen as the ideologue, mentor and leader for all Dalits.

perspectives in dialogue with their lived experience. Such an engagement would not only strengthen their faith in God but would also deepen the theological basis for their struggle against caste, alongside the secular perspectives that they may have developed. Therefore if, as I suspected, the influence of Dalit Theology among grass roots activists is limited, it seems that there is a case that Dalit Theology needs to be further developed as a shared Christian praxis to engage with the grass roots and to equip them with theological insights to sustain their struggles.

This perception encouraged me to undertake research to study the status and significance of Dalit Theology among grass roots Dalit Christian activists as a source of motivation in their struggle against caste oppression. It is hoped that such a study, its outcome, and the probable suggestions based on the study, will help Dalit Theology to expand its domain further, to include grass roots Dalit Christians and to develop as a shared Christian praxis, a critical discipline, which would strengthen the faith of Dalit Christian activists and inspire them to believe that God is with them in their activities to transform oppressive systems and practices (Swinton and Mowat, 2006 p 6-7).

## **2. The context – caste and its adverse effects on Dalits – Dalit Christians**

### ***2.1 A brief appraisal of the origin and manifestation of caste***

Caste – an old phenomenon – stratifies Indians and distinguishes Indian society as divisive and discriminatory. While space precludes a detailed discussion of the origin

and development of caste, I offer a brief overview here of its origin as it has been described by a few significant commentators. The genesis of caste is uncertain, but appears to date in some form to the Vedic period, and thereby forms a continuous thread in recorded Indian history (Basham, A.L in Pusalkar, 1951 p 204). The earliest history of India is highly contested. The major arguments are between different versions of an event commonly known as 'the Aryan invasion'. This historical occurrence has been used by many groups in India as the basis for claims about their political and social origins (Thapar, 1996 p 3-31). The historical accuracy of the various accounts of 'the Aryan invasion' is not the subject of this thesis. It is important, however, to understand the role that this historical theme has played in the history of the Dalit struggle and the development of Dalit Theology.

The Aryan invasion refers to the arrival in India over 3000 years ago of Indo-European-speaking people, often called 'Aryans'. These people brought different forms of worship and social practices to those previously found in the sub-continent. One theory is that people who speak Dravidian languages, such as Tamil, (a different language family from the Indo-European) are descendants of the pre-Aryan people, who were subjugated by the invading Aryans. Linked to this theory, is the assumption that the Aryans used the caste system, justified by their religious perspective, to oppress the native population whom they conquered, in part by making them 'untouchable' (quoting Hutton, John C.B. Webster, 2007 p 2). This theory points to the *Rig-Veda*, the oldest Hindu Scripture, for the origin and sanction of the caste system, as the text describes how four *varnas* – *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* – came into being from

Purusa, the Creator of humankind (Tenth book, Hymn 90, verses 12, in Griffith, 1897 p 519, 603). The hereditary character of caste imposes a specific *dharma*-occupation for each *varna* (literally: colour, but used to denote broad categories of occupation, linked to social status) i.e. Brahmins serve as priests, Kshatriyas as warriors, Vaishyas as traders and Shudras as servants (Dumont, 1980 p 65). As Bayly, a sociologist comments, caste forced endogamy, dictated a hierarchical social division, and vested preferential economic and political power upon certain individuals, leading to the formation of divided social groups and varied cultural heritages (Bayly, 2001 p 13). Citing Ambedkar, Dietrich, a feminist theologian, argues that the closing of doors to marriages between different *varnas* and the marriage cycle of endogamy was a major contributing factor in the maintenance of caste system (Dietrich, 2009 p 2).

*Panchamas*, the fifth category, was termed 'outcaste', as indicated by *Chandogya Upanishad*, another early Hindu text (Massey, 1994 p 90-91), and its members, called *Chandalas*, are despised as both unseeable and untouchable, debarred from accessing the rights and privileges enjoyed by the four caste-based *varnas*. In line with historians, sociologists and anthropologists have also defined caste as a system imposing social hierarchy (Chakravarthi, 2004 p 6-8). Thus caste has been a divisive system, forging graded inequality among people, and granting discriminative privileges in accessing and enjoying socio-economic and political advancement since the earliest phases of recorded Indian history. The link between caste and the Aryan invasion, or between fully-fledged casteism and the sanctions in the *Rig Veda*, or the association between Dravidian speakers, Dalits and the people subjugated by the Aryans is not adequately



historically fully secure, but these ideas are firmly lodged in the history of Dalit Theology and will be explored later in relation to Dalit Theology and its use of Exodus themes. The key point here is that the caste system is ancient and it oppresses mainly Dalits based on birth, descent and certain defiling occupations.

## ***2.2 Situating Dalits – today's context***

Whatever the origin of caste, it divides the people of India and discriminates against Dalits in particular. It denies human status and dignity to Dalits. It breeds a range of untouchability practices and Dalits are subjected to visible and invisible segregation, separation, exploitation, humiliation and harassment at the hands of non-Dalits in all walks of life (Grey, 2010 p 9-10). Caste decides the social, economic and political status of a person and determines one's residence, occupation, rights of ownership, marital relationship, political power and even place of burial. It denies the right to life and livelihood for Dalits, including education, employment, land, labour, health, common properties, water resources, access to political power and participation in religio-cultural activities on a par with non-Dalits (Irudayam et al., 2006 p 22). Dalits mainly live as agricultural labourers in rural areas and as daily wagers in urban areas, besides undertaking the ritually 'unclean' jobs of manual scavenging, sweeping, cobbling, drum beating during funerals, grave-digging and guarding cemeteries (Haslam, 1999 p 49-50).

Caste practices are predominantly visible in village areas and mostly invisible in urban areas. When caste practice is challenged, non-Dalits often unleash crude and cruel forms of physical violence upon Dalits, ranging from social and economic boycott, raping and the naked parading of Dalit women, damaging and burning the property of Dalits, forcing human excreta and urine into their mouths, maiming and murder. A significant study on 'Atrocities on Dalits 2000-2003' by Sakshi, a known human rights organisation from the state of Andhra Pradesh, has highlighted the existence of several crude forms of untouchability practice, leading to discrimination in all social, economic and political areas of Dalit life in India and the atrocities unleashed on them (Dr. SDJM Prasad, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

When Dalits challenge these discriminative caste practices, non-Dalits often view their assertion as an act of disobedience and perpetrate atrocities against them. The following statistics are derived from cases booked under specific and special legislations designed to protect Dalits from caste-based discrimination by non-Dalits. They therefore provide a useful indicator of anti-caste violence, though, of course, do not include acts of injustice which are not reported to the authorities. The official Indian crime statistics, averaged over the period 2001-2005, reveal that 27 atrocities are committed against Dalits every day; 13 Dalits murdered every week; 5 Dalit homes or possessions burnt every week; 6 Dalits kidnapped or abducted every week; 3 Dalit women raped every day; 11 Dalits beaten every day and a crime committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix- 1 for a range of untouchability practices imposed on Dalits.

(GOI, 2007) & (Mason-John, 2008 p 13-14).<sup>3</sup> According to the *Indian National Crime Bureau Report 2007*, the total number of persons from a non-Dalit background facing trial in courts for crimes committed against Dalits is 235,560. Out of these, 9048 are facing charges for murder, 6748 for rape, 2240 for kidnapping and abduction, 831 for dacoitary-looting of Dalit houses, 695 for robbery, 2509 for arson, 31,195 for wounding, 5250 for crimes under the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 90,934 for crimes under the SC/ST (Prevention Of Atrocities) Act and 86,110 for other crimes (GOI, 2007). The recent annual report by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment of the Government of India, which handles the affairs of Scheduled Caste people, states that 38,943 cases have been registered against perpetrators of violence against Scheduled Caste people and the conviction rate is only 31.4% (GOI, 2011 (16th March 2011)). These figures also prove the volume of physical violence against Dalits, and these are only the notified or disputed cases. There are many unreported acts of violence unleashed upon Dalits who do not seek a legal remedy for fear of social boycotts and further oppression. The impunity enjoyed by both the perpetrators of violence and the erring officials who violate their bounded duty is enormous (Duraishwamy, 1986 p 3).

While the scale of untouchability practices and atrocities is enormous, the statistics on the economic life of Dalits are just as alarming. The 2001 census figures of the Government of India, the *National Sample Survey Report on Land Holdings*, and the 2006 and 2011 *Annual Reports of the Ministry of Personnel* (Ministry of Home Affairs) state that Scheduled Castes constitute 16.6% of the total population but they are far

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<sup>3</sup> See also: Sakshi Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Organisation – Special Report, Hyderabad, India, 2006.

behind other groups in terms of their position in education and employment. Large numbers of Dalits remain illiterate and also continue to work as agricultural labourers without holding land (GOI, 2000). In public sector employment, they predominantly perform lower-level jobs like sweeping (GOI, 2006) & (GOI, 2011).<sup>4</sup> Even in the present era of economic globalisation, Dalits face social exclusion in the form of wider labour-based and occupation-based discrimination, besides denial of free access to investment and entrepreneurship. They are denied managerial positions in the name of their lack of credentials, and professionalism (Newman, 2007 p 4121-4124).

These illustrations and figures demonstrate the alarming social and economic situation of Dalits and the crimes committed against them in the name of caste and caste-based discrimination. Whilst this is the overall situation of all Dalits, the particular plight of Dalit Christians is even worse.

### ***2.3 Caste in Christianity and the plight of Dalit Christians***

Neither indigenous nor imported religions, including Christianity, are spared the shackles of caste. Tracing the history of Christianity demonstrates how much attention it gave to the higher castes from the days of its advent in India. Christianity was said to have been brought to India in the first century by St. Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples, who shared the Gospel with the most highly placed dominant-caste Brahmins, the Namboodries of Kerala (Firth, 1998 p 3) & (Duraismwamy, 1986 p 3). Later, in the fourth

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2.

and ninth centuries, two Syrian groups came to Malabar, again in Kerala, under the leadership of Thomas of Cana and Marwan Sabrisho respectively, and converted dominant caste people. The descendants of these converts call themselves 'Syrian Christians' even today. These early missionaries do not seem to have shown much concern or interest in converting low-caste people to Christianity (Jeyakumar, 2004 p 44). Then, in 1542, St. Francis Xavier, a Portuguese missionary, and in 1605 Robert De Nobili, an Italian Jesuit, arrived and shared the gospel among fisher-people in the first case and among other dominant castes in the second case (Firth, 1998 p 58, 110-113). Though a few *Shudra* and outcastes were also converted, there was no breach of castes norms, since outcaste people were separated in both church and missionary buildings (Firth, 1998 p 120).

It was only after the arrival of Joseph Beschi in 1700 (Duraismamy, 1986 p 24-27), then Ziegenbalg and Pluchau in 1706, later Schwartz in 1750 (Firth, 1998 p 131, 140) and finally William Carey in 1793 (John C.B. Webster, 2007 p 35), that lower-strata people were contacted in substantial numbers. This change in the attitude and involvement of missionaries brought Dalit conversion on a mass scale to Christianity (John C.B. Webster, 2007 p 36), which was a challenge to Hinduism; it was an act taken by Dalits in order to regain human dignity by seeking liberation from the caste system (Larbeer, 1997 p 384). The caste system was all-pervasive and the earliest missionaries had contact and communication mainly with Brahmins and other non-Dalits who were socio-economically dominant. Thus Christianity was introduced first to Brahmins and non-Dalits and only later to Dalits.

Although caste practices were never eliminated in Christianity, there were attempts to challenge caste within Christianity even in the time of the early missionaries. Schultze, who took leadership of the mission to India in 1719 after the death of Ziegenbalg, issued an order to stop the discriminatory practices that were found in the New Jerusalem church in Tranquebar, in the form of separate seating and worshipping inside churches and also the different treatment of pupils in Christian schools. But there was discontent and strong opposition from the non-Dalits and the discriminatory practices were restored once Schultze was redeployed in 1725 and other missionaries, Walther and Pressier, took over from him (Firth, 1998 p 137-138). Therefore, there were some unsuccessful attempts to challenge caste within Christianity. However, as Ambedkar commented, although Christian doctrine preached equality, Christianity was not able to challenge graded inequality and discriminatory practices among Christians (Keer, 2005 (Reprint) p 299). This was the reality in the early period of Christianity in India and this deficiency still, largely, holds true today.

### **3. Caste-based discrimination against Dalit Christians - today's context**

Today, including all denominations, Dalits constitute around 70% of Indian Christians (Rierner, 2009 p 7). Dalits, although forming the majority, continue to suffer untouchability practices in many churches (Arulraja, 1996 p vi,163-164) & (John C.B. Webster, 1999 p 89). The Church is rooted largely in rural India (Synod, 2010 p 6-12) where caste discrimination among Christians is seemingly rampant. Caste practice is

more visible and obvious in rural areas, and takes less visible, hidden forms, in urban congregations (Dr. SDJM Prasad p 7). The grass roots Dalit Christians mostly live apart. In many places they are not treated equally in worshipping or in the sharing of the Eucharist, nor are they allowed space next to non-Dalits in burial grounds. Inter-dining and inter-caste marriages between Dalit and other Christians are still largely unacceptable. Within the Church hierarchy, Dalits are not only deprived of positions of power but are also unable to enjoy benefits from a range of church institutions (M. Mary John, 2007 p 115) & (Riemer, 2009 p 8-16).

The minority non-Dalit Christians, besides discriminating against Dalits, enjoy most benefits at all levels of church and church-based institutions. To quote a glaring example,

out of 156 Catholic Bishops in India 150 Bishops belong to the upper caste community; only six belong to the Dalit community. Out of 12,500 Catholic priests, only 600 are from the Dalit community. While 75% church members are from the Dalit community, they are still not able to rise to the level of occupying many positions in church hierarchy proportionate to their membership; out of approximately 40,000 Christian educational and health institutions, the majority beneficiaries are not from Scheduled Caste people and Christians of Scheduled Castes Origin (Thomas, 2009 p 2) & (Arulraja, 1996 p 27)& (John C.B. Webster, 2007 p 183-184).<sup>5</sup>

Among the Protestants, change has started to occur during the last few decades, if not at the expected speed. In the Church of South India, for example, Dalits wield power in the church hierarchy, in both the episcopacy and general administration (Pushpanathan, 2010), but the desired result of equality and justice among Christians is yet to be realised at all levels of church and church based institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.Dalitchristian.com> Html/arulappa.htm - Problems and struggles (8.04.2009 accessed).

Outside the church, despite facing the same discrimination and social, economic and political oppression as Dalits of other faiths, Dalit Christians continue to be denied Scheduled Caste status by the Government,<sup>6</sup> resulting in them being unable to enjoy the positive discrimination measures and affirmative action, like the reservation system, ensured by the Constitution of India to protect Scheduled Caste people from a wide range of oppression, and to promote their socio-economic and political advancement (Thomas, 2009p 3-4). Thus Dalit Christians are triply oppressed – inside Christianity, in the secular world, and also by the Government. In addition to this, Hindu fundamentalist forces unleash violence on Dalit Christians in the name of preventing conversions to Christianity from Hinduism. In this situation it is essential to look at Indian Christian Theology and whether it tried to reflect and address this issue of caste, particularly at the time of its emergence.

#### **4. Indian Christian Theology**

##### ***4.1 Its need, emergence and crux***

The following is a brief discussion of some of the important themes debated by Indian Christian theologians. It begins with the context in which Indian Christian Theology developed. The Indian Church, having its roots some two thousand years ago,

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<sup>6</sup> Scheduled Caste is a constitutional term to denote the so called 'untouchables' – presently calling themselves Dalits, (the broken people) – who profess Hindu, Sikh and Buddhists faiths. Dalit Christians are not included in the list of Scheduled castes by which they are prevented from enjoying any of the affirmative action policies enacted by the Government, which benefit Dalits of other faiths.



was under heavy pressure in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to evolve its own theology. Indian philosophers, Hindu thinkers, and reformers like Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda and Dr. Radakrishnan, besides describing and debating Christ with their Hindu philosophical thought-forms, criticised Christianity in India for overtly following western dogma and having no freedom to formulate its own theology (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 6-7).

The Hindu social reformer, Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), a Bengali Brahmin and the founder of *Brahma Samaj*, argued that the Christian ethic was the attraction to the faith rather than its dogma, and he considered Jesus as a teacher and messenger of God but not as the Son of God. He did not agree that the Father and Son are one and criticised the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and atonement; but he believed in the saving work of Christ and was attracted by the Sermon on the Mount (Boyd, 1969 P 19-20). Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84), a follower of Roy and an organiser of *Brahma Samaj*, relied more on experience as a source for his theological arguments as he had a deep personal experience of love for Christ. He was convinced by the Christian orthodoxy of atonement and redemption. He believed in the concept of Trinity as he considered Brahman to be *Sat, Cit, Ananda* (being, intelligence, and bliss). For him, Christ is the mediating link between humankind and God (Boyd, 1969 p 26-29).

Nehemiah Goreh (1825-95), was a Chitpavan Brahman, who hailed from Saivite orthodoxy, turned to the Vaishnavite tradition and studied the Bible. He used reasoning as the basis for his theological understanding and to answer intellectual doubts, as well

as advocating dialogue among beloved opponents. His studies on Hindu philosophy and his background in a traditional *Bakthi marga* family, helped to convince him that the true light is Christ and that only through him is salvation possible (Boyd, 1969 p 40-45).

Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya (1861-1907), again a Bengali Brahmin, accepted the true sonship of Christ and his resurrection, and was baptised as a Christian. He too believed in the Trinity in line with *Saccidananda-Sat Cit Ananda*. He felt that culturally he was a Hindu, but at heart, a Christian. He lived as a Christian *Sanyasi*, following the Madurai tradition of Robert De Nobili, an Italian Jesuit who came and served as a missionary in the seventeenth century (Boyd, 1969 p 63-67). Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna (1862-1902), was a strong supporter of *Advaidha*. Therefore, he found difficulty with the Christian dogma of God creating the world and with the notion that fallen humans need redemption. He did not agree with the theory of Father and Son but was comfortable with the proclamation of Christ that 'I and my Father are one'.

Hindu thinkers Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Dr. Radakrishnan took up the same line as Vivekananda (Boyd, 1969 p 59-61). Dr. Radakrishnan (1888-1975), a believer in *Advaidha* compared the life-affirming and life-denying aspects found in Christianity and Hinduism. He compared the resurrection of Jesus with the passage of the soul from the world's slavery to the Universal Light. He argued that the Incarnation was not only God taking the form of humanity but also the ascension of humans to the state of divinity. But he did not agree with the Christian

doctrine of Christ's divinity. His view was that the Christian dogma failed to change the life of human beings (E.C John and Prabhakar, 2006 P 8-12).

This brief survey indicates how God, Christ and Christian dogma were viewed in the context of Hindu philosophical thought-forms.

#### **4.2 Its development**

Alongside the debates and positions of the Indian philosophers, a distinct Indian Christian Theology developed after 1900. The emergence of a national freedom movement, the initiative for the unity of the churches in India, coupled with a changing theological context in the West, nurtured the evolution of an Indian Christian Theology (Boyd, 1969 p 86-88). The following is a brief overview of some of the key figures in the early development of Indian Christian Theology. Krishna Pillai (1827-1900), a dominant-caste Vaishnavite from Tamilnadu, a poet, Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919), a Chitpavan Brahman from Maharashtra, and Appasamy (1891-1975), a dominant-caste person from Tamilnadu, all identified *Bakthi marga*<sup>7</sup> as being closer to Christianity than *Gnana marga*<sup>8</sup>.

Appasamy challenged the position of monist-theory theologians like Ram Mohan Roy on the popular Johannine text, 'my Father and I are one' (John: 10:30). For him the relationship of Son and Father is a moral one and he drew attention to John's quote, 'the

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<sup>7</sup> The devotional path to understand God.

<sup>8</sup> The path of Wisdom to understand God.

Father is greater than I' (John: 14:28) and argued that Jesus was always dependent upon his Father. However, he differed from Ramanuja in his view that the world is the body of God. He believed that 'the Church is the body of Christ and the whole creation is his' (Boyd, 1969 p 110-115). Thus he endorsed his closeness to the *Bakthi* tradition. Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929), was a convert from Sikhism, who developed a Christ-centric perspective based on his spiritual-cum-ecstatic visionary experiences and his views on prayer, suffering, sin and *karma*. Through his religious experiences, he saw Christianity as the fulfillment of Hinduism. He attacked Western Christian tradition, perhaps owing to his closeness to the Indian religious tradition. He saw Christ as the Water of Life, but not in a European vessel (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 73-77).

Chenchiah (1886-1959), a Brahmin convert from Hinduism, believed in the theology of new creation. He argued that a new spiritual power could be gained through yoga and an ashram life. He rejected both the *Gnana marga* of Sankara and the *Bakthi marga* of Ramanuja, as Sankara argued that God could be understood only by wisdom and Ramanuja argued that God could be understood by devotion. He attacked the Chalcedonian Christology of Christ, which states that Christ is fully God and fully man. He said Christ is a new creation, a product of God and humankind and not God-man. He was not much concerned with Christian dogma but he appreciated the claim to a Christian direct experience of Christ. Thus he was neither for *Advaidha* nor for *Dvaidha* as *Advaidha* argues that God and the Universe are one and *Dvaidha* argues that God

and Universe are different. He introduced a theology of a new creation (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 83-92).

Then came V. Chakkarai (1880-1958), a relative and contemporary of Chenchiah, who believed in the Christology of spirit. He found Christ to be not an Avatar of Hinduism but a permanent and dynamic incarnation, which occurred once for all. For him, the Holy Spirit is Jesus himself and the Spirit works in the human personality. He commented that Western theology had confused the truth, and Indian Christians have a personal experience of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (Boyd, 1969 p 171-173). Chakkarai is known for the basis of his theology in personal experience. Lastly came Devanandan (1901-1962) who called for a dialogue with other faiths, mainly Hindus, to consider the contemporary religious and cultural movements, mostly the developments in Hinduism, Indian politics and its society (Boyd, 1969 p 186) & (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 10).

In short, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indian philosophers, social reformers and thinkers, and twentieth-century Indian Christian theologians reflected on and debated God, Christ and Christian doctrines in relation to Hindu philosophical thought-forms and Brahmanic traditions. However, this does not mean that they did not also talk about caste. Keshab Chandra Sen, unlike Ram Mohan Roy, attacked the caste system while at the same time showing his interest in the person of Christ. Appasamy recalled how Ramanada, who hailed from Ramanuja's *Bakthi* tradition, was against the caste system (Boyd, 1969 p 26,111). Similarly Brahmanabandhav Upadhyaya proposed the

integration of the social structure in India which could be understood as a call to challenge caste. Appasamy himself was opposed to the caste system since it was against the Lordship of Christ. M. M. Thomas argued that the centrality of divine forgiveness releases human beings from the idolatry of caste, alongside other oppressions (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 8,98).

These discussions and debates by both Indian philosophers and proponents of Indian Christian Theology were seen by Dalit theologians as Brahmanic, not necessarily because almost all of them hailed from Hindu Brahman or non-Dalit families, but because of their thought-forms, which are basically Brahmanic and are controlled by Hindu philosophical insights. Nowhere was the 'life experience of Dalits', or even more broadly, 'the life experience of Christians' adequately taken into consideration while framing Indian Christian Theology. Much importance seems to have been given to either Hindu philosophical thought forms or to Scripture and western-based Christian doctrines. Therefore Indian Christian Theology, according to Dalit theologians, did not adequately qualify as an authentic contextual theology concerning the faith and real-life experience of people, mainly Dalits, who form the majority in the Indian Church. While analysing Indian Christian Theology, the early Dalit theologians came out with sweeping statements criticising their background, insights and articulations. However, it is worth mentioning Massey's remark that Dalit theologians were 'not arguing for the rejection of the expressions of Indian Christian theology but wanted to work out another expression of theology relevant to the life situation of vast majority of people' (Massey, 1990 p 147).

## **5. Dalit Theology – its significance and themes – a broader view**

Indian Dalit Theology emerged in the early 1980s in response to the perceived deficiencies in Indian Christian Theology, namely its failure to reflect theologically on the oppressed life experience of Dalits who form the majority among Christians. Dalit Theology did not intend to deal only with philosophical explanations about truth, the nature of God and the question of the salvation of human beings. Instead, it opted to give importance to the life context of believers and their faith in God to challenge oppression, taking scripture and tradition as contributing to the transforming of the caste situation. Dalit theologians have been firm in considering theology not merely a 'scholarly enterprise dealing with the insights or the wisdom of believers' (Farley, 1983 p xi) & (Farley, 1988 p 5,88). They have argued that, despite theology being understood as 'faith seeking understanding', Dalit Theology should be practical, leading to action, as God's people should not only be hearers but also doers (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 23). Therefore Dalit Theology does not wish simply to provide intellectual insight which would serve a minority interest (Christie, 2007 p 7), but emphasises a systematic faith reflection aimed at the liberation of oppressed people (Arockiadoss, 1997 p 290).

### ***5.1 'Contextual and life experience' – the source***

Christian Dalit Theology is contextual as it reflects differently from a Brahmanical framework and considers the life experience of Dalits as its source, along with scripture and tradition (Devasahayam, 1997a p 280). The definition of Bevans has relevance to the contextuality of Dalit theology: he states that 'theology that is contextual realises culture, history, contemporary thought forms and so forth are to be considered along with scripture and tradition as valid sources for theological expression' (Bevans, 2003 p 4).

Many Dalit theologians believe that Dalits have a long history and that Dalit culture is a rich resource for Dalit Theology. They link their argument to the theory of the Aryan invasion, discussed earlier. According to this theory, Dalits are regarded as the original people in India, later forced into the status of untouchables. As Prabhakar argues, based on the writings of the historians John Marshall and Hamanathan:

[t]he Dalits, like Tribals, were the original people of India, even pre-Dravidian, and therefore they had pre-Aryan origins and culture. The early Dalit culture/religion was animistic-pantheistic, interpolated by fertility cults and tantric forms of worship, and later on Saivite, the most ancient living faith in the world. The economically poor class and those who opposed the Brahmin supremacy among the Dravidian races were made quite artificially as untouchables (M.E Prabhakar, 1990bp 45).

If we look at the religious context, alongside the Brahmanic theory, Ambedkar maintained that 'untouchability is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism; threatened by the popularity and power of Buddhism, Brahmanism (Hinduism) eventually eliminated Buddhism in India' (Keer, 2005 (Reprint) p 407). However, the elimination of Buddhism did not stop Dalits from joining other



egalitarian faiths and traditions such as Islam, Sikhism and Christianity. Later, in independent India many adopted Buddhism along with Ambedkar in 1956 (M.E Prabhakar, 1990b p 46). The truth of these historical accounts is not relevant here. However, these statements demonstrate clearly that Dalits are *regarded* by some as the original people of India who had their own culture and embraced many religions in the course of their struggle against caste which forced them into an oppressed status.

## **5.2 Dalit Theology is 'Liberative'**

Liberation has two important features. One is to challenge and transform the oppressive system and other is to form a new order. Almost all Dalit theologians state that Dalit Theology is liberative in its character as it challenges caste and seeks to form a society of justice and peace. Gutiérrez concludes his book, *A Theology of Liberation*, with the thought that the theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the meaning of faith in the commitment to build a new society by abolishing injustice, where a new humankind will emerge, respecting human dignity (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1988 p 174). This position very much fits Dalit Theology as it calls for the faith of Dalit Christians to challenge caste and to create a new society. As Massey claims, Dalit Theology is a younger sister to Latin American Liberation Theology, Black Theology, Feminist Theology and Minjung Theology as all these have a common historical base in oppression (capitalism, racism, patriarchy and feudalism respectively), and a common goal for the complete liberation of all people (Massey, 1997b p 169). On the same lines, Prabhakar argues that theology has been for too long a preserve of the intellectual elite

and has remained an academic discipline but Dalit Theology is an attempt towards a liberation theology for people, in order to enable them to transform the situation and develop an alternate consciousness of economic equality, political justice and a religion of God's freedom (M.E Prabhakar, 1990b p 49-50). Therefore Dalit Theology is a liberation theology as it aims at changing the oppressive caste system and tries to bring about the formation of a casteless society.

### ***5.3 Viewing 'God as Redeemer – Liberator'***

Dalit Theology is of the view that Dalit Christians, being the oppressed community, are known for their faith affirmation of God. It argues that, for Dalits, redemption is mainly freedom from caste oppression. They should view God not only as redeemer from their state of sin, but also as an enabler to regain their human status from caste oppression. Dalit Theology affirms the Exodus experience of the early Israelites. Although Dalits are under caste oppression on their own soil, Nirmal states that Dalits trust that the God of the Exodus will redeem them from that oppression which makes them captives; since the non-Dalits are the oppressors, the triune God will not take sides with them but God will identify with Dalits as they are God's own people (Prabhakar, 1990a p 62-63). Sharing the same position, Devasahayam argues that God, revealed in Jesus, identifies with the oppressed Dalits as God's people and aligns with them in their struggle (V.Devasahayam p 21). Thus for Dalit theologians, God is both a redeemer and liberator who not only offers salvation to Dalits but also liberates them

from caste oppression; though salvation and liberation is for all people, including the oppressors of the Dalits (Massey, 2001 p 79).

#### **5.4 Seeing 'Jesus, a Dalit' and His mission as a 'suffering Messiah'**

Dalit Theology affirms that Dalits have lived in pathos and suffering for generations and they have turned to several religions to regain their human dignity. They embraced Christianity with the hope that they would be freed from caste oppression (Ayrookuzhiel, 2006 p 21). Though it did not happen, Dalit Theology states that, for Dalits, Jesus is a Dalit and a suffering Messiah who will achieve liberation for them. In the thoughts of Nirmal, Dalit Christians have a perception that they understand God only through their life situation and struggles; for them Jesus is a serving God, like a waiter, *dhobi* or *bhangji* and he is a suffering God for others (P.Nirmal, 1988 P 80-81).

It is a very strong notion to claim Jesus as a Dalit and also a suffering Messiah who struggles along with Dalits. Nirmal must have arrived at this position by relating the life and mission of Jesus to the present context of Dalits. Although Jesus was born a Jew, he identified himself with Gentiles, sinners, tax collectors and immoral women. Also, he opposed the Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the law. He spent most of his time in the province of Galilee with the poor, the sick and the marginalised. He condemned the dominant groups who isolated them, claiming superiority and oppressing the poor.

Jesus took sides with the oppressed and weak, and proclaimed the Kingdom of God to those who are marginalised and voiceless. This being the position of Nirmal, Massey too argues along the same lines that Dalits affirm their faith in the incarnation of God in Christ, and that he has made 'Dalits as Dalit Christians' and empowers them to destroy the oppressive caste system which dehumanises them (Massey, 1996 p 87). These statements seem to be in line with Reddie who argues that God works in partnership with people throughout history. 'God's active involvement in history, in partnership with human agency, will give rise to peace, justice and God's righteousness' (Reddie, 2008 p 185). Therefore, there appears to be every reason for Dalit Theology to claim that Jesus is a Dalit and a suffering Messiah, as Jesus had the Dalitness in him in terms of identifying with the oppressed and serving and suffering for others. This must have encouraged Dalit theologians to claim that Jesus will take sides with Dalits, and that he has chosen Dalit Christians to struggle against the oppression of caste.

### ***5.5 Dalit Theology ensures freedom and peace for all***

Dalit Theology professes freedom and peace for both Dalits and non-Dalits. Liberation struggles always aim for transformation and freedom. When transformation takes place it brings freedom to the oppressed and the oppressor alike. If caste is eradicated it will bring freedom to both Dalits and non-Dalits. For Dalits, it would free them from caste oppression; for non-Dalits it would free them from their bondage to caste mentality. Thus freed, Dalits and non-Dalits could live together in equality, justice

and peace. Therefore Dalit Theology, as a counter-caste ideology seeks to promote values such as liberty, equality, fraternity, freedom, and community, ensuring justice, peace and well-being for all (Devasahayam, 1997a p 282). Dalit Theology aims to energise Dalit Christians to have faith that God is a liberator and will be in their struggle. Since they are the oppressed they need to initiate the struggle. Massey also argues that the struggle of Dalits will bring salvation to all including the oppressors (Massey, 2001 p 79). However, non-Dalits who are imprisoned in a false consciousness concerning their authority and dominance will not act first, but will be freed by the struggles of Dalits.

This survey expresses the argument of Dalit theologians that, taking the life-experience of Dalits as a main source of their theological reflection, and affirming the contextual and liberative character of Dalit Theology, both Dalits and non-Dalits can be released from the bondage of caste to lead a transformed life of equality and justice.

I feel it is necessary to state that the argument of Dalit theologians in certain places might appear to be a glorification of the significance and themes of Dalit existence in a Christian context. This might be because of their view that there was no adequate or serious effort either by Indian Christianity or by Indian Christian theology either to address the issue of caste or to reflect the oppressed life experience of Dalits. Thus, the first generation Dalit theologians might have gone to the extent of attacking the earlier tradition and glorifying Dalit Theology. This work attempts a more nuanced and balanced reading of Dalit Theology, while nonetheless, agreeing with the substantive claims of these earlier writers.

## **6. The problem, key research question and methodology**

### ***6.1 The Problem***

As suggested above, theology in India appears to have remained an academic and religious-based enterprise for a long time. The early Indian Christian theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made scanty mention of caste and their theological reflections were largely based on scripture, drawing on Brahmanical and westernised thought-forms and insights. However, from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards theologians appear to have enlarged their focus into a more public domain, to deal with the context and life-experience of believers, primarily based on class oppression (Kappen, 1978 p 61). Therefore, Dalit Theology emerged as a contextual and liberational theology, giving focus to the 'life-experience of Dalits' who suffer from caste oppression (Amaladoss, 1978 p 44-46). This recalls Gutiérrez's statement, that 'Liberation Theology brings hope to the poor and liberation from unjust social structures by conscientization from below' (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1974 p 48-50). Dalit theologians claimed Dalit Theology as a Practical Theology, constructed from below, since it aims to transform reality through action with the help of God (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 27). In line with Bevans, Dalit Theology believes in praxis, and the

intervention of Dalit Christians for social change, by taking inspiration from present realities and future possibilities (Bevans, 2003 p 70). Therefore Dalit Theology is viewed as liberative, contextual and practical.

The arguments of Dalit theologians affirm that the contextual interpretations they articulate are mainly from their own lived experience and their liberational insights relate largely to the caste-affected life-situations of Dalits which need to be transformed. In that way Dalit Theology is a practical theology. This, however, remains a somewhat abstract expression of Practical Theology, as it *reflects* the life experience of Dalits, *believes* in liberation and *aims* for a praxis to bring a change in reality. The present character of Dalit Theology is defined by mainly transformative orientations – ideas, beliefs and insights. These transformative reflections, orientations and intentions of Dalit Theology may need to be developed further into a shared Christian praxis by *engaging* with grass roots Dalit Christians to help them to create a dialogue between those ideas and insights and their lived reality to energise their faith perspectives and intensify their struggles. This is what Groome describes, as seen earlier, as shared Christian praxis, which helps the faith community to engage in a participative dialogue and to involve themselves in transformative actions.

On the same lines, Reddie, as a participative Black theologian observes that he constantly engaged with ordinary Black people in local churches and in other networks in order to bring the insights of Black Theology into dialogue with their experiences; this dialectical process of teaching and learning and dialogical theological exploration and

reflection has been the ongoing substantive model of Reddie's scholarly work (Anthony G Reddie, 2008 p 208). Hope and Timmel, when arguing for training for transformation, also observe that local participation and dialogue are the essential components in a process of bringing development and change (Hope and Timmel, 2001 p 16-17). In the development of a shared praxis, these transformative ideas or insights need to be disseminated among the people in order to establish dialogue and so become involved in action to change the oppressive status quo. In other words, theology should become a people's movement in terms of expressing their aspirations and energising them to transform the oppressive reality.

This suits Dalit Theology as well. As my intuition about the present status of Dalit Theology among grass roots Dalit Christians, and the subsequent verification of this through fieldwork (see Chapter Six) demonstrates, Dalit Theology needs to emerge as a shared Christian praxis by engaging with grass roots Dalit Christians, enabling them to discuss the theological ideas and insights reflected and articulated by Dalit theologians, which would inspire them theologically to intensify their struggle against caste. As mentioned earlier, as a Dalit rights activist for three decades, I noticed through interaction with grass roots Dalit Christians that the well-formulated liberational themes and faith articulations of Dalit theologians seem not to have adequately engaged with grass roots Dalit Christian activists to influence them theologically. Therefore, their struggles, formulated mostly through an action-reflection process (praxis), are mainly inspired by the prominent ideology and secular strategy of Ambedkar or other local Dalit leaders. I feel that, if shared, the themes and the insights of Dalit Theology could



definitely play a substantial and vibrant role, in motivating Dalits theologically to sustain and intensify their struggles alongside existing secular perspectives. Such an engagement would bring about a qualitative difference in the struggles against caste by Dalits of Christian faith and other faiths.

## ***6.2 Key research questions***

In the light of my concern that Dalit Theology be a participative theology and my impression that it is limited in its influence at the moment, this project proposes the following research questions: (i) what are the key themes of Dalit Theology? It will be important to answer this question as a basis for the remainder of the thesis; a distinctive aspect of my answer will be a comparison with Black Theology; (ii) how significant is Dalit Theology as a source of motivation for Dalit Christian activists? A major goal of this study is to test by observational hypothesis that Dalit Theology is currently a people's theology only in thought, not in practice; (iii) in what ways might Dalit Theology be challenged to reformulate its ideas as a result of developing as a participative praxis? That is, in what ways will Dalit Theology be challenged through becoming truly dialogic?

## ***6.3 Methodology***

Methodology and method play a significant role in research. Methodology is defined as a series of methods used in an activity or study, as the Oxford dictionary puts it. As Swinton states, 'method is a specific technique used as a tool' to collect data for analysis in research and 'methodology is an overall approach' that has been applied in

research' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006 p 74). Cameron states that 'methodology is a study of different approaches to research...[and] offers an abstract and theoretical exploration to carry forward research'; and 'method is an actual use and implementation of an approach' (Helen Cameron et al., 2005 p 19). These descriptions of Swinton and Cameron largely argue that methodology is the overall framework of a research project and method is a particular technique for the collection of data or information to support a research methodology.

While describing a range of models of methodology for different disciplines, Cameron states that the *praxis model* is one of the key methodological approaches used in practical theology; this model refers to the pastoral cycle of 'see, judge and act' with the stages of experience, exploration, reflection and action integral in the process (Helen Cameron et al., 2005 p 23). Swinton also argues that 'the primary task of practical theology is not just to see the realities differently, but to change them' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006 p 255). Therefore the *praxis model* could be an appropriate methodology for this research project, which aims to develop the existing practical Dalit theology by providing a new dimension of shared Christian praxis. It explores this problem, and thereby operates according to the model of *praxis* through a literature review, reflection upon the data or information collected from field work – in this case by means of personal interviews as it is a qualitative research project – and through motivating the practitioners to involve themselves in action to change their reality (Helen Cameron et al., 2005 p 24).

This correlates with how Swinton describes interpretation: that, 'it is the task of the Practical theologian to use scripture, tradition and context to develop a practical theology to state who God is and how does He work as a truth to transform the oppressive realities' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006 p 27).

#### **6.4 Field work**

As seen above, 'method' is a tool to collect data or information to assist a research methodology. Since this research project aims mainly to study the significance of Dalit Theology as a motivational source for grass roots Dalit Christian activists, I found 'personal interview' to be an effective method to extract information from the struggling activists. Therefore a field-study was undertaken for a period of four months from October 2010 to January 2011 in the State of Tamilnadu, where rural Dalit Christians are in the forefront of the struggle. I contacted the Alternative Forum for Dalit Christians Liberation (AFDCL), a state-level network of Dalit Christian organisations of major denominations in Tamilnadu, the members of which are mainly activists from the grass roots. Since it is a qualitative research project, criteria were established to identify a team of fifteen committed and proactive grass roots Dalit Christian activists who belong to this network and who are in the forefront of the struggle, including both laity and clergy. Questionnaires, participant information pamphlets, consent forms and formats for field study were all taken when conducting interviews. An independent translator has provided English translations of the interviews as they were carried out in Tamil, the local language. Questions were framed for extracting qualitative information from the

selected activists with an objective of developing a shared Christian praxis within Dalit theology.

The field work led to a considerable immediate impact among the grass roots activists, helping them to understand the basics of Dalit theology and its usefulness for their faith motivation to intensify their ongoing struggle. The field work itself appeared to be a mini praxis model, which reflected the methodology of this research, in terms of helping the interviewees to understand the themes of Dalit theology and reflect theologically upon their involvement in struggles with extended perspectives and renewed vigour. I am convinced that the praxis model for interaction with grass roots Dalit Christian activists has the potential to enlarge Dalit Theology as a vibrant Practical theology incorporating shared Christian praxis.

## **6.5 Analysis**

A careful and detailed analysis was carried out on the status of Dalit theology among grass roots Dalit Christian activists, using the vital components of the chosen methodology – the *praxis model*. Exploration was done through literature review, qualitative information was gathered by the method of personal interview and reflection was accomplished through the careful analysis of the research questions. Since Practical Theology deals with the framework of hermeneutical, correlational and critical models (Swinton and Mowat, 2006 p 76), this praxis-based methodology was found helpful in offering suggestions for Dalit Theology to develop as a vibrant Practical

Theology by means of shared Christian praxis to engage with the struggling Dalit Christians against caste oppression.

## **7. Organisation**

The objective of this research, as described, is broadly to study the status of Dalit Theology among the struggling grass roots Dalit Christian activists and mainly to develop Dalit theology as a Practical Theology with a strong dimension of shared Christian praxis by engaging with those activists in order to convey the ideas and insights of Dalit theology for and generate a dialogue with their life experience in order to enhance their theological motivation to intensify their struggle against caste oppression.

Therefore, the first chapter has given an overall background to this research project, its present context, the insights of Indian Christian theologians, the emergence of Dalit theology, its source, key themes, the problem noticed, the research question and the methodology adopted.

Chapters Two to Four, as a response to research question one, attempt to list the significance and the key themes of Dalit Theology namely, its giving importance to the caste-affected life experience of Christian Dalits as a main source; chapter four mainly elucidates a brief comparison of the key liberational themes that Dalit Theology and

Black Theology deal with in order to bring out what is distinctive in Dalit theology in comparison to another representative liberation theology.

Chapters Five and Six aim to answer questions two and three (how significant is Dalit Theology as a source of motivation for Dalit Christian activists and in what ways might Dalit Theology be challenged to reformulate its ideas as a result of developing as a participative praxis?). Chapter Five provides an overall description of the significance and the salient features of a Practical Theology and the action-reflection process in transforming realities. Chapter Six is based on the field work undertaken during this study. It analyses the status and effectiveness of the themes of Dalit theology as a source of motivation for the struggles of Christian Dalit activists. Very particularly, a part of Chapter Six reflects on how Dalit Theology's themes and reflections might be challenged by becoming a participative theological praxis.

Chapter Seven offers a conclusion, which argues, in part, that there is evidence that my initial intuition, that Dalit Theology is too remote from the grass roots, is plausible. The chapter also points the way forward by suggesting possible ways or methods by which Dalit Theology may become a participative practical theology.

## **Chapter Two – Dalit Theology – its significance**

### **1. Significance**

This chapter attempts to address the first research question and deals with the first element of the literature review of Dalit Theology, by discussing the significance of Dalit Theology. The second element, a discussion of the themes of Dalit Theology, will be dealt with in the next chapter. Dalit Theology, a counter to Indian Christian theology and particularly a source of empowerment of Dalits, as it claims, emerged as contextual and liberative by recognising the issue of caste which denies human dignity and equality to Dalits in general but forms the majority among Indian Christians. This chapter attempts a brief review of the major significance of Dalit Theology as described and argued by a few first-generation Dalit theologians who were the pioneers in framing Dalit Theology.

This review of the significance of Dalit Theology begins with two major perceptions of Dalit theologians. One is that theology should reflect the context of the society at large; and the other is that it should have its source in people's life experience. Theology is widely accepted as 'God-talk or discourse about God' (Brown, 1993 p 53). Since theology is basically formulated by elites and intellectuals, it tends mostly to remain within an academic environment and in the church; gradually, however, it has been responding to the context, the life situations, of people in the wider society. As Ford observes, '[t]heology, in course of time, has been elevated to a level of a

separate academic discipline, and its responsibility has been broadly accepted to three major areas – the academy, church and society’ (Ford, 1999 p 21-22). In line with these arguments, Dalit theologians have come to the view that theology is not a product of God but of human beings, and that early Christian thinkers interpreted the words of God in relation to the context from which they came. In the words of Devasahayam, ‘the intellects who emerge as Theologians belong to different times and historicity, and also hail from different socio-economic, political or cultural situations, and therefore their interpretations of God’s words are confined to their own reflections of the context and also to the reality from where they are originated’ (V. Devasahayam, 1997b p 278). Their context and interpretations have ignored the situation of the wider community. As Clarke suggests, ‘many constituencies among the Indian Christian community were kept out or made silent by the traditional theological discourse; this vacuum galvanised the unrepresented communities, specifically Dalits and Tribals, to articulate and reflect for an authenticated theology’ (Clarke et al., 2010 p 20).

The second perception is that theology should be based on the experience of people, and therefore Dalit Theology has its source mainly in the life experience of Dalits. Theology, as widely described, has originated from six sources – scripture, tradition, reason, revelation, culture and experience (Macquarrie, 1977 p 4-20). As Massey sees it, ‘western theology, a known base for all other theologies, has its source mostly in scripture, tradition and reasoning; the sources of revelation, culture and experience of people have been given prominence once the liberation theology came into being in different parts of the world’ (Massey, 1997b p 167-172). Since people’s



experience is viewed as a vital source for theology, 'Dalit Theology entails the experience of Dalits and their reflections; it is grounded in the past, relies on the present and moves ahead believing in the redemptive power of the future' (Massey and Lourduswamy, 2001 p 34). This being the core perception of Dalit theologians, four key elements of Dalit Theology are outlined below.

### ***1.1 Counter to Indian Christian theology***

The first element in the significance of Dalit Theology is that it is counter to Indian Christian theology. While theology is generally understood as the study of the nature of God and God's relationship with human beings, Western theology has sought to give a coherent account of Christian beliefs based on scripture and tradition. Indian Christian theologians followed the Western tradition of defining God, Christ and Christian doctrines; they were largely comfortable with Western theological insights for centuries. As seen in the first chapter, this would have continued had it not been criticised and challenged by the eighteenth century Indian philosophers. They viewed Christ through their own Vedic insights and framework (i.e. based upon the oldest scriptures of Hinduism). They also criticised Indian Christianity concerning its inability to evolve its own theology. This brought pressure to bear on Indian Christians to work on promoting an Indian Christian theology (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 1,4). I discuss below the various arguments of Dalit theologians, which they articulated as a counter to Indian Christian Theology. Mostly, however, their reflections actually address themes

from Western theology that the Indian Christian Theologians had inherited alongside a Brahmanical framework.

### *1.1 (i) Dominant factors in formulating Indian Christian theology*

Three prominent factors were involved in defining Indian Christian theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These have already been discussed in the first chapter in terms of how the Indian philosophers and Hindu thinkers viewed Christ and criticised Christianity for overtly following western dogma which brought pressure for Indian Church to evolve Indian Christian Theology. First, as described, Indian Christian theologians were familiar with westernised theological insights which heavily influenced the evolution of this theology. Second, they listened to the criticism of Indian philosophers and their view on God and Christ, informed by their own Vedic understandings, and tried to give their responses within the same framework. The third factor is that Indian Christian theologians mostly hailed from upper caste backgrounds and were influenced by Brahmanical Hindu insights and understandings. As Clarke states, these three factors – westernised thought forms, Vedic views of Hindu philosophers and a Brahmanical background – influenced their reflections on Indian Christian theology. However, their reflections neither addressed the issue of caste nor took into consideration the suffering life experience of Dalits, who form the majority among Christians in India, facing caste oppression. The reason for this was that the proponents of this theology were mostly non-Dalits and their interpretations

predominantly inherited Indian concepts and Brahmanical traditions (Clarke, 1999 p 36-42).

### *1.1 (ii) Criticism by Dalit theologians*

The early Dalit Theologians and present-day theologians of non-Dalit origin, who are, by and large, sympathetic to the Dalit cause, criticise the way that Indian Christian theology was evolved by the early theologians. Their criticism has not only challenged Indian Christian theology but also formulated a basis for the formation of Dalit Theology.

As Nirmal states, the Indian Christian theologians laboured to interpret Christ for an Indian situation in order to evolve Indian Christian Theology and to be freed from the influence of westernised Christian theologies; this has necessitated the evolution of a Dalit Theology as a counter theology to disconnect from the dominant Brahmanical traditions of Indian Christian theology. This theology is based primarily on the pathos and sufferings of Dalits (Arvind P Nirmal, 1988 p 76).

When defining why Dalit Theology has developed, Prabhakar observes that 'the Indian Christian Theology failed to take account of the sufferings and hope of Dalits, who form the majority of the Indian Christians; its approach of primarily responding to the philosophical-theological conceptions of the dominant Brahmanical religion and culture has not helped Dalits' aspirations. Hence the need for Dalit Theology' (M.E.Prabhakar, 1988 p 3).

When describing a Christian Dalit Theology, Nirmal states that '[a]t the moment Indian Christian theology has ceased to be the enterprise of the elite and on behalf of the elite and allowed itself to be an enterprise of people. These people are the Dalits – the broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split; the opened, the dispelled, the scattered, the down trodden, the crushed, the destroyed, the manifested and the displayed' (P.Nirmal, 1990 p 54).

While explaining the ingredients for a Dalit Theology, Massey expresses in his book, *Indigenous people and Dalits*, that 'the roots of Indian Christian theology lie in the experiences of mostly upper caste/class Christian converts of this century and last century..., and therefore they interpreted their new faith or experiences in Indian thought-forms i.e., based on the Brahmanic religion and culture in which they had grown up...[W]e have to work out another expression of Indian Christian theology which would be relevant to the living situation of the vast majority of people especially of the Dalits...Dalit Theology will be based on the living experiences of the Dalit themselves'. (Massey, 2006b p 339-340) Devasahayam states that 'the Indian Christian Theology has been the work of Caste Christians, who theologise an elite upper caste perspective, ignoring the glaring reality of the Indian Christians being constituted predominantly by the Dalits' (V. Devasahayam, 1997b p 16).

While arguing for a true liberative Indian Christian theology, Franklyn argues '[that] the Western class superiority and Indian caste superiority went hand-in-hand is a historical fact and it is also an existential reality. Hence any truly Christian Dalit

aspiration for liberation in India must start with a critique of both traditional Western Christian Theology as well as Indian Christian Theology' (Balasundaram, 1997b P 262).

Clarke, while analyzing Indian Christian Theology spells out that the agenda for Indian Christian theology was set by caste Hindu intellectuals (mainly Brahmin) and thereby it has maintained its hegemony with the Indian concepts and symbols from Brahmanic tradition by excluding and ignoring the voice of Dalits who are the majority (Clarke, 1999 p 38-41).

When discussing theology in India, Wilson comments that

one has to decide for himself as to which one of the following is more important – to analyse the predicament of the people and then find solutions in the words of God; or to articulate theologies first and then try to attune people to these already manufactured doctrines? It is unfortunate that even when issues such as Humanization and secularization are discussed by Indian theologians, they are treated mostly at a conceptual level rather than in relation to the human conditions of a particular community (Wilson P 156).

Carr, when criticising Indian Christian theology states that

[i]n the recent past when indigenization was the great fad of Christians, who suddenly become conscious that they are Indian and not British or American, [they] began to uphold the example of De Nobili with mad enthusiasm. A clear example of how not to contextualize theology; because the privilege of theologizing had passed from the hands of Western masters to the Indian Christian upper caste elite...Little did any Indian Christian seem to realize that the mission advocated by the Gospel calls us to dismantle the caste structure and not to legitimize it (Carr, 2006 P 233).

While arguing the reasons for a Dalit Theology, Chatterji asserts that the

Indian Christian theology was unable to detach itself from the Brahmanical culture and ideology. For many of the Indian theologians, cultural contextuality meant adjustment to the dominant ethos and even to such structures as caste...Another

stream of theological thinking concerned itself with the notions of development, poverty or the poor, liberation and like. But none of these streams addressed itself to the realities of the Dalits or indigenous peoples, women, and other marginalised groups. No profiles of suffering, aspirations or struggles of these sections came out of these exercises (Chatterji, 2006 p 196-197).

Oommen observes that Dalit theologians have rejected 'both the European missionary movement and the traditional Indian Christian theology of the 20th century, as metaphysical speculations, having nothing to do directly with the history and existence of the marginalized majority within the Indian church' (Oommen, 2000 p 19-37).

Webster comments that Dalit Theology is a critique of those missionary and Indian church leaders who, in their efforts to 'Indianise' the church, have equated Indian culture with Brahmanic, instead of Dalit culture (John C.B Webster, 2001).

Equally, Dalit theologians were critical of Latin American-based Liberation theology. While they claim that Dalit Theology is a liberation theology, they differ from Thomas and Kappen (Kappen, 1978 p 61) as they claim that the first barrier to be broken is class bias. This is in line with Latin American-born Liberation theology which has its roots in the Marxian tool of analysis, thus giving primary importance to the economic factor, the class division among Christians. But in the Indian context it is a social factor, caste, which plays a greater role in dividing and separating Christians as Dalits and non-Dalits (Massey, 1997b p 168-172).

Thus the proponents of Dalit Theology, by and large, are different from the Indian Christian theologians as they have personally undergone a pathetic experience of caste discrimination (Massey, 2006b 341-342) and have also noticed how Dalits are victimised both within and outside the church (Massey, 1996 p 73). Therefore, their insights and arguments are very different from those of the early Indian Christian theologians.

While considering these arguments, it is also necessary to note that some early philosophers and missionaries opposed the caste system. Although this has been discussed in the first chapter, the key arguments raised are summarised here. Brahmabandhav, the early philosopher, opposed caste as it was against Christian philosophical thinking. Appasamy opposed caste in the church as it was against the Lordship of Christ (Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993 p 8-9,98). Keshab Chandra Sen opposed the caste system as it was against the person of Christ; Ramananda, a disciple of Ramanuja of the Bakthi movement, was also against the prevalence of the caste system (Boyd, 1969 p 26,111) as it was against God. Schultz, a missionary, even passed an order to stop caste practices in the Church (Firth, 1998 p 138) though it was reversed once he was moved from that position.

It is important to note here that challenging caste is something different from reflecting theology from a Dalit perspective. Though some of these early philosophers and theologians were against the caste system and challenged it, they failed to interpret God and Christ through the perspective of the Dalits, the suffering untouchables. Dalit theologians were categorically critical of this. Thus, they seriously criticised the

theological insights, reflections and arguments of Indian Christian theologians who did not take into consideration caste oppression while developing Indian Christian theology.

A difference must be recognised, however, between present-day Indian Christian theologians and earlier proponents. The former not only oppose the caste system but also provide theological interpretations condemning caste and its oppression of Dalits. Wilfred, for example, a well-known contemporary Indian Christian Theologian, accepts that Indian Christian Theology, now several hundred years old in its own right, has failed to give attention to the issue of caste and the suffering of the marginalised. Instead it has simply used the Brahmanical tradition to express Christian truths. In contrast, he frames his theological writings around a recognition of the suffering of Dalits and other marginalised groups and he encourages and directs Dalit priests and bishops to undertake doctoral research on Dalit theology, using his thoughts and insights to oppose caste discrimination (Wilfred, 2005 p 134-135). The situation is, therefore, changing with respect to the recognition of the life experience of Dalits within theologising in India.

In sum, Dalit Theology, as seen above, is defined as counter to Indian Christian theology on four counts. First, it anchors its source in the life-experience of Dalits; second, it aims to strengthen and shape the faith perspectives of Dalits with liberative theological insights; third, it focuses on inspiring Dalits to sustain their struggle against caste to transform the oppressive situation and create a just society; and fourth, it concurs with the Ambedkarian analysis of viewing caste as the source of all oppression of Dalits. The pivotal difference between Dalit Theology and Indian Christian theology is



that, while Indian Christian theology is concerned with the identity of Christ, Dalit Theology considers the question of those with whom Christ identified himself. Therefore it can be described as a counter to Indian Christian Theology.

While understanding the criticism of Indian Christian theology by Dalit theologians and their arguments around the emergence of Dalit Theology, most of the Dalit theologians themselves are urban-based and from elite class contexts, although they hail from the Dalit community. Of course, as Dalits they have had their first-hand experience of caste oppression. However, the life experience of grass roots Dalit Christians is certainly and acutely different from that of urban-based and middle class Dalits. Equally, early and contemporary Dalit theologians were highly literate and intellectual, capable of reflecting and articulating theological insights. But the village-based Christians are still mostly illiterate and they have hardly any idea about theology or its various forms of reflection. Therefore, there is a vast difference between what Dalit theologians reflect, write or speak and the understanding of rural-based Dalit Christians. Consequently, Dalit Theology, after its thirty years of existence, has to look into the present life experience of Dalits, especially those who live in villages, and must engage with the grass roots to fulfill its aim and focus. The argument is built along these lines in the following chapters.

## **2. The life-experience of Dalits – the source of Dalit Theology**

The second fundamental characteristic of Dalit Theology is its source. It is based in the life-experience of Dalits. Contextual and Liberation theologies mostly have their base in the oppressive life-experience of various groups of people and Dalit Theology, being contextual and liberational, reflects Christian faith from the perspective of Dalits, the discriminated and oppressed community.

As discussed above, Western Christian theology has its fundamental source mainly in the Bible, tradition and reason (McGrath, 1993 p.xv). But, as Bevans sees it, when theology was conceived as an insight and exploration relating to the expression of one's faith-based life-experience, then its nature expanded from classical to contextual. He observes that

classical theology is conceived as an objective science of faith, having its reflection on the sources of scripture and tradition; but contextual theology recognizes the human experience which rests in culture, history and contemporary thought-forms which get changed. In addition to scripture and tradition, now human experience also becomes the source of theology – contextual theology (Bevans, 2003 p 3,4).

Though his observation appears to be a little generalised, it still carries importance for the life experience of a faith community. Similarly, Cone while describing Black Theology, states that

[t]heology is a rational study of God's presence in the existential situation of the oppressed community; no Christian theology could exist if it does not identify with the humiliated and abused; it ceases to be a theology when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed; Black Theology arises out of the condition of the Black community (James H. Cone, 2001 p 1,10).

Gutiérrez too, while describing the theology of liberation argues that

the early church and the classical theology reflected on wisdom and rational knowledge to link with the spiritual life of Christian community; but liberation theology deals with the critical reflection on praxis, the functioning of theory and practice of human beings, in terms of their attitude and reflection on the socio, economic and cultural issues that they face' (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1974 p 47-55).

These three perspectives contribute to an argument for the life-experience of people to be considered as the primary source for contextual and liberational theologies, since they attempt to reflect and change circumstances of oppression. Christian communities, especially in developing countries, face various problems of caste, race ethnicity, class, patriarchy, post-colonialism and neo-liberalism. These divisive, discriminatory, exploitative and oppressive systems have enslaved, subjugated and abused the majority. For the oppressed, the question of liberation from these worldly tyrannies seems to be more vital and immediate than their redemption from spiritual enslavement. Therefore, Dalit Theology immerses itself in the life-experience of Dalits who are under caste oppression and reflects upon theology from their perspective.

Webster affirms this position. He says that because Dalits form the majority in the Indian church and suffer from caste discrimination inside and outside church then Christian theology in India should root itself in the life-experience of Dalits (C.B.Webster, 2007 p 197-198), in order to inspire them to strengthen their faith and overcome their life situation. Of course, scripture and tradition play a role of source for any Christian theology and since Dalit Theology is also a Christian theology, it does not negate the role of scripture and tradition. However Dalit Theology, being contextual and liberational, encourages Dalits to get rid of caste and its oppressions. Therefore it needs to locate itself primarily in the life-experience of Dalits and attempts to interpret scripture in

relation to their life. As Massey argues, Dalit Theology is the 'local expression of the experiences of the local people of their faith. It is a well known fact that the majority of Christians come from the lower strata of society. What is missing from Indian Christian theology is the experiences of these lowliest people' (Massey, 1988 P 58).

### ***2.1 Life experiences of Dalits – originating from the reality of caste***

If life experience is argued for as the source of Dalit Theology, then how the life situation of Dalits is different from other Christians must be seen. The following analysis highlights the pathetic and shocking condition of Dalits. The life-experience of any community is conditioned and measured by the socio-economic, cultural and political factors that prevail in the society in which they live. For Latin America, the life experience of the majority of Christians was profoundly affected by the economic factor; in Africa, it was racism which discriminated against and marginalised Black people; in North America again it was race and the master-slave relationship; in Korea it is the cultural divisions among the ordinary people; in the Philippines it is political colonisation; in the context of India, it is caste which has disadvantaged and marginalised Dalits (Massey, 1997a p.78-79). That being the reason, a brief review is necessary to understand the origin of caste and how it forms the source of division and discrimination.

The theories of the origin of caste have already been dealt with in the first chapter. However, the issue is here dealt with in greater depth in order to provide a clear basis for subsequent arguments. Griffith, a historian of the *Rig Veda*, states that Aryans

(nobles) invaded north India and conquered the local settlers, the *Dasas* (slaves) in 1500 BC and introduced the four-fold caste system to divide them (Griffith, 1986 p 603). Srivatsava argues that 'the destruction of Indus Valley Civilization and the contents of the hymns of Rig Veda are inter-related; it describes the war conflict of different groups of people; it gave birth to untouchables' (Srivatsava, 1980 p 1). Azariah states that, 'according to historians the four-fold Varna system was introduced by Aryans who invaded India 4000 years ago and the original tribes - the Dasyus or the Adi-Dravidas or Adi-Dasyus – were made as the fifth category and named as untouchables' (M. Azariah P 88,89).

Baghwan Das explains that 'Brahmins introduced an elaborate system to preserve their purity. They married among themselves and if they had sexual relations with women of lower castes...the progeny was not entitled to the privileges allowed to those who were born of Brahmin women's womb. In order to maintain purity all relations with lower castes were prescribed' (Das, 2006 p 58). As already discussed, though the historical link between the 'Aryan invasion' and the construction of a caste-divided society is very difficult to substantiate, this brief survey of the writings of eminent historians and theologians, demonstrates the way in which Dalit history has been perceived. Whatever the actual origin of the caste system, as Devasahayam illustrates, caste made Dalits into a distinct, segregated community. He argues that *Manusmriti* (a text prescribing social practices based on Vedic principles, and dated to c. AD 700) introduced the concept of purity and pollution. Brahmins stayed at the top as pure, and Dalits were tainted as impure, a status which was extended to their places of

inhabitation, work and burial. Even their Gods were defiled as impure. This resulted in forcing Dalits to live in social immobility, illiteracy, poverty and powerlessness (V.Devasahayam, 1990 p 4-10). Wilson states, further, that Dalits were the descendents of pre-Aryan Indians; *Arya Dharma* created the *varna* (caste) system and moved Dalits from freedom to slavery; they were uprooted from their harmonious relationship between man and matter and man and man (Wilson, 1988 P 48). Peacock argues that, according to the theory of the Aryan invasion, the Aryan race invaded and subjugated the local population known as Dravidians; Aryans claimed to be upper castes and the Dravidians were termed as lower castes, the untouchables (Peacock, 2010a p 76).

The important point to note is that the caste system has undoubtedly existed for an extremely long period and if caste is challenged, it often triggers the wrath of non-Dalits, who then inflict all forms of physical or mental violence against Dalits to retain their social hierarchy, hegemony and supremacy. In short, caste decides largely the human or inhuman status of Indians, besides any social, economic and political advancements or marginalisation. As Prabhakar states, caste forces Dalits to become socially ostracised, economically exploited, politically powerless and even spiritually ambiguous. Therefore the life-experience caused by caste is the most important factor for Dalits, playing a vital role in forming their ideology and also their theology (M.E Prabhakar, 1990b p 44-45).

## **2.2 Caste practices discriminate against Dalits**

While understanding the origin of caste, it is essential to study in what way the life experience of Dalits differs from that of non-Dalits. This has been illustrated to some extent in the first chapter. It has been pointed out that caste has a history of thousands of years. Dalits were excluded from the caste-based *varna* system, and termed polluted, impure, degraded and untouchable (C.B.Webster, 2007 p 3-4). Caste imposes two major crude oppressions on Dalits which the non-Dalits do not undergo. They are the imposition of inhuman untouchability practices and violence against Dalits. Although this has been discussed in Chapter One, this account elaborates further on the plight of Dalit Christians.

As per the report of the Sakshi Human Rights organisation, first, untouchability practices force Dalits to undergo more than 124 forms of visible and invisible forms of discrimination, which include living in segregated areas, and denial of equal treatment with non-Dalits in terms of inter-dining, intermarriage, temple entry, access to common village resources including burial grounds, common roads and public services, and treatment in schools, public health institutions, local markets and even polling booths. The second oppression is denial of basic rights and privileges in all social, economic and political realms, such as economic domains, education, employment, land, labour, health, housing, markets and consumer institutions, political and party activities. The third oppression is forced and filthy labour which includes manual scavenging, garbage removal, sweeping, gutter cleaning, washing toilets, skinning of dead animals, tanning

and undertaking all leather works. The fourth relates to the subjugation of women and children; Dalit women are forced into temple prostitution (as Joginies), and face trafficking, molestation, rape and being paraded naked in public. Child labour, abuse, beggary and trafficking are some of the shocking violations of Dalit children (Dr. SDJM Prasad, 2004 and 2007). All these visible oppressions are based on caste which drives Dalits to dwell in separated sections, abject poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and economic dependency, coupled with humiliation and stigma, which results in losing their human dignity and suffering inferior social, economic and political status (C.B.Webster, 2007 p 29-30). These four oppressions are inflicted on Dalits. What Webster stated, as seen above, correlates with the outcome of the study mentioned already cited. For non-Dalits, despite their poverty and other disadvantages, caste provides them with social pride as 'upper' castes, and they enjoy human dignity and all the privileges of a caste-based society.

In addition to untouchability practices, Dalits face gruesome physical violence in the name of caste. When caste and its authority is challenged, non-Dalits inflict massive and large-scale violence in a variety of forms against Dalits, such as spoiling drinking water resources, social and economic boycott, tonsuring heads and single-side shaving of moustaches and beards of Dalit men, physical assault, the force-feeding of human excreta and drinking of urine, maiming, rape and naked parading of Dalit women in public, plucking out eyes, all the way up to murder and drastic killings. When atrocities are committed, non-Dalits do not spare Dalits of any faith. We have seen in the first chapter a number of statistics relating to the atrocities committed against Dalits as



recorded in the reports of the Indian Government in the last few years. This authenticates the claim of extreme violence inflicted against Dalits if they rise against caste oppression of non Dalits. In short, caste is the reason for imposing both untouchability and atrocities upon Dalits, which leads them to live in suffering and in some cases utter agony. This is how much the life experience of Dalits differs from that of non-Dalits.

### ***2.3 Life experiences of Dalit Christians***

#### ***2.3 (i) The presence of caste in Christianity***

Since Dalit Christian theology talks about caste discrimination against Dalit Christians, it is necessary to look into the status of caste in Christianity from its inception and how it affects particularly the life of present-day Dalit Christians. As already noted, Aryans who invaded India are widely believed to have introduced the caste system and dehumanised Dalits as untouchables. Over centuries, caste embedded itself into the religio-cultural life of all Indians. It endured for thousands of years, survived foreign rule and penetrated into the imported religions like Christianity and Islam. According to Bayly, a leading anthropologist, the caste system reigned in the ancient monarchies, endured in the Moghal period, withstood British rule and continues to be predominant in the post-colonial era (Bayly, 2001 p 25). Chapter One described in detail how caste Hindus were brought into Christianity by the early missionaries.

To summarise this process, some of the work of a second-generation Dalit theologian, Peniel Rajkumar, is reproduced here. He traces the status of caste from the days of the early missionaries. He begins with the idea that Christianity was introduced to India by the Apostle Thomas in the first century, which caused some Brahmins to become Syrian Christians. Then the Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in the sixteenth century, who also converted some non-Dalits. Up to then Christianity was a religion only for members of the upper castes. Then came the missionary, Francis Xavier, who converted different caste groups, including Dalits, who subsequently followed the Latin rite, while the 'Thomas Christians' followed the Syrian rites. From then on, caste and segregation began to play their roles in Christianity. Later came Robert De Nobili (1606), an Italian Roman Catholic priest, whose mission was to produce 'upper-caste' Christians, calling them 'new Brahmins'.

Next came the Protestant missionaries, Ziegenbalg and Plutschau (1706), who converted Dalits, followed by later missionaries of other Protestant denominations. Peniel sums up the pathetic conditions of Dalit Christians and concludes with the reason for the emergence of Dalit Theology. Quoting other theologians as well, he states that the 'Indian church remained inaccessible and unresponsive to the Dalit situation and allows Dalits to remain in marginalisation. Church denies opportunities and fails to share the resources to Dalits. This discrimination influenced the emergence of Dalit Theology', (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b p 25-31). This shows how caste entered into Christianity and became an indelible factor which persists even today.

### *2.3 (ii) Dalit Christians face discrimination by non-Dalit Christians*

Very important is the current status of Dalits in Christianity. The discrimination and the oppression that Dalits face in today's Christianity is described here. Dalit Christians, in addition to all generalised discriminations, deprivations and humiliations that Hindu Dalits experience, face specific discrimination in Christianity as well. They are discriminated against in places of worship, in sharing Eucharist, accessing cemetery space, sharing positions of power in the church hierarchy – both clerical and lay – and enjoying the benefits of church-based educational and health institutions. According to Lourduswamy, the Dalit-desk Director of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, the equality that is being preached by Christianity does not have any effect in matters relating to practices. A Dalit remains a Dalit in every sense of the word (Lourduswamy, 2005 p 20, 37-38).

Shiri, while summing up his study on the plight of Dalit Christians, highlights that they live with social restrictions, curbing their freedom of movement and occupation, without dignity and self respect. They suffer denial of entry into tea shops, prevention of access to public water resources, refusal of services by village barbers and washermen, disruption of marriage processions and restricted access to village shops. They are the victims of forced labour, embezzlement, eviction, sexual abuse and all forms of physical violence (Shiri, 1997 p 237). According to Chinnappa, Archbishop in Chennai,

Dalit is a Dalit whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Christian. Even as members of various Christian communities, Christian Dalits suffer the same ancient segregation, oppression and unjust discrimination, the same social, educational and economic disabilities, now at the hands of their

fellow Christians of the upper castes. Conversion into the new faith has not redeemed them from the stigma of untouchability (Chinnappa).

Antoniraj highlights how Dalits are treated in seminaries:

until the 1960's, Dalits were generally not admitted to seminaries or religious life. Even today 70 percent of Dalits are turned away. Many do not enter seminaries or religious life because they fear caste treatment. In 1990, only 2 to 4 percent of Tamil Nadu priests were Dalits, and there were no Dalit bishops. By 2004 only three out of 16 dioceses had Dalit bishops — this in a state where 70 percent of the Catholics are Dalits. Not only has the church failed to eradicate caste; it has accommodated itself to caste (Izzo, 2005 p 14).

### *2.3 (iii) Dalit Christians face discrimination by state*

The other significant oppression of Dalit Christians is that they have to forgo the constitutional guarantees, privileges and protections earmarked for Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits, once they embrace Christianity, a religion which does not believe or profess caste hierarchy and discrimination by birth. Sikhism and Buddhism also do not profess division and discrimination by birth, but they were assimilated legally as sects of Hinduism, despite their objection to such assimilation. Therefore Sikh and Buddhist Dalits enjoy these privileges. Dalit Christians are denied this right (Banerjee, 1997 p 39,40). When non-Dalits attack they do not differentiate between Dalits and Christian Dalits; for them a Dalit is a Dalit whether he remains in Hinduism or has converted to Christianity (Arulraja, 1996 p vi). But the Government of India discriminates against Dalit Christians by refusing to grant them the status of 'Scheduled Caste' which would give them protection through special provisions and advancement through affirmative action. The position of the Indian Government is visibly biased. Despite various reports,

struggles and the legal intervention of Dalit Christians over the last sixty years, the Government finds it difficult to shift its position owing to various social, economic and political factors which include strong pressure from Hindu extremist organisations and their political parties. Thus, Dalit Christians are triply oppressed – by the outside world, the church and the State (Massey, 1997a p 34-40). Besides all social, economic and political disadvantage that Dalit Christians undergo on par with Dalits of other faiths, they are also denied their Scheduled Caste status by the Government and enjoyment of the requisite Constitutional safeguards (Shiri, 1997 p 238).

### *2.3 (iv) Dalit Christians face threat and violence by Hindu fundamentalist forces*

In addition to this triple oppression, Dalit Christians are targeted by Hindutva forces...who unleash violence on Dalit Christians in the name of controlling conversion. This is a major physical oppression with an entirely present-day context. Dalit Christians increasingly face massive physical attacks, arson, bulldozing of their churches, molesting of their women, rape, damaging of their houses and looting of their properties. In a recent book, George, besides quoting the prevalence of untouchability practices in almost all states, highlights that anti-conversion laws are in force in six states. These laws are a visible threat to Dalit Christians by the State, besides the physical attack by Hindu fanatics. He has compiled 405 instances of violence unleashed in 2006 and early part of 2007 in which 325 atrocities were committed against Dalit Christians (George cover page ).<sup>9</sup> Thus, more than Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits, Dalit Christians face

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<sup>9</sup> Undated publication by Dr. Sajan George, Bangalore.

additional violence in the name of the conversion issue as well. Hindu fundamentalist forces wanted Dalits to remain untouchables to serve them (Izzo, 2005 p 12,13). For all these crimes, Dalit Christians cannot invoke the special legislation for protection and justice earmarked for other Dalits as they are not included in the list of Schedule Castes.

### *2.3 (v) Dalit Christians face exclusion in Church-based institutions*

The other alarming discriminatory reality is that the educational and other institutions relating to the church are by-and-large in the hands of non-Dalit Christians who form the minority among Christians. According to Lourduswamy, not even ten percent of Dalits – either Dalit Christians or Dalits of any other faith – are the beneficiaries of these institutions. These institutions serve mainly non-Dalits of both Christian and any other faith (Lourduswamy, 2005 p 28,49). His observation is corroborated by the report and affidavit filed recently by Thomas in the Supreme Court of India in a case demanding Scheduled Caste Status for Dalit Christians, in which he states that out of approximately 40,000 Christian Education and Health Institutions at various levels in India, Dalit Christians are not the substantial beneficiaries (Thomas, 2009) & (Arulraja, 1996 p 27). Though Dalits form the majority among Christians they are an oppressed majority; their conversion to Christianity did not bring any substantial change in their socio-economic life (John C.B. Webster, 1999 p 89). Despite this abhorrent situation, Dalit Christians continue to remain in Christianity with their faith that the God who brought them this far will certainly lead them to a better future (Oommen and C.B.Webster, 2002 p 146).

As Webster summarises, Dalit Christians live a pathetic life at the hands of non-Dalits inside and outside the church, by facing untouchability practices, atrocities and no access to special protection and justice (C.B.Webster, 2007 p 196-197).

Christianity as a philosophy professes and preaches equality. However, in the Indian context, since caste penetrated into the church, by virtue of its divisive nature it divided Christians as high and low. Even economic affluence or positions of power occupied by Dalits do not matter, as long as that person is born a Dalit. Since caste is stamped on a person or community by birth and descent, the social, economic and political realms are associated with the caste into which they are born (Choondassery, 2007 p 14-17). The Church finds it difficult to eradicate this, since many non-Dalits in the church, in their hearts, still feel that they should always hold power (Haslam, 1999 p 121) and that Dalit Christians should remain downtrodden (Deshpande, 2008 p xi).

When this is the life experience of Dalit Christians, full of pathos and suffering, any theology in India which does not include the life experience of Dalits would definitely be alien to the majority of Christians who are stigmatised Dalits. As stated by Massey, this situation has encouraged Dalit Theology to concentrate mainly on the 'life experience of Dalits' as a source. Dalit Theology reflects the ground reality of Dalits and tries to provide them with a relevant faith perspective, and theological insight that God is already in action with them to sustain their life, and their struggle for their liberation from caste. Thus Dalit Theology gives priority to the history, culture and the present thought-forms of Dalits who dwell in untold misery and pain (Massey, 1997a p 77-80).

### **3. Dalit Theology is contextual and liberative**

This is the next significance of Dalit Theology, which is also dealt with in Chapter One. However, it is discussed here a little more elaborately, with the arguments of Dalit and other theologians.

Dalit theologians argue that Dalit Theology is contextual, with a liberative character. Gutiérrez argues that theology emanates from the faith of a Christian community pertaining to the context. He states that, 'what we call theology is something that every Christian and every Christian community does...Theology is a Christian community's awareness of its faith at a given moment in history' (Gustav Gutiérrez, 1987 p 23). This applies to Dalit Theology as it delves into the caste-oppressive situation of Dalit Christians, which is their context and which strengthens their faith commitment to liberate themselves. The context is defined by the life experience of Dalits who face all forms of caste oppression. It is liberative as it shapes the faith of Dalit Christians to have the exodus experience that God is in action with them, to release them from the captivity of caste (D. Manohar Chandra Prasad, 2009 p 169-170).

Equally, the definition of Stephen Bevans fits Dalit Theology as it deals with the context, the life-experience, and culture of Dalits. Bevans illustrates,

[w]hen the classical traditional theology anchors its notion in individual sin, morality and salvation in the light of a western culture which is perceived as universal, unchanging, permanent and suits to all locations and amounts to help maintain the socio economic oppressive status quo, contextual theology concentrates in the imperative of human experience of both individual and collective that is nurtured by the social location and particularity of culture and



also it strengthens the faith of the oppressed to change the oppressive status quo (Bevans, 2003 p 12-15).

Dalit Theology, in line with this argument, is based in the experience of Dalits, both individually and collectively, which has been nurtured in their culture. It also strengthens their faith to challenge caste to change the prevailing situation. Wesley argues that Dalit Theology is both contextual and liberative, similar to Black and Minjung theology, as it stands to take note of the life experience of Dalits who dwell in segregation, discrimination and exploitation owing to the caste-class power nexus and inspires Dalits to change the status quo for equality, peace and justice (Wesley, 2009 p 341). Thus, it has been compared to other contextual and liberative theologies, particularly the Black and Minjung.

In addition to its source, according to Sebastian,

Dalit Theology attempts not only to counter Indian Christian theology and its reductionism, but also it aims boldly to speak about what is Truth for those who are at the bottom. Dalit Theology, instead of replicating the same old traditional pattern of describing the philosophical understanding of Truth, maintains its contextuality by interpreting God's revelation as redeemer and reliever not necessarily from the sin only, but also from worldly oppression. Dalit Theology prefers to remain as a way of living together and caring for each other by challenging and changing the oppressive scenario in which it finds itself (Sebastian, 2008 p 89).

Living together and caring for each other is a cultural value of Dalits which has the potential to change the status quo.

One more argument is that Dalit Theology in today's context is a counter-caste theology. It views theology as a narration of God's struggle against oppressive, devilish

forces to rescue people from enslavement and to enjoy a fuller human life. As such, Dalit Theology sees the caste system as devilish, and interprets the victory of Jesus on the cross as his power for transforming the caste system in order to establish liberty, equality and justice for Dalits, and for all. It is counter to Brahmanical theology as it is from below and it is also contextual as it gives importance to the music, dance, stories, proverbs, values and principles of Dalits, to carry forward their history, culture, aspirations and also faith (Aleaz, 2004 P 161). This view of Aleaz affirms Dalit Theology to be both contextual and liberative.

Dalit Theology can be seen as one of the Asian theologies. It correlates with what Chung, a Minjung theologian, says about Asian contextual theology. He avers that

the exploited peoples express and formulate their consciousness of the oppression which they have suffered for centuries and encounter the socio political and religious injustice. They concretize the meaning of the gospel radically and contextually and raise a new form of theological consciousness for shaping Christian theology (Chung, 2006 P 92)

A brief survey of the argument of theologians from across the continent confirms that there are two aspects which qualify a theology to be contextual and liberative. One is that it has to derive from the experience of people in a given situation and the second is that it should energise oppressed people to become liberated from their oppression. These fundamental aspects apply to Dalit Theology as it is evolved from the life experience of Dalits who are under caste oppression and also it strengthens the faith of Dalits to challenge caste and transform the society. In line with Laurie Green, Dalit Theology is certainly contextual and also liberative as it is developed in its own context

of life experience, not wanting to be bound up in any alien or outside thrust (Green, 2009 P 18).

#### **4. Parallel from Black Theology**

A further significance of Dalit Theology is that it draws parallels from Black Theology. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. However, to introduce this parallel as a key issue, a brief discussion is offered here.

While Black Theology emerged in the context of slavery, was intensified by the transatlantic slave trade, and remains relevant even today due to the oppression of racism, Dalit Theology grew out of casteism and untouchability. Racism and casteism are sufficiently similar in two important aspects: they are colour-based and slavery-inflicted. While Black people are different in colour from White people and have been made slaves, the theory of the origin of Dalits as a result of the Aryan invasion also introduces the issue of colour into the caste system. Aryans are perceived in this theory to have originated in the Germanic north of Europe but came into India via the Middle East. While Aryans were light in colour, Dasyus, the Indian natives, also known as Dravidians, were dark in complexion. When, by this account, Aryans invaded from the north-west in 1400 BC, they were resisted by the native Dravidians. The Aryans were not able fully to exterminate the Dasyus as they were widespread, but they introduced the inhuman caste system and forced Dravidians to be known as untouchables and to live in slavery (Raj, 1985 p 10). However, the slavery system that has been imposed on

Black people is different from that of Dalits at the hands of non-Dalits. Still the socio-economic oppression that Dalits face in the form of untouchability, seclusion and segregation on account of the caste system amounts to a modern form of slavery. Thus Black people and Dalits, at least according to this widely-believed account of the origin of Dalits, share similar origins, stigma and a life-experience of pathos and sufferings based in part on colour.

Similar to Black Theology, Christian Dalit Theology stems from the effort to reinterpret God's liberating presence in a society where the human dignity of a community is denied and a socially ostracised, economically exploited and culturally subjugated life is mandated for that community. Dalit Theology uses political language about God. As Cone describes, Black Theology selects a political language about God, Jesus Christ and the Church, as these three cannot ignore a community's oppressive socio-economic and political realm (Song, 1976 p 24).

While referring to Black people's experience, and their struggle, Reddie states that 'Black people cherish the Blackness as their identity and love their life experience which is based on their culture, heritage, spirituality and tradition and from there they generate a destiny for them' (Anthony G Reddie, 2003 p 2). Similarly Dalit people also cherish their identity and Dalitness, which is known for its values of love, care and equality. As Nirmal compares,

Dalit Theology, Tribal theology, Black Theology, African theology, all these different theologies are seeking to express the distinctive identities of these peoples. They are denied their distinctive identities by their oppressors. The oppressors' theologies are considered to be normative and therefore imposed

upon the oppressed. In India the Brahmanic theological tradition has been imposed upon the Dalit Christian majority (A.P Nirmal, 1990 p 143).

Thus, Nirmal eloquently brings parallels from all these theologies to Dalit Theology in terms of how Dalit identity was oppressed by the Brahmanic oppressors.

The parallel is not limited only to the origin and identity but also the liberative character of Dalit Theology. As Reddie remarks, 'Black Theology believes that the incarnation of Jesus and his love as the mission of God does not simply talk about a pietistic love and humility but it is judgmental and strengthens to liberate the oppressed from the socio, economic political and cultural oppressiveness' (Anthony G Reddie, 2003 p 41-42). Reddie further argues, quoting Cone, that 'Black people would not associate with a supine God who would legitimate the status quo and does not stand along with them in their struggle against oppression' (Anthony G Reddie, 2003 p 158-159). The same is the case with Dalit Theology, which interprets God's love and mission as judgmental and liberative from caste oppression. God is not with the oppressors but with Dalits in their struggle for their liberation (P.Nirmal, 1990 p 58-59).

While describing the parallels to Dalit Theology, Massey argues that the Africans were brought to North America not by their choice but by force and Black Theology emerged from the racial roots of the master-slave relationship; Latin American liberation theology was based on economic oppression; Minjung theology was based on the cultural oppression in Korea; and the theology of struggle emerged in the Philippines out of the oppression of political colonisation. Similarly, he states, Dalit Theology emerged

as the Dalits have lost their land, culture, language, religion and all socio-economic and political rights (Massey, 1997a p 78-79).

These arguments affirm that Dalit Theology has a parallel to all liberation theologies but very particularly it has a closeness to Black Theology as both peoples have similar oppressed origins, and both are contextual and liberative, cherishing Blackness and Dalitness. Also, they both believe in struggles in which God is with them to change the status quo. An extensive analysis of parallels with Black Theology is developed in Chapter Four as a separate section.

## **5. Culture as background**

Another important significance of Dalit Theology is that it has culture as its background. Before venturing into discussing the argument of Dalit theologians on Dalit culture, I would like to express my own limitations and constraints. Being born a Dalit and being an activist for three decades against caste and Brahmanism, it is difficult for me to set aside my emotions. For me, Dalit culture has a strong place in and bearing upon the potential life experience of Dalits which legitimises their values of togetherness, loving, caring, equality and peace. I try my best to play the role of a researcher, by seeking to prevent my emotions from forming the basis for a glorification rather than an examination of Dalit culture.

### ***5.1 Culture – broad definition and as a source to challenge hegemony***

Prior to looking into Dalit culture as a background for Dalit Theology, it is appropriate to look at a broader definition of culture. As Geertz, an anthropologist, defines, 'culture is a way of life of a people; a social legacy; a way of thinking, feeling and believing; and an abstraction of behavior' (Geertz, 1993 p 4). According to Billington, 'culture relates to the beliefs and values people have about societies, social change and the ideal society they seek' (Billington et al., 1991 p 1). Alasuutari comments that culture is a way of life or outlook adopted by a community or a social class (Alasuutari, 1995 p 25). These definitions broadly interpret culture as the most prominent source for a community's identity, way of life, values, behaviours, perspectives, practices and life-style.

However, Dalit Theology considers Dalit culture as its significant base not only for its reflection of the anticipated potential life-experience of an oppressed community but also its character of resistance against oppression. Therefore, besides sharing the broad definition of culture, I prefer to look at the viewpoint of Black theologians who defined culture from the perspective of the oppressed. While describing Black culture, Beckford comments that culture has different definitions but could be broadly defined as a 'signifying system through which a social order could be communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored; culture as a system has a mutual function of shaping a community and also being shaped by the community; also it is dynamic and not static; and it has got a root and also it takes routes' (Beckford, 1998 p 16). Another Black

theologian, Hopkins, defines culture as dealing with self-image, roots and heritage; alongside the thought-forms, ways of life, resistance techniques, expressions in songs, tunes, poetry, plays, novels, games, laughter and dance of a community (Hopkins, 1990 p 14,177). These statements by Black theologians based in the United Kingdom and the United States describe Black culture as a dynamic source for life, identity for Black people and also as a factor shaping their resistance techniques to challenge the oppression of White people. Thus culture, besides framing the character of a community, has a potential to shape and strengthen its motifs, actions and reactions at a given point in time. This helps to understand Dalit culture as well, which not only exhibits the way of life of Dalits but also its potentiality to challenge caste oppression.

## ***5.2 Dalit culture – its historicity and character***

It is useful to look at Dalit culture in the light of the above definitions and descriptions. Dalits have a long history and they possess distinct cultures that shaped their community to respect equality, human dignity, sharing and caring, and to live in peace. Here it should be noted that Dalit culture is used as shorthand for what is, in fact, a pluralistic reality of Dalit cultures. The Dalit community, as of now, is not homogenous, but is diversified in terms of sub-castes or groups, widely scattered in thirty states of India, speaking several languages, practising a number of religious beliefs and following a range of value systems and behavioural patterns, although Dalits are all singularly termed as untouchables which is the main parameter differentiating them from non-



Dalits. This position has already been discussed by Prabhakar who states that Dalit Theology recognises the socio-cultural situation of Dalits as

Dalits are the people known as poor, oppressed, exploited and suffering people...ethnic groups, speaking many languages and practicing many religions, in a concrete historical situation with a specific aspiration and goals; Dalit Theology is a people's theology from below and it is *for* the Dalits, *by* the Dalits and *of* the Dalits'; Dalit Theology is a Political theology as it believes in social action to transform unjust, undemocratic and oppressive socio-economic structures (M.E Prabhakar, 2006 P 210-211).

However, this position of pluralising Dalit culture has not been done by many Dalit theologians and they all mention Dalit culture in the singular form. Since this is a literature review, I accordingly continue to use the singular form when discussing the argument of Dalit theologians.

Almost all Dalit theologians highlight the importance of Dalit culture, due to its historicity and the vital role that it played in the life and liberation of Dalits. Massey presents his account of the origin and development of Dalit culture using literature and archaeology. According to him, Dalit history dates back 3500 years in India, to the time of the great civilisation of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, called the Indus Civilisation, known for its rich cultural excellence which included beliefs, behaviour, customs, arts, symbols, rituals and ceremonies designed to enable people to live as a community. In accordance with the theory already outlined, this life and culture was attacked and these native Indians, the Dasyus (Dravidians), were reduced to the present-day status of poor, miserable and subhuman, owing to the arrival, domination and rule of the nomadic Aryans of 1500 BC who introduced the caste system. The Muslims and British who

arrived in 700 AD and 1700 AD respectively were not able to do away with this system (Massey, 1991 p 11-43). Bishop Azariah, citing missionary Caldwell and historian Datta, argues further in this vein that Dasyus were the natives of India, and that the present-day Adi-Dravidians (Primitive Dravidians) – the Dalits – are the outcastes who were spread in many parts before the arrival of the Aryan invasion, with their own history and culture (M. Azariah, 1990 p 89). The accounts of these writers appear to be a repetition here but demonstrate the importance for most writers not only of the question of the origin of caste but also to the conviction that Dalits had a significant culture prior to the introduction of the caste system.

This importance for Dalit theologians of seeing Dalit culture as unique and extremely ancient can be seen further in the description of Dalit theologian, Appavoo. The following detailed account of Appavoo appears to be romanticising Dalit culture; however, his description portrays the nature and potentials of Dalit culture. He argues that, unlike Aryans, Dalits have native gods, patterns of worship, symbols, values and lifestyles which profess equality and peace. Dalits are a nature-loving and nature-worshipping community who believe in community living. These cultural traits continue to the present. The worship-pattern of Dalits even today is different from many other communities; they worship in open space and not inside temples or closed structures, and mostly at night in a cool atmosphere, allowing all people to join in after their return from work. Dalits have their own songs, drums, dances and art forms. Their symbols are simple weapons, shapeless stones and parts of nature which reflect and recall their daily life situations. Their priests are different from other faiths as they do not require any

specialised courses or training. This provides equal opportunity for everyone who wishes to lead worship as there is no privileged priestly section among them to form a religious hierarchy or superior group. They have a collective style of living and community worship. Their Gods are either symbols of nature, or their ancestors who sacrificed their lives to protect the community. Dalits had their own martial arts mainly to defend themselves. These are all important dimensions of Dalit culture that symbolise being together, and remaining simple, collective, equal and potential. In short, Dalit culture, broadly known as 'Dalitism', legitimises a community-based life with the values of equality (Appavoo, 2006 p 111-121).

However, the portrayal of Dalit culture by Dalit theologians appears to be more idealistic. They glorify Dalit culture on the basis of its values of promoting a community-based, equal life. But no culture could be claimed to be ideal as none is free from demerits. If Dalit culture is for equality, why are Dalit women not treated equally within the Dalit community? As argued by Vimal Thorat, a Dalit women's rights activist, Dalit women are subjugated and oppressed by Dalit men and they too struggle for equal rights, space and equal opportunity on par with Dalit men (Thorat, 2001 p 1-3). Similarly, if Dalit culture were ideal then Dalits would not have assimilated other cultures in the course of time; also, they would not have developed varied cultural forms within the Dalit community. Culture is neither static nor neutral but fluid. As already mentioned, Dalit culture no longer has a single identity (if it ever had) but it has taken a plural shape and developed a range of values, behavioural patterns and worshipping methods in the course of time. Today Dalit culture cannot be described as a single identity. However,

the main laudable character of Dalit cultures is that they do not seek to oppress or subjugate other people, as they originate from the life-experience of oppressed people. But that does not mean that there is no oppression within Dalit community, nor is any culture free from any defects.

### ***5.3 Dalits assimilating other cultures***

Despite the antiquity of Dalit culture and its laudable characteristics, in the course of time Dalits started adopting Brahmanical and other cultures. They followed Brahmanical culture as it was claimed to be supreme, civilised and practiced by Brahmins, the so-called 'oppressor caste'. Dalits thought such assimilation would allow them full human status in a Hindu society. As Srinivas, an anthropologist, quotes, 'in the process of sanskritisation the low-caste group takes over customs, beliefs, rituals and ideology and style of the high castes – Brahmins' (Srinivas, 1989 p 56). However, this adoption did not bring the desired result of regaining human dignity on par with Brahmins or alleviating the sub-caste consciousness.

As they were not able to regain their human dignity in the Hindu religion and culture, Dalits started embracing other religions – Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and Buddhism – with the dream of getting rid of casteism; but the dream remains a dream despite numerous avatars, incarnations, gurus, religious traditions and institutions of various faiths (Wilson, 1982 p 13, 74). Thus adoption of other religions and their cultures, besides not offering human status, has slowly shattered the laudable

characteristics of Dalit cultures. The major aim of Dalits to be freed from the shackles of caste did not materialise by adopting Indian-based or imported religions. Thus Dalits became virtual losers, as their internalisation of Brahmanical or other cultures did not bring the desired result of equal status. Therefore, as Ayrookuzhiel puts it, Dalits joined Hindu protest-sects like Lingayats, Ravidasis, Valmikis, Satnamis, Kabirpanthis, Dadupanthis, Mahima Dharma and numerous other small groups of main-line religions all over the country where caste is a reality, whether visible or hidden. So, despite all these developments, Dalits continue to follow their traditional religious practices and customs (Ayrookuzhiel, 2006 p 80). This is the present situation. As Ayrookuzhiel states fairly, irrespective of embracing different religions, Dalits, especially those who are village-based, are still attached to their own ancestral cultures, which unite and nurture them.

While looking at Christianity, although Dalits embraced Christianity to follow its traditions, values and worshipping patterns, their social status did not change as Christianity took caste into its fold. As Ambedkar, the icon of Dalits remarked,

the position of untouchable has not been raised to the level of touchable in Christianity and the caste mentality of the converts did not change. There are Brahmin Christians and non Brahmin Christians. In north India, among non Brahmin Christians, there are Maratha Christians, Mahar Christians, Mang Christians and Bhangi Christians. Similarly in South, there are Pariah Christians, Mala Christians and Madiga Christians...Almost all the converts retain the Hindu forms of worship and believe in Hindu superstitions (Maharashtra, 1987 p 454-456).

His quote illuminates the crucial point that Dalits embraced Christianity, by which their religious identity was changed but their socio-cultural identity remained the same, as untouchables, so-termed by Brahmins. However, Ambedkar's other reflection that Dalit

Christians continue to worship pagan gods, warrants a response. Dalit Christians cannot be pagan worshippers. At most they might participate as spectators when their relatives of other faiths practice their beliefs, since they are surrounded by them, but they remain strong Christians by faith. Culturally, since they are Dalits, they follow Dalit cultural forms like songs, beating drums, cultural activities and dancing, along with Dalits of other faiths.

This discussion demonstrates that Dalits have a unique culture which is known for its inclusivism, collective living, and caring and sharing, despite its own internal deficiencies. The important aspect is that, while following other cultures, Dalits do not totally relinquish their culture and its distinct values.

#### ***5.4 Dalit culture as a background for Dalit Theology***

This being the cultural context, Dalit theologians offer hope for Dalits to get rid of the caste system by giving precedence to their cultural values and insights. In line with Black culture, Dalit culture gives strength and potential for rising against caste oppression. As Thumma states, Dalit Theology acknowledges that Dalits feel proud and wish to uphold their culture, known as Dalitism (a term which, admittedly implies the quality of an ideology rather than simply a culture), which has its base in dignity and equality. Its values and principles ensure social, economic and political justice to oppressed Dalits, and liberty, equality and fraternity to all in society (Thumma, 2000 p ix). Dalit Theology recognises the importance, greater even more than their food or the

needs of livelihood, of the dignity of Dalits, which is embedded in their culture. For Dalits, dignity is more important than other basic necessities. This affirms the strength of Dalit culture, which provides motivation and energy for Dalits to rise against caste oppression.

Chatterji, while supporting a Dalit Theology, raises the question of why a Dalit Theology, as opposed to a theology of the poor or a theology of people? He argues that the Marxian notion of approaching caste not as a primitive concept or structure but as a later development has led to neglecting the issue of caste which actually causes the social, economic, cultural and religious inequalities. He lists how Dalits (he includes Tribals as well) are a separate cultural identity and how they have been distanced by earlier Western Christian missionaries who converted only the high castes, and by the present Christian churches which practice discrimination. In the light of this reality, he argues for an indigenous people's theology – Dalit Theology and Tribal Theology – not to make Dalits and Tribals adjust to the dominant social, economic and cultural structures but to transform the oppressive structures (Chatterji, 2006 p 179-210). His argument is against the Marxian tools of analysis as this analysis does not count caste as the basic structure of division among Indians. Mainly he regards Dalit Theology as an indigenous theology which counts culture as an important factor.

Nirmal, while describing what is Christian in Dalit Theology, argues that Dalitness is Christian where the Triune God will be on the side of Dalits (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 219-220). Nirmal is of the strong belief that Dalitness means the values of dignity, equality and struggle for justice and peace, and that exists in correlation with Christian values

which ensure liberation and redemption from bondage, and assure a life of equality, peace and justice. These arguments of Dalit theologians affirm that Dalit culture forms the basis for Dalit Theology, which is fundamentally different from the Indian Christian theology.

### ***5.5 Comments on the discussion on culture***

It has been argued above that Dalit culture, known as Dalitism, is ancient and is founded on the values of equality, justice, love, caring, community and collective living. In fact it gives Dalits their identity, not as untouchables as Brahmanic culture calls them, but as a people who really believe in equality, love and collective living.

It is seen that throughout Indian history Dalits have challenged the economic dominance and supremacy of those who claimed hegemony and cultural superiority, particularly followers of Brahmanical Hinduism. But, Dalitism as an inclusive culture perhaps would not have opposed the Brahmins' cultural practices directly. Dalits initially followed their own culture without being affected by the Brahmanical culture, and later they started assimilating Brahmanical culture with a hope that once they incorporated the Brahmanical culture their denied human status would be restored. But it did not happen. Brahmins not only exploited Dalits but also dehumanised them through their exclusivist culture. But today, the same Dalitism is seen by Dalits as a cultural force to challenge Brahmanism, which is still oppressive, divisive and discriminatory. As Clarke argues, *drumming*, a Dalit art, vibrates and unites the subaltern communities to be



responsive to the oppressive situation (Clarke, 1999 p 150-151). Therefore, today it is specifically an ideological and cultural battle between Dalitism and Brahmanism. Dalits revive their energy through their native culture, and challenge the dominance of Brahmins and their culture of division. Thus today's Dalits no longer prefer to remain untouchables but rise as challengers of caste and Brahmanical oppressive designs. At the same time, while their struggle is to challenge caste, as people of inclusivism they are ready to live alongside non-Dalits – provided the latter drop the caste mindset, identity and practices. Here it goes with the argument of Dalit theologians that Dalit culture offers a basis for Dalit Theology. As Devasahayam suggests there is a close affinity between the values of the Gospel and the values of Dalit culture, as both express equality, community, concern, sharing, service and wholeness (V. Devasahayam, 1997b p 26-27). Both these values – Dalit culture and faith in the Gospel – combine to oppose caste and Brahmanism for the transformation of society.

A final comment relates to the argument that culture is dynamic, fluid and not static. It is a fact that Dalit people adopted various cultures which entered into India either by invasion or by religious belief. However, still they own and maintain their core cultural values of loving, caring, helping and even pardoning and forgiving others. Of course their external manifestations relating to dress code, language, eating habits, even matrimonial relationships have been changed. But still the intrinsic cultural value of treating others equally and being prepared to live with difference remains with them. Dalits have embraced various religions and moved to other parts of the world. But still they remain in their cultural essence, Dalits. This theory applies to Black people as well.

They may have moved from their soil and followed White people's culture in outward manifestations, but the essence of their origins and roots largely remains with them. However, whether it is Dalits or Black people, though they acquiesce with the oppressive cultures to some extent, the oppressive forces are not ready to treat them equally. This is the crux, reality and empty victory of racial or caste culture. Therefore Dalit Theology has emerged to operate with the strength of Dalit cultural values.

Since the first element, the significance is discussed in this chapter, the important themes of Dalit Theology, the second element, are discussed in the next chapter. These chapters, Two and Three, describe the need, origin and focus of Dalit Theology.

### **Chapter Three – Themes in Dalit Theology**

The themes of Dalit Theology are discussed in this chapter to answer the first research question. The significance and themes of Dalit Theology are distinct in the Indian theological context and journey. These items justify the emergence and the uniqueness of Dalit Theology. As its significance has been discussed in Chapter Two, the themes of Dalit Theology as interpreted and articulated by Dalit theologians are dealt with in this chapter in more detail. This chapter is vital as the focus of this research – the status and the relevance of Dalit Theology among the grass roots will be analysed and discussed in the final chapters on the basis of the presence of these themes among the grass roots Dalit Christians. Six major themes are identifiable in the works of almost all Dalit theologians and are discussed here. This chapter begins with the rationale for considering these themes.

#### **1. Rationale for considering these themes**

As seen in the previous chapter, Dalit theologians countered Indian Christian theology and created Dalit Theology, with the argument that its significance lies in its context and liberative character. They justified their arguments with certain themes that form a basis for that context and its liberative character and have the ability to empower caste victims and strengthen their faith perspectives to transform the oppressive status quo. As Dalit theologians argue, Dalit Theology

- (i) portrays *God as the God of the oppressed*; and Dalits engage in struggle with the belief that God takes sides with them, the oppressed;
- (ii) argues that Dalits are encouraged by the *Christian anthropological position which affirms the concept of imago dei*; this motivates them to struggle for their human status, as they are created in the image of God;
- (iii) describes Jesus as a *Dalit*, as Jesus was born in a manger, consorted with the forsaken people like Dalits - the poor, the tax collectors, the excluded and the so-called immoral women; it also describes Him as *Christ the Liberator*, as he saved human beings by facing humiliation, harassment and death similar to the persecution of Dalits;
- (iv) claims that since the *mission of Christ* is to challenge, defeat and win over the Devil, the prime source for all forms of oppression, this mission energises Dalits with the belief that *they are called to challenge caste* and win over caste-oppressors to cleanse society from this inhuman practice;
- (v) asserts that *Christian eschatology assures salvation from the bondage of sin*; for Dalits, while having faith in this eschatological position of salvation, salvation is primarily freedom from caste bondage;
- (vi) affirms that the struggle and the mission of Jesus brought *freedom for all*; and thus the struggles of Dalits against caste will bring freedom for *both Dalits and non-Dalits* – for Dalits from physical and emotional oppression and for non-Dalits from mental and psychological oppression.

These six major themes are articulated mainly by a few prominent first-generation Dalit theologians, considered to be the pioneers of Dalit Theology, and are commented upon by a few second-generation Dalit theologians. The present thesis attempts to discuss and analyse the ability of these themes to inspire Dalits to enhance their faith perspectives and intensify their struggles against caste.

## **2. Themes of Dalit Theology**

### ***2.1. God as the God of the oppressed***

Dalit theologians, by-and-large, describe 'God as the God of the oppressed', mainly by citing parallels with God's role in liberating the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery. For them, the 'Exodus narrative of the Old Testament' has a tremendous relevance for the liberation of Dalits from caste bondage. They make their arguments from a range of angles.

Nirmal, a pioneer of Dalit Theology, draws out parallels with the Deuteronomic creed found in Deuteronomy 26:5-12 wherein it is stated that God listened to the cry of the Israelites and liberated them from toil, oppression, and the harsh Egyptian bondage. He uses this text to highlight similarities with the suffering of the Dalits and argues that, if Dalits cry out, God will liberate them from caste bondage as God did for the Israelites. He insists on such a faith from the Dalit community (A.P. Nirmal, 1991 p 98-105). However, this position of Nirmal attracted criticism. Rajkumar differs and argues firstly

that Nirmal was influenced by Gutiérrez and Cone who used this Exodus experience in liberation theology and Black Theology respectively to motivate people for liberation in their context. But this is not compatible with the Dalit experience as they do not have a victor-type image of God; for Dalits, only the Brahmanical gods use divine power as a weapon to kill others, an action which is not associated with the images of Dalit gods; also this paradigm divides Dalits and non-Dalits forever as oppressed and oppressor, and provides no chance for integrated living. Secondly he draws support from Warrior and states that the Israelites, the oppressed people, once liberated, became oppressors of the Canaanites, the indigenous people (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b p 62-63). For Rajkumar, it is not the Exodus experience but the Canaanites' experience which forms a more appropriate narrative and reference, as Dalits are represented as having been displaced by invading Aryans from their places of habitation. Clarke also feels that 'this conception of God has no relevance to the Dalit situation as the narration of the mighty acts of God have exhausted Dalits...besides there had been no miracle happened so far to change the structures of the Indian social order' (Clarke, 2002 p 285-286). Although the arguments of Rajkumar and Clarke appear to be appropriate, the parallel drawn by Nirmal still seems relevant on one count, i.e. Dalits should have a faith that God will listen and act upon the cry of the oppressed and release them from bondage. However, the argument of Rajkumar offers a genuine warning to Dalits that they, being the oppressed community, after liberation should not emerge as oppressors as did the Israelites, even with the claim – which is debatable – that the Israelites acted on the will and direction of the mighty God. This is a note of caution to Dalits.

The second argument from Nirmal is that Dalits, if Dalits confess that once they remained 'no people' have become 'God's people', then God, as He listened to the cries of the descendents of a wandering Aramean, will also liberate them from their oppression (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 220). By this statement, Nirmal emphasises that God is the God of the oppressed and God will restore humanness to Dalit people, whose human status has been snatched away by the casteists, as God did for Israelites. While it sounds great to generate faith among Dalits, this quote has a referential problem. Israelites were the descendents of Abraham, the Aramean. They already believed themselves to be a people chosen by God, and when they called, God listened to them to fulfil God's covenant. But in the case of Dalits, they were neither the descendents of any chosen person nor has God any covenant-based obligation to listen to them. Therefore this parallel does not seem to be adequately relevant to Dalits. However, Nirmal may have convinced himself at least on two grounds. One is that, since God is the God of the oppressed, the call of oppressed Dalits would activate God to listen and liberate Dalits as God's own people, whether or not there exists a chosenness or covenant. The other is that both Israelites and Dalits were made 'no people' by the oppressors. In the case of Israelites, they were a 'free people' in Egypt, an alien country, right from the days of Joseph (Gen. 47:11, 27) and were made 'no people' later through slavery (Exod. 1:8-11); for Dalits, they were perceived to have been the natives of their own soil, made into a 'no people' by Aryan invasion and subsequent untouchability practices. This similarity is based on the commonality of strong faith and that might have enthused Nirmal to use this parallel to claim God is the God of the oppressed who will transform the 'no people' and elevate them to the status of 'God's own people'.

These arguments of Nirmal recall the position of Leonardo Boff on Liberation theology. Boff argues by quoting Exod.3:7, 9 that God is a Living God, who listened to the cry of the people, witnessed their oppression and decided to liberate them. He portrays four characteristics of God to demonstrate that God is the God of the Oppressed - '*He lives, listens, witnesses and decides to liberate people* who are in bondage' (Boff and Boff, 2007 p 44). Boff's statement fits very well with the situation of Dalits and also Dalit Theology's affirmation of the faith that God is a living God who listens to the cry of Dalits, witnesses their humiliation and harassment and will liberate them.

In the same way, Nirmal, while framing Dalit Theology, states that Christian theology in the context of India must be exclusively for Dalits, as the Triune God will only be with the oppressed Dalits and not with the non-Dalit oppressors. He encourages Dalits towards an 'exodus experience and the exodus hope' (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 59,68). This is his third argument within the parameter of the Exodus experience and the notion that God is the God of the oppressed. Nirmal was categorical in stating that God will not be on the side of non-Dalits, the offenders, as God is the God of the oppressed and thus he encourages Dalits to put their hope in the Exodus experience. However all non-Dalits cannot be termed caste minded or oppressors. Alongside this, the argument tends to sound a wrong note by implying that God will be with the oppressed Dalits at all times, even if they become oppressors after their release and liberation, just as the Israelites claimed that God was with them when they demolished other nations on their way into Canaan. This notion is challenged by Palestinian theologian Ateek. He argues that the



choseness of Israelites is not a privilege but a responsibility to serve and be a model to others, which means God is concerned about other human beings as well (Sugirtharajah, 2006 p 229). Indeed God will not take sides with the oppressors, but that does not mean that the oppressed, once liberated, can oppress others with the sanction of God since they were once oppressed people, as happened in the history of the Israelites when they oppressed the Canaanites and used the promise of God as justification. The liberated people should have a responsibility to remain a people of justice, as an example to others, according to Ateek. The same position has been strengthened by American Indian theologian, Warrior. He believes that the liberated Israelites marched into Canaan in the name of their mighty God, and destroyed and displaced nine other communities who lived there. This destruction was viewed by Israelites as a matter of right with a claim that God was with them. But Warrior reminds us that they forgot the second part of the covenant which needs to be given more importance by a liberated community. God says 'you should not wrong others and if they cry, I will listen to their cry as well and I will kill you' (Ex: 22:21) (Sugirtharajah, 2006 p 238).

These arguments are to be taken seriously by Dalits while enlarging their faith in the Exodus experience. Firstly, when an oppressed status is the only criterion for God to take sides between the oppressor and the oppressed, then the oppressed should be very vigilant not to become oppressors once liberated as God's preference would then be for the oppressed, whether Dalit or non-Dalit. Secondly, the universality of God in Christ is also to be borne in mind. God is for all, both the oppressor and the oppressed,

although God takes sides with the oppressed in times of oppression. Therefore Dalits need to be cautious when appropriating the concept of God as the God of the oppressed, as portrayed by Nirmal.

The other two arguments by Rajkumar on the concept of the Exodus experience warrant attention. One is that this concept helps Dalits to recall their past history and roots, namely how their free ancestors are believed to have been bonded by Aryans, like the Israelites who were once a free people in Egypt before being enslaved by the Egyptians. This should remind Dalits that once they are released from their bondage, they should allow others also to live in freedom and peace. The other argument is that the concept of the Exodus experience symbolises the mighty hand and outstretched arm of God which ensures a certain measure of terror on the route to liberation (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b p. 50). The reflection of Rajkumar is based on the argument of Nirmal who states that a certain measure of terror is necessary to achieve liberation (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 61). This terror is thought-provoking as apparently God himself is involved in terrorising the Egyptians in the course of liberating the Israelites. The term 'terror' in today's context is viewed as an act of cruelty against humanity. But Rajkumar uses this term to justify such acts for liberating the oppressed. This argument of terror and 'the mighty hand' are controversial, as terrorising is not a universal and eternal necessity in a liberation struggle. The Indian freedom struggle from the British did not include the act of terrorising. It is also equally pertinent to note that, of course, God may have had to terrorise Egyptians to obtain the release of the Israelites, but God did not eliminate them. Therefore Dalits should also understand that their struggle should challenge the

caste practices of non-Dalits as the ultimate aim is to change the caste mindset of non-Dalits, enabling all to live together in equality and peace.

Azariah also talks about the Exodus experience. His argument has an important relevance for present-day Dalits. For him, this experience includes the dimensions of both emancipation and empowerment of the released community. God as the God of the oppressed not only released the oppressed minority of enslaved people from the majority of dominant Egyptians but also empowered them to lead their life in a free atmosphere. He argues that God sent Moses and his companion to liberate Israelites from Egypt and made them pass through cleansing struggles for forty years in the wilderness, and then empowered them to enter the promised land of Canaan (Masilamani Azariah, 2000 p 164-166). For Azariah, God's liberational activity entails these two aspects of 'emancipation and empowerment'. Emancipation helped the Israelites, the minority slaves, to have the Exodus experience of being liberated from the oppression of the majority Egyptians. The other is that God sent someone not only to release them but also to empower them for forty years in the wilderness. When analysing the argument of majority and minority in the context of Dalit situation in India, it manifests a different picture. Of course, Dalits are a minority when compared to the non-Dalits in India as a whole, but in the case of Christianity Dalits are the majority and non-Dalits the minority. But the majority Dalit Christians are being oppressed by many minority non-Dalit Christians, thus inverting the general norm that the majority will oppress the minority.

The other reality is that the oppression of the minority by the majority is not the universal experience of oppression. For example, in South Africa the minority White people have oppressed the majority Black people. Similarly in all colonised countries the minority outsiders have ruled the local majorities. Thus Azariah's reference to Egyptians and Israelites in terms of number – majority and minority – represents a different circumstance from that among Dalits and non-Dalits in the Indian Church. However, apart from the number game, Azariah's argument that God listens to the oppressed is the vital point, and that has a relevance to the Dalit situation irrespective of majority-minority status. The other argument, that the oppressed community will be released by a God-sent person who will empower them to lead a free life, needs further attention. In the current Indian situation, as has been seen earlier in the arguments of Rajkumar and Clarke, God sending a person like Moses or delivering and leading them for a number of years to develop empowerment is debatable. However the argument of Azariah reminds us of an important factor: that the oppressed community during the course of their liberational struggle, should engage in empowering activities not only to equip them to lead a free and joyful life but also to be vigilant so as not to fall again into the hands of oppressors. In this way Azariah's argument on the Exodus experience is helpful to alert struggling Dalits not only to have faith in the Exodus experience but also to understand its intrinsic meaning.

The theme 'God as the God of the oppressed' has one more important dimension according to Massey, i.e. God's preferential option and solidarity. Though God is a God for all, *God's preferential option is always for those who are under oppression and*

suffering. God is not neutral in terms of God's action to perform justice. God's solidarity is with the oppressed. Thus God's preferential option is the basis for expressing solidarity. But solidarity today has two different positions: one is to show solidarity only in words, the other is to translate the same into action. But the God of the oppressed shows solidarity both in words and action. James Massey believes that God's calling of Moses (Exodus 1: 8-14, 2:23-25, 3:7-9) and sending him to Pharaoh to rescue the Israelites should be seen as an act of 'God's decision to be in solidarity with the oppressed people' (Massey and S.Lourduswamy, 2003 p127). This quote explains God's words and actions together. God's solidarity led God to act not merely in spiritual or religious terms. Massey here emphasises for the faith of Dalits that 'God's solidarity with them in their struggles would manifest both in words and in action, and it would cross the religious boundary to address their socio, economic and political oppressions' (Massey, 1997ap.76). Massey's contention that God's solidarity goes beyond spiritual to material liberation is significant for the Dalit situation.

The notion of God's solidarity needs to be analysed in relation to the current situation of Dalit Christians. First, since solidarity is to be expressed both in word and action, Dalits need to be vigilant when some non-Dalits talk about solidarity with their struggle. Many non-Dalits in today's context just offer lip-service but not action in support of the Dalit struggle. The second important caution for Dalits is correctly to understand God's preferential option for the oppressed. God's option is to be understood not as total but conditional. As already discussed, if Dalits, once liberated, emerge as oppressors, then God's preferential solidarity will shift from them to other oppressed people. It is

worth noting God's commandment to Moses. He warned that the Israelites should remember that once they were slaves in Egypt, so they should not enslave others. Therefore God's solidarity is always conditional and not a blanket or blind assurance. The third dimension is that, as Ateek puts it, the liberated community should learn to live with others in harmony and peace. He quotes the second 'exodus experience' wherein the Israelites who returned from exile in Babylon were instructed to live in harmony and peace with those who lived in Canaan. He also quotes Ezek. 47, 21-23, which advises Israelites to share everything with other tribes who lived there (Sugirtharajah, 2006 p 230). Therefore Dalits, while having faith in God's preferential option, need to be more vigilant and act as a responsible community if they wish to enjoy God's blessings forever.

Before closing the argument on this theme, it is useful to review one more argument. Oommen comments, affirming the reflections of Dalit theologians, that 'the exodus liberation paradigm which had tremendous implications for liberation theologies in Latin America has extensively influenced the thinking and articulation of Dalit Theology in India' (Oommen, 2000 p 19-37). He seems to be right as most Dalit theologians discuss this theme, 'God as the God of the oppressed', based on the concept of exodus experience and God's preferential option. They eloquently argue this theme to instil a strong faith in Dalit Christians to involve themselves in struggles to challenge caste. However, the second-generation Dalit theologians offer critiques against the compatibility and contextuality of this theme, as discussed above. The faith expected to be generated based on this theme, among Dalit Christians and especially

the grass roots, is splendid, as they understand the narrative of the Israelites although they might not be able to reflect in the way that theologians do. Therefore this theme has the potential to create a considerable impact among Dalit Christians in terms of strengthening their faith perspectives and also their struggle against caste. The caution and warnings of second-generation Dalit theologians are equally significant as Dalits, once liberated, should not become oppressors. The only need is that ordinary Dalit Christians who are struggling should have access to such articulations or manifestations to connect this theme to their own life-situations. An important limitation to this vital theme is that the faith expected to be generated is limited to Dalits of Christian faith only. The vast majority of Dalits in other faiths do not understand, or remain unaffected by, this theme as they are not Christian.

## **2.2 Dalits as ‘Full Human beings’ through the concept of *imago dei***

The next theme articulated by Dalit theologians is the ‘*imago dei*’ concept. It ensures human status to all human beings and sees all as equal. Cameron, a Scottish theologian, describes theological anthropology that is concerned with God and human being, as both are interconnected. It is concerned with the creation of the world, human beings in the image of God, the incarnation of Jesus, His life, death and resurrection; also the divine calling and human response for personal and social transformation (Charles Cameron, 2005 p 53-61). This definition correlates with the position of Dalit theologians in arguing that Dalits are created by God in God’s own image and therefore they are equal in status to non-Dalits and have a responsibility to transform the caste

system, to enable both Dalits and non-Dalits to live in equality and harmony. They base their argument on Christian anthropology.

Christian anthropology differs from Hindu anthropology. The former views all human beings as created by God in God's image, and therefore all human beings can claim equal status, dignity and rights. The latter teaches that, except Dalits, all the other four 'categories' of human beings were created by God; Dalits, earlier called *Chandalas*, were born out of despicable relationships between the four God-created categories, as defined in *Manusmriti* 10.12 and 10.38. Since Dalits do not carry the image of God, they are excluded and debarred from enjoying all rights, privileges and needs as equals with non-Dalits, as depicted in *Manusmriti* 10.51,52 (Burnell, 1971 p 306,312). As Massey describes, *Manusmriti*, the Hindu code completed around AD 700, has brought about negative developments for Dalits (Massey, 2006a P 31). Massey, based on these arguments, demonstrates that Hindu anthropology has denied Dalits the right of being created by God and, as a result, they are prevented from enjoying the fullness of human status in every sphere of their life.

When Hinduism denies human status to Dalits, Dalit Theology affirms that all human beings are created by God and therefore Dalits are also created in the image of God to enjoy full humanness beyond just being simply human. As Nirmal claims, '[f]or a Christian Dalit Theology it cannot be simply the 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' (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 222). This



quote asserts the full nature of Dalits as human beings, and also as children of God, which is the most significant right that has been denied to them. Full humanness is not limited simply to the narrative of creation, but expands to include life, death and even the eschatological envisioning of the created people. When that divine right has been denied to Dalits by Hinduism, naturally Dalit theologians argue for such a right by placing the concept of *imago dei* at the centre of the faith and affirm that Dalits who were made 'no people' by the Hindu concept have become God's people in Christianity.

Dalit theologians, particularly Larbeer, argue that since Dalits were created in the image of God, they become not only God's people but also a messianic community. 'This messianic community...will not be satisfied with the land flowing with the milk and honey...; on the other hand, its Messianic hope is to continue the struggle towards achieving the full humanness and the full divinity: in other words achieving the very image of God' (Larbeer, 1997 p 391). Thus, the responsibility of messianic people goes beyond the translation of 'no people' status to God's people. God's image in Dalits has imbued them with a faith that they are a messianic community, instilled with a sense of struggling and suffering and the mission of Jesus to bring change. This means a faith to which Dalit Christians are called and which requires them to engage in struggles for the transformation of the society. This position recalls the argument of Black theologian Reddie. While describing Black theism, Reddie argues by quoting Murrell that

White hegemony working from a position of power and authority has either sought to deny God's existence (on the grounds that God is no longer necessary), or has attempted to co-opt God in support of its own socio,-political and economic ends; White men with power, do not possess the structural force to give up power in order that others might live. Surrendering of power by Jesus on the cross conceives both salvation and liberation (Anthony G Reddie, 2006b p 74,79).

This quote affirms not only the nature and the strength of the messianic people like Dalits or Black people in terms of challenging their oppression but also the inability of some non-Dalits or White people as holders of power and authority even to conceive liberation.

This position of Dalit theologians argues that Dalit people, since they have the image of God, have the divine call and responsibility to change their oppressed status in society in line with the nature of God. This view is corroborated by Cameron who believes that the divine calling is mainly to transform society (Charles Cameron, 2005). Dalits have to affirm and assert this status, and respond to this call with transforming activity. All these statements give reassurance that Dalits are made in the image of God, and inherit the nature of Jesus in changing the oppressiveness they experience.

The next argument of Dalit theologians in theological anthropology relates to the question of gender equality. Prabhakar, while defining doing theology, states that the concepts of Hinduism have systematised a caste-class-gender hierarchy that imposes not only socio-economic division among human beings but also justifies patriarchy, the dominance of men over women in all spheres of life. He argues that Christianity believes all human beings are created equal. He cites Gen. 1: 26-30, 2: 20b-25, to give his argument a Biblical perspective as to how man and woman were created equal by God, and how God found all his creation – including human beings – to be good. Prabhakar goes on to say that Dalits own the image of God but caste, a Hindu concept, has denied human status to Dalits by birth; similarly an unequal status was ascribed to women

which forced them to lose their equal identity; patriarchy, combined with caste-class hierarchy was devised by and for the upper castes to preserve their superior or dominant social order, oppressing lower castes to perpetual servility (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997a p 79,85,90). Though the argument of Prabhakar is largely acceptable, it warrants a discussion as well. Of course, according to the Bible, men and women were created by God and they were found good by God. That does not mean that Christianity is not free from gender bias. Even in the Creation narrative it is mentioned that God created both male and female (Gen. 1: 27); later it describes the story of how Eve was created from the rib of Adam (Gen. 2:21-22). Equally the teachings of Paul clearly imply male supremacy (I Cor. 11; Eph. 5: 22-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:9-15), although the same Paul argued, doctrinally, that there is no difference between man and woman in union with Christ (Gal. 3:28). Leaving aside the connotations in the Old and New Testaments, the present-day reality among Christians – Dalit Christians too – is that the status of women is lower than men, and women are subjugated. As Mary Grey observes,

Dalit women are referred to as the least among Dalits, the Dalits of the Dalits, or thrice Dalits – caste, class and gender. They are discriminated against for being female, within their own family and marriage, even by their husbands who frequently beat them and allow them to bear an unequal burden of work, as well as being discriminated against by high-caste people, and third, they are oppressed simply for being Dalit – by the entire caste system as a whole' (Grey, 2010 p 13).

This thesis does not deal with the question of gender justice and the patriarchalism of Dalit theology. However it should be noted here that Dietrich, the feminist theologian, and Fatima, a Dalit women's activist, concur with Mary Grey in stating that caste forces women to lose their human dignity, personhood and all basic rights (Dietrich, 2009 p 1-3) & (Fatima, 2002 p 3).

The next development in this theme is that it grants the same human status to all human beings, despite the disparity in their economic, social and political positions. Therefore Dalit Christians, despite advancement in economic and other fields, mainly strive for human status as their primary focus. Rajkumar in his recent book, *Dalit Theology and Dalit liberation*, discusses the objectives of Dalit Theology. He cites Nirmal and Balasundaram, the pioneers of Dalit Theology, who handled the 'ideal of *Imago Dei*' to authenticate Dalits as children of God. Dalits own a God-given identity and therefore, for them, human status and dignity is more important than their economic advancement. 'This identity affirmation coupled with faith leads to a liberative social vision to enlarge their struggle' (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b p 40-41). Dalit theologians go beyond the Marxian concept of gaining economic equality. This does not mean that Dalits do not aim for economic equality. Primarily, they strive to regain their human status and dignity with the faith that they were created in the image of God, and that has to be recognised by non-Dalits. Economic affluence and equality is also important but not at the cost of human status. Although Christianity as a doctrine proclaims equality, many Indian Christians practice inequality in all social, economic and political spheres both inside and outside church along the lines of caste, which amounts to denial of human status to Dalits. The same is the position of Black people in Britain. Black people are treated as 'other' by many White Christians. As Reddie explains, although the socio-cultural and economic opportunities for Black people have been increased, White people treat them as 'others'; Black people face anger, shame and frustration by feeling the 'other' due to White supremacy. Reddie illustrates this from his own experience to strengthen his argument by describing how an address to White participants in Oxford in 2007 was

inimically received. He was treated as 'other' and a 'bad guy' when he highlighted the violence experienced by Black people, which is a continuing legacy of slavery (Anthony G Reddie, 2008 p 139,142,150).

This demonstration clearly echoes the position of Dalit theologians that Dalits are not considered as 'one' by many non-Dalits because they subscribe even unconsciously to the concept and division of caste. Douglas's argument on the dual role of White Christianity is interesting; on the one hand it oppresses, dehumanises and inflicts violence on Black people and on the other it has nurtured and strengthened the faith of the Black people (Kelley Brown Douglas, 2005 p 5-9). This is the exact situation for Dalit Christians as well. Indian Christianity while practising casteism to dehumanise Dalits has also nurtured their faith to remain as Christians. Both Dalit and Black theologians affirm that, although Christian anthropology views all human beings as equal, as they were created in the image of God, many non-Dalit and White Christians practice discrimination against the 'other' and even unleash violence. This demonstrates the difference between preaching and practice.

The concept of *imago dei* delivers equal rights to Dalits to enjoy their humanness and also to claim their equal share in all material and spiritual aspects of this world, as they were created by God. Dalit theologians argue that this concept has given Dalits the status of God's people and a messianic community to transform the oppressive systems, structures and feelings of 'other' inside and outside church to ensure humanness, equal status and full life for all.

### **2.3 Jesus as Dalit, Christ as Liberator**

The next theme that most Dalit theologians put forward is that of 'Jesus as Dalit and Christ as liberator'. They were, by their argument, able to distinguish between the historical Jesus, and the messianic Christ. They bring in Jesus's birth, genealogy, identification, suffering mission and death, to demonstrate their argument. According to Nirmal, Jesus's genealogy included Tamar who was seduced by Judah, Rahab, the prostitute who helped the Israelite spies, and Solomon, the son of David, illegitimately born to Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 226). This genealogy recalls the impure and polluted stigma imposed on the birth of Dalits, the outcastes, by Brahmanism. As mentioned earlier, Dalits were said to have been born out of immoral or illegitimate relationships between the three oppressor castes and the *Shudras*, the servant class known as untouchables in the caste system. Comparing this, Nirmal terms Jesus a Dalit. However, this argument warrants an important discussion. Although Brahmanism describes that Dalits were born out of an immoral relationships between the four *varnas*, as seen earlier, present day Dalits get angry, deny and challenge such theories which defile their birth and life. Therefore Nirmal's comparison of the genealogy of Jesus with the defiled birth of Dalits amounts to agreeing with the mischievous Brahmanical theory.

Arulraja, a scholar-activist cum Dalit theologian who authored the book *Jesus the Dalit* offers an in-depth justification for naming Jesus as a Dalit. He quotes the life and mission of Jesus – he was with Joseph, a carpenter, and worked as a manual labourer;

he identified himself with lepers, tax-collectors, immoral women, and Samaritans; he broke the rules of Sabbath and reinterpreted the law of Moses with a justice-oriented perspective; he touched the sick and the dead, ate without washing hands. He therefore calls Jesus a Dalit (Arulraja, 1996 p 66-117). Where Nirmal's interpretation to call Jesus a Dalit was based on the birth and genealogy of Jesus, Arulraja's focus was on Jesus's identification and mission. These two explanations go well with the Hindu way of describing the birth, descent, menial work and social status of Dalits. However, these arguments of genealogy and behaviour are more relevant as a reminder of the *Dalitness* that is found in the birth and mission of Jesus, than as an argument simply for referring to him as 'Dalit'. Dalit theologians are well aware that Jesus was born a Jew but the Dalitness that is found in him encouraged them to call him a Dalit. The following are the arguments by Dalit theologians that demonstrate that Jesus Christ is both Dalit and Liberator.

According to Prabhakar, Dalits see Jesus Christ and his saving act from the standpoint of their dehumanised social existence and find in him hope of regaining humanity and justice (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997b p 405). This notion reminds us of the oppressed socio-economic condition of Dalits and argues that Dalits see Christ and his saving act of liberation through their life-situation. Prabhakar reiterates the mission of Christ and also the faith of Dalits that Christ is their liberator. Mathew argues that 'Jesus's solidarity with the victims of exploitation was out of his compassion and genuine concern for them. This is the mission priority of Jesus, as it is clear in the 'Nazareth Manifesto' (Mathew, 2007 p 98). Similarly, Nirmal states that the 'Nazareth Manifesto' of

Jesus was only for Dalits as it talks about the full liberation for those who are in bondage and oppression (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 226-227). This spells out again the liberative agenda and mission of Christ which ensures the release of Dalits from all socio-economic oppression, and the fact that Dalits own Christ as their liberator. Nirmal also believes that Jesus had the Dalitness in him both to serve and suffer. He says that Jesus is like a *dhobi* (washerman) or *bhangi* (sweeper) who strives to eradicate the dirt from society, but still he was rejected, treated as inferior and humiliated. He quotes Isaiah (Is. 53:1-8) describing Jesus as a suffering servant who is like a lamb, oppressed, grief-stricken, humiliated, whipped and led to be put to death for no wrong that he committed (P.Nirmal, 1990 p 64). These arguments of Nirmal define three realities – the servant-hood of Jesus, his rejection, and the humiliation that he faced, which is similar to the life-situation of Dalits, who are themselves servants, even slaves, and are rejected as polluted, harassed and humiliated.

Inspired Dalit theologians perceived these similarities and termed Jesus a Dalit and Christ a liberator, as the Dalitness in him caused him to serve and suffer for the liberation of humanity. However, Nirmal's comparison and argument that 'our God is a servant God; He is a waiter, a dhobi, a bhangi traditionally all such services have been the lot of Dalits...To speak of a Servant-God, is to recognise and identify Him as a truly Dalit deity' (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 224) has been criticised by Balasundaram, who argues that the servility of Dalits should not be glorified as that of Christ as it was an imposed humility, whereas the serving nature of Jesus was his preferred option to save others (Balasundaram, 1997a p 69-91). This position of Balasundaram clarifies that the



servant-hood of Dalits was forced on them against their will, but Jesus's servant-hood was by his own voluntary will and was a preferential choice to save all humans. While understanding the difference in the nature of servant-hood, the crux is that it is the servant-hood that matters, and therefore calling Jesus a Dalit and Christ a liberator has got a clear relevance, even if there is a difference in the type of servant-hood.

Prabhakar offers a detailed argument to establish Jesus as a Dalit and Christ as liberator. Deriving his argument from M. M. Thomas, he states that the Indian Christian Theology, with its Brahmanical insights, largely defined Jesus as '*Chit*', '*Jivanmukta*', and Christ as '*Supreme Satyagrahi*'. All these Indian classical theological perceptions and connotations were derived from 'above'; but Dalit Theology views Jesus Christ from 'below'. Dalits are able to see God from their suffering and oppressed experience and thus they see Jesus as a Dalit, both a sufferer and liberator. Prabhakar further argues that the 'Jewishness' of Jesus affirms his historical existence, but he also acknowledges him as the 'Christ of Faith'. The eschatological vision of Jesus as 'last shall be the first and the first, last', and his option for the poor and the meek, are closely related to the life-situation and experience of Dalits who claim him as a Dalit and liberator. The preaching of Jesus, 'the good news to the poor' – *dinon* (humbly, lowly) – and the crucifixion of Christ as a ransom for many are the basis for Dalit Theology to inherit Jesus the Dalit – because of the Dalitness that he has inherited – and Christ as their liberator. Christ the liberator not only liberates Dalits from their oppression but also energises them to function as 'liberating servants' to carry forward the struggle for his

rule on earth (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997b p 410-419). These examples justify the position of Prabhakar to claim Jesus as Dalit and Christ as liberator.

The other argument by Massey to claim Jesus as a Dalit and Christ as liberator is based on the Biblical narrative. The Bible incarnates Jesus as a poor person, born in a manger and living in Galilee, but facing his death as liberator of humankind from all its sins and oppressions. Massey further argues that God preferred to be born as a poor person and this reflects the fact that in our context Jesus is a Dalit, the poorest of the poor. This position also means that when the church is being termed as the body of Christ, the Indian church, where Dalits form the majority, is called a Dalit church. Thereby he criticises the church in India in that it talks only of the saving of souls, which brings only a half salvation to Dalits; caste oppression is not addressed so Dalits are not offered full salvation. However Christ died to ensure full salvation for humankind and therefore Massey wants the full gospel to reach Dalits and to eliminate the caste system, which would entitle them to the full liberation which Christ won on the cross (Massey, 1997a p 92-94).

Thus the birth, life and mission of Jesus Christ have been compared to the life-situation of Dalits who live in exclusion, misery and an outcaste status. As Rajkumar summarises in his analysis of Dalit Christology, there is a link between Dalit theological anthropology and Dalit Christology. Because of their brokenness, Dalits are a messianic community and through them, God's salvific work and his glory will be manifest (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b p 53-54). Since Dalit means broken and Dalits are a broken people,

the saving act of Jesus from brokenness enables them to view him as a Dalit. In sum, Dalit Theology sees Jesus Christ as a Dalit and liberator who inherited the Dalitness in him by his birth, life, mission, suffering, struggle for salvation and persecution faced at the hands of the oppressors. This claim, and the descriptions of Dalit theologians, sound both relevant and amazing, but have to be verified by the understanding of grass roots Dalit Christians and their perception about Jesus Christ.

#### ***2.4 Dalits are called to struggle for transformation***

The fourth theme that has achieved prominence among Dalit theologians is 'Dalits are called to struggle for transformation'. This recalls the Missiology of Dalit Theology. The immediate mission of Dalits at the moment is to have faith in God's mission and to struggle for their liberation from caste. Struggle is part of the life of Dalits as it is the primary activity and focus of any oppressed community to rid itself of oppression. Since Dalits have been under caste oppression for three thousand years, their struggle has also lasted this long. Struggle could be described in different forms. Expressions, gestures, body language of resistance and disapproval of subjugation form part of the struggle in the life of Dalits. In today's context, struggles are carried out in various democratic forms, ranging from assertion to expressions of anger, dissatisfaction, rage, demonstrations, rallies, campaigns, advocacy, lobbying, approaching the judiciary and human rights institutions and sometimes picketing as well. When this is the situation, the motivating or inspiring factor for Dalit Christians to

become involved in struggles is to be reckoned with. Here comes the question of faith and the divine call.

Dalit theologians argue that Dalits are called to have faith in the mission of God and to be involved in struggles to transform their oppressive reality. Massey argues that the issue of Dalits is to be seen not only sociologically but also theologically. He bases his argument on the incarnation of Jesus as a human being who identified with the poor and the marginalised and struggled up to the Cross for the cause of justice. Therefore Dalit Christians who identify Jesus as Dalit are strongly encouraged to undertake struggles for transformation (Massey, 1997a p 92-93). This comment emphasises two aspects of Jesus. First, he identified with the oppressed and second, he undertook struggle as a fundamental part of his life-saving mission. This nature of Christ forms the source and encouragement for Dalits to promote struggles for their liberation, even to the extent of risking their lives. This is how Dalit theologians view the suffering and the struggles of Dalits as theological. They feel they are called to challenge caste in order to transform society in line with the mission of Christ by changing the deep oppressiveness even at the cost of losing life.

Almost all Dalit theologians have the same opinion, that faith in God is the inspiration for the mission of Dalit Christians and in that sense their struggles are different in nature and strength from Dalits of other faiths. They argue that Dalit Christians believe in the Dalitness of Christ who, as the 'Son of Man', came to serve and not to be served. Prabhakar when discussing the Christology of Dalit Theology argues

that God calls Dalits to be God's friends and to immerse themselves in struggles to defeat caste oppression. A transformed society is the place where God's rule of justice and peace will be established. He brings a parallel and forms a mission for Dalits to engage in struggles. He reminds us that the serving mission of Jesus was rejected and he was put to shame, humiliation and death as he took sides with sinners and the marginalised. This nature and mission of Christ affirms his Dalitness. Similar to Jesus, Dalits are known for their service to society but are forced to undergo humiliation and harassment, and at times injury or death, when they cause problems. Just as Jesus challenged oppressiveness in order to change the status quo, Dalits are inspired by him to struggle to destroy caste, whereby they aim to form a society of justice and peace (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997b p 419). Prabhakar interprets caste as a 'devilish system' and therefore Dalit Christians are inspired and called to undertake a transformative role to dismantle caste with the strength of Christ, to form a society of peace and justice.

Devasahayam suggests that Christ, the suffering servant, was stripped of his humanity on the Cross but he defeated Satan and sin for the formation of a new world. Similarly, Dalits see the caste system as devilish and the resurrected Christ as helping them to beat this devil and liberate them because they were stripped of their human status by birth. Therefore, Dalit Christians have faith in their struggle that Christ will give them victory and transform the world (Devasahayam, 1997a p 276-277). Here Devasahayam compares caste with Satan. More importantly, his emphasis was on comparing the stripping of Christ's humanity on the Cross with that of the stripping of the humanity of Dalits by caste. The other point of this comparison is that although the

Cross signifies redemptive action, Devasahayam gave prominence to the suffering part of Christ on the Cross. As Christ suffered through the Cross, and was victorious over Satan and sin, Dalits could gain victory over caste and untouchability by their suffering. Devasahayam tries to instil this faith in Dalit Christians to inspire them in the belief that they are called to challenge the caste system, and that the resurrected Christ will help them.

Along the same lines, Nirmal argues that Dalit Christians had an Exodus experience by leaving Hinduism and embracing Christianity with the hope that Jesus truly is the liberating God. This Exodus to Christ enables Dalits to have a liberating experience through their struggles to challenge caste. The struggle has just begun and it needs to be sustained to regain the lost rights (P.Nirmal, 1990 p 63). This position of Nirmal reminds Dalits that just conversion to Christianity will not *suo motto* give them liberation from caste. Therefore, they are called to have faith that the liberating God is with them in their mission and to struggle to challenge caste and transform society.

In addition to this, Faustina voices the opinion that Dalit Christians are in a status of exile and their struggle will liberate them, with the help of God. 'It will be a Dalit Godliness which is opposed to Semitic or Brahmanic Godliness which is based on the notion of patriarchy, purity and pollution' (Faustina, 1997 P 99). Faustina argues this from Dalit feminist perspectives as well. She attacks the Semitic and Hindu religions for their patriarchal and 'purity and pollution' concepts which divide and discriminate against people. She describes the status of Dalits who live outside the villages as exile. She

offers a hope that they will struggle and God will help them in their liberation. Her account also emphasises that Dalits need to have faith in the liberating God and they should struggle with faith for liberation. The only issue which should be approached with caution is the usage of the word 'exile'. Faustina uses this term to liken the segregation of Dalits to that of the exiled status of Jews from Canaan. However, there are two differences. One is that Jews were driven out from their settled country to live in subjugation in another country, losing their rights and privileges. But Dalits are in a status of exile in their own land, segregated and banished from the life and livelihood of main villages and mainstream realities. The other is that Jews always claim that they were sent by God into an exile status as they did not listen to his commandments and promises. It has been a practice of Jews to bring God into all their doings, misdoings, life and suffering, which is a limitation that we see in the Old Testament, which has many collections of books about the history of the Jews written in their favour out of their self-understanding. But Dalits cannot claim that kind of treatment by God, as they are neither chosen nor did they disobey God's commandments to deserve God's wrath. In fact, they were forced to become like captives on their own soil. However, the argument of Faustina is clear, that Dalits should have faith in God and engage in struggle for their liberation.

These are the major arguments that Dalit theologians have developed to justify their understanding that Dalits are called to transform the situation of oppression. They should have faith that God is with them in their mission.

## ***2.5 Salvation for Dalits is liberation from caste***

This is the fifth theme articulated by Dalit theologians. This theme has a close link with Christian eschatology. According to Dalit theologians, especially Gnanavaram, Christian eschatology deals with last or final things that include the future of the world, the second coming of Jesus, the resurrection of all those who have died, the final judgment and the formation of the kingdom of God. In short, it talks about salvation in terms of awarding wholeness or completeness by saving and restoring those who have fallen, and ensuring for them a life with justice and peace. Therefore, eschatology for Dalits is to be freed from caste and its all oppressive structures so that they might live in justice and peace in this world with full humanity. This is salvation for them and this would entitle them to enjoy the fullness of humankind and live in harmony with others (Gnanavaram, 1997 p 477-478). This quote affirms that for Dalits, salvation is not only to be freed from sin and assured of eternal life but necessarily to be freed from caste oppression so that they can live the full and whole life of a human being in this world in equal status with others.

Massey observes that, so far, Dalit Christians are assured of half salvation as they have been given the promise of the salvation of the soul, but full salvation is yet to reach them by doing away with the caste system (Massey, 1997a p 94). Here two points are worth highlighting. The first is that since Dalits embraced Christianity, they are sure that the Christ who overcame sin on the Cross ensures eternal life for them as they are redeemed from their sin. The second is that salvation is not sufficient for Dalit Christians



as long as they suffer under the bondage of caste while they live in this world. Caste oppression has to be overcome and only then will Dalits enjoy full salvation – both free life in this world and eternal life in the other world. Otherwise according to Massey it is not full salvation but only half. Therefore Dalit Theology lays out its faith that the risen God calls Dalits to struggle against caste to enjoy their full human dignity in this world as he will give them victory over the sinners, the non-Dalits who profess and practice caste.

Dalit theologians further argue that when Dalit Christians struggle for salvation it is not confined to them only. As Massey describes, the annihilation of caste will bring salvation to all people including the oppressors. His belief is that Christ struggled and suffered for the redemption of all – including sinners and oppressors. Therefore, the struggle of Dalit Christians against oppressive structures and the gaining of full liberation and salvation is not necessarily limited to them regaining their own humanness and role as makers of history, but it brings salvation to non-Dalits as well, even though they are the sinners who unleash all kinds of oppression on Dalits in the name of caste (Massey and S.Lourduswamy, 2003 p 129). This is a vital point to be discussed. This point affirms that the destruction of caste and its oppressive structures will bring liberation and salvation to both Dalits and non-Dalits. Casteism brings physical bondage and a wounded psyche to Dalits and at the same time it oppresses many non-Dalits with a mental obsession with caste status that forces them to become oppressors. In that sense, both the oppressed and the oppressor are in caste bondage. They both need to be freed from this caste oppression to enjoy full salvation as voiced by Massey. Dalit Christians, the oppressed, initiate struggle against caste and once it is dismantled this

provides liberation to both Dalits and non-Dalits. This might be something unique as Dalit Christians strive for the salvation of both the oppressed and the oppressors by destroying caste. As the death of Christ brought salvation to both sinners and those sinned against, the struggle of Dalit Christians will bring liberation to both Dalits and non-Dalits. This is an added advantage and a favour not only to non-Dalits but also to the caste-minded Dalit Christians as well, who practice sub-casteism within themselves. This is how Dalit Christians are called to undertake the mission of Christ to bring liberation and salvation to both the oppressed and the oppressor through their struggle.

However the question of salvation is something different and eternal which was earned and manifested by Jesus by facing the Cross. It is a question of redemption. While understanding the argument of Dalit theologians that the salvation of Dalits is integrally related to annihilating caste, it need not necessarily be connected to the annihilation of an oppressive system. Salvation cannot be solely connected to one single aspect of oppression as if humankind would be completely freed once that particular oppression removed. Even if the caste system were totally abolished, oppressions in economic and political form would remain and continue where the very same caste-based oppressors would still hold the power to oppress Dalits. Therefore salvation, as an eternal relief or freedom, need not necessarily be limited to caste-based oppression only. The arguments of Dalit theologians should be understood as a mark of the degree to which they recognise the cruelty of the caste system in the life of Dalits, and the necessity to transform the same.

## ***2.6 The speciality of Dalit Theology – to ensure freedom for all, both Dalits and non-Dalits***

This sixth theme is the speciality of Dalit Theology – that is, the ensuring of freedom for all. It is held that the struggles of Dalits ensure liberation and freedom to both Dalit and non-Dalit. Freedom is normally known as justice to a person or community who is in enslavement, captivity, discrimination or under oppression. Once freedom is achieved it is always said that the oppressed [people] are freed or liberated. But it has one more dimension: that the freedom gained is not only for the slaves or the ruled people, but equally for the oppressors and rulers. While liberation struggles bring freedom to those who have been under physical oppression or enslavement, they also bring freedom to those enslaved by their oppressive, authoritarian, even violent, minds and perceptions. The oppressors might not have been in physical slavery or oppression but they are under the influence of mental slavery, bondage and obsession in terms of their oppressive ideologies, perceptions, hegemonic designs and crude forms of oppression. Therefore, once the struggling, oppressed people win, liberation comes to both the oppressed and the oppressors equally by dismantling the oppressive systems and structures. This is the same with the struggles of Dalits. It is well described by Massey that Dalits have been under caste bondage which has caused them to suffer physical enslavement and violence. But once Dalits defeat the caste system, it automatically releases or delivers the non-Dalits as well, as they have been under the mental enslavement of this oppressive caste system (Massey, 1997a p 99). Since the

struggle of Dalits brings liberation to the oppressors, the non-Dalits, as well, this is a specialty of Dalit theology.

This speciality of Dalit Theology invites discussion. In the present context in India, the struggle of Dalits against caste is purported to be supported by many sympathetic non-Dalits as well. Particularly the Church, as a body of both Dalits and non-Dalits, is expected to carry out its mission by supporting the struggles of Dalit Christians to oppose caste oppression. Prabhakar states that the Church, as the body of the people, should cross its boundaries and seriously take note of activists and other movements, both secular and religiously oriented, to express its solidarity with Dalits and annihilate the oppressive system. Its ministry should address the humiliation, suffering and powerlessness of Dalits and God's beauty should be discovered in the life of the despised and marginalised (M.E Prabhakar, 1990b p 48,49). When Prabhakar talks about the Church and its ministry, it includes non-Dalits as well. Although the Indian Church is predominantly made up of Dalits, non-Dalits are also there, and also in positions of power. Therefore the mission and the ministry of the Church includes non-Dalits as well. Since Dalits are in a struggle against caste within the church, non-Dalits should join them, to transform caste oppression not only inside the Church but in the secular world as well.

Raja, a mission-studies theologian, argues that the main purpose of Christian Mission is to help people to come to God and to live as 'one' despite their caste, class, and racial differences and realities. His position is that the mission of the Church needs

to go beyond merely critiquing the existing structures. He argues that developing a new world should not only be by deconstruction but also by reconstruction (Raja et al., 2010 p.4-5). While agreeing with his notion that all people should live as one irrespective of various divisions, his comment on deconstruction and reconstruction warrants a discussion. No oppressed community will be satisfied simply with deconstruction. Rather, the whole aim of deconstruction is to reconstruct a system and structure for a new world with the values of equality, justice and peace. In the context of the Dalit struggle, the prerequisite for reconstruction of a new society is first to deconstruct and destroy the existing oppressive caste system and its structures as that alone will give space and base for reconstruction. The other point is that it need not go through a defined process of one before the other. The process of deconstructing an oppressive society could concurrently entail elements of reconstructing a transformed society. The third important point is that those who are involved in the deconstruction of an oppressive system and structure should have a commitment for an alternative mind, vision and mission for reconstructing a new society with the values of equality, justice and peace.

The fourth is that the non-Dalits should join Dalits in the process of deconstruction, which includes the potential of reconstruction as well. Dalits are anti-caste people and they always look for others to join them in their struggle, and also to live in equal status with others. Therefore they engage in deconstructing caste not only to regain their human dignity on a par with others but also to create a conducive and harmonious atmosphere for all to live in justice and peace in a newly constructed

society. Therefore Dalits are for both deconstruction and reconstruction at the same time. Here the argument of Joshva on the mission of the Church comes to the fore. Church means both Dalits and non-Dalits. While Dalit Christians are already on the warpath against caste, the non-Dalit Christians within the Church should join them in their mission of both deconstruction and reconstruction. Non-Dalits should not simply wait for Dalits to deconstruct first and then join them for reconstruction. If they do not join the deconstruction process, they will not be able to conceive the process of reconstruction and the vision of living together. As a result both communities could remain as warring groups. Therefore, since Dalit Christians have already started opposing caste, the mission of the Church, whose hierarchy is by-and-large in the hands of empathetic or sympathetic non-Dalits, is to take sides with Dalits to demolish caste. Theology should lead to praxis.

Thus, the argument of Dalit theologians is that the struggles being promoted by Dalits will ensure freedom for both Dalits and non-Dalits, once caste is annihilated. While agreeing with this, the position of theologians like Raja for reconstruction of a casteless society by both Dalits and non-Dalits is a desirable option. Since Dalit are already in the struggle process of deconstruction of caste and many non Dalits still remain as just spectators, it is appropriate also to give importance to the position of Nirmal, who argues for a methodological exclusivism of Dalit Theology. He says that Dalits are always open to receive the support of others in annihilating caste, but the pains and pathos that Dalits experience is different from others. Since Dalits undergo this firsthand experience of suffering he calls it 'empathetic knowing'. For the *Shudras*, the low-caste non-Dalits,

although they undergo the pains of untouchability, it is not akin to the pathos of Dalits and therefore he calls for their support through empathetic knowing. And for the dominant caste persons they simply show their solidarity as they are sympathetic to this cause and so it is termed 'sympathetic knowing'. Therefore he cautions that the difference in experiencing pathos and suffering needs to be borne in mind. Dalits are already in a struggle to oppose caste and others who are also against caste may join Dalits by dropping a caste mindset and caste practices to win over the confidence of Dalits and join them in the struggle for deconstruction and transformation. In any case, caste annihilation would entail a situation where all would live in peace and harmony (A.P Nirmal, 1990 p 142-143). In sum when Dalits are struggling to dismantle caste, non-Dalits who are against caste and for a just society should join Dalits for both deconstruction and reconstruction, which will go together as a single process.

These six themes and their significance, as discussed in the earlier chapter, are the essentials of Dalit Theology. The first-generation Dalit theologians who are the pioneers have eloquently articulated and discussed these essentials to counter Indian Christian theology, and have elevated the position of Dalit Theology to be contextual and liberative. In addition, their arguments seemed to have the potential to strengthen and shape the faith perspectives of Dalits to oppose caste with the theological insight that God is not neutral and is with them in their struggle, and that Dalits, being created in the image of God, have full human status, are called to suffer for others and also to transform the oppressiveness in society. Their arguments seem to have sufficient substance to enthuse Dalits to view Jesus as a Dalit by virtue of the Dalitness he had

and Christ as liberator as he struggled, even sacrificing his life on the Cross, to defeat Satan and to save humankind. These generate hope and vigour among victimised Dalits to rise and struggle against caste oppression and to bring freedom and oppression-free life to both Dalits and non-Dalits, as both are created in the image of God to live together in joy and peace with equality and justice. Having seen the significance and themes of Dalit Theology, it is appropriate to examine their propagation among Dalit Christians and the status of Dalit Theology among the grass roots Dalit Christians to achieve its objectives. This will be dealt with in Chapter Six. Before that, it is appropriate to see the liberational themes that Dalit Theology seems to have drawn from Black Theology.



## **Chapter Four – The liberational themes that Dalit Theology drew from Black**

### **Theology**

#### **1. The rationale for writing this chapter**

It should be made clear from the outset that this chapter is neither an elaborate attempt to look at Black Theology as a system nor a historical study of the origins of both Black Theology and Dalit Theology. Rather it aims to offer a helpful comparison of Black Theology and Dalit Theology, in terms of their emergence, significance and liberational themes. Very particularly it deals with the liberational themes that Dalit Theologians may have drawn from Black Theology to enable Dalit Theology to emerge as a theology of liberation.

Black Theology and Latin American-based liberation theology are normally regarded as contemporaries, which came into being in late 1960s and early 1970s, though they began independently of each other (Hopkins, 1999 p 167); but Dalit Theology was not conceived of until the early 1980s (Clarke et al., 2010 p 6,19). I presume, the two intervening decades helped Dalit theologians to read and ponder on the insights of both of these theologies. Consequently, they evolved Dalit Theology along the same lines as Black theologians, as casteism is closer to racism in terms of its inflicting discrimination and oppression.

As seen in the earlier chapters, Dalit theologians have created a counter to Indian Christian theology, which gave importance to western tradition and Brahmanical doctrines (Devadason, 2008 p 24). They also differed from Indian Liberation theologians, who reflected on the Indian situation with a Marxian analysis, and drew insights from Latin American-based Liberation theology (M. Azariah p 86,87). But Dalit theologians found that the crucial reason for the plight of Dalits is 'caste', as 'race' is for Black people. Both concepts are closed and immutable and not fluid. Therefore, the development of Dalit Theology as an Indian Christian Liberation theology is justified, as the earlier-promoted Indian Christian theologies did not give importance to the caste-affected life-experience of Dalits (Devadason, 2008 p 25). Dalit Theology also reflects on scripture in the same way as Black theologians have done (M. Azariah, 1990 p 91,92). This has encouraged me to write this chapter to bring out the situational similarity and the liberational themes that are pertinent and appropriate for Dalit Theology, so as to help it emerge as a contextual and liberational theology.

Since the objective of this chapter is mainly limited to studying the similarity in life experiences, significance and themes of Black Theology which may have enthused Dalit theologians to promote Dalit Theology, I have chosen to deal with the discussions and arguments put forth largely and mainly by James H. Cone, a leading proponent of Black Theology. The main sources for this discussion are found in Cone's book, *A Black Theology of Liberation - 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition*, which contains the core themes of his theological writing and deals substantially with his later ideas, and the writings of a few other key Black theologians who were influential in defining the need for and essence of

Black Theology, particularly at the time of its inception. Therefore, the further development and progress of, or the current challenges facing Black Theology are not addressed. This chapter concludes with a few current challenges that Dalits and Dalit Theology face that are similar to those of Black people and Black Theology in a wider spectrum. It is hoped that this chapter might provide grounding for future research into the main similarities and differences between Black Theology and Dalit Theology.

Before venturing into my main arguments I would like to raise certain important caveats, as expressed by Johnson (Johnson, 2010 (November) p 266-285), which need to be considered in order to understand the background and aims of Black Theologians, particularly Cone, who can appear to be polemic their views on White people or White Theology. These are: a) when Black theologians, particularly Cone, attack White Theology, they are attacking the overarching framework of western Christendom which has dominated and shaped the construction of knowledge and truth, (epistemology) since Constantine I; b) as White Theology is mostly an elite discipline, mainly proposed by educated men, when Black theologians attack White Christians, for the most part this attack is not against all Whites, especially those who are at the grass roots, but is intended to oppose this elite minority; c) the first generation Black theologians, especially Cone, were writing at a time of extreme social upheaval in the 1960s, affected by the rise of the Black power movement, the death of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. and other factors. Thus, they often overstated their case in order to develop and justify their arguments.

## **1.2 The parallels in the emergence of Black and Dalit theologies**

Generally, both of these theologies are contextual and liberational. They both challenge discrimination, which despises the human dignity, history and culture of two excluded peoples in the world. The primary parallel is that both of these theologies came into being as a response to ongoing external struggles against racism and casteism. Challenging racism and related forms of intolerance was the main reason for the emergence of the Black Theology of the United States, South Africa, and Britain. The Civil Rights Movement played a substantial role in provoking the emergence of Black Theology in the late 1960s. In the US, it was James Cone, strongly influenced by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., who then authored two books, *Black Theology and Black power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), which initiated a great deal of discussion among theologians on the need for and the arrival of Black Theology (James H. Cone, 2001 p xiv,xi). It has also been suggested that

Black Theology combined slave theology and a new reading of the Bible with Black folk's affirmation of Black pride and resistance against White racism during the momentous years of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X'. 'More specifically Black Theology as a 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian theology arose from three main endeavours: a critique of Joseph R. Washington Jr.'s *Black Religion*, the Civil Rights Moments of 1950s and 1960s and the Black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Hopkins, 1999 p 28,29).

In South Africa, as Mosala observes, the Black Theology Project commissioned in 1971 by the University Christian Movement, and its later publication of a book, *Essays on Black Theology* in 1972, triggered the popularisation of Black Theology, while the

banning of leaders of SASO, BPC, NUSAS and UCM<sup>10</sup> also contributed to taking forward the discussion (Itumeleng J. Mosala and Tihagale, 1986 p viii, ix,xv).

With regard to Britain, Black people became an increasing presence, with commensurate social visibility in Britain when they arrived from the Caribbean in 1948 in the ship *Windrush*, and subsequent migration (Aldred, 2005 p 9). But the development of Black Theology in Britain, as Reddie cites, took two trajectories – one was a movement of prophetic, Black-consciousness-inspired approaches to talking about God through texts, reports, articles and books in the 1980s and the other took the form of the work of Black scholars on the role of the Black churches (Anthony G. Reddie, 2006a p 16). It might also be said that the emergence of Black Theology could be traced from the year 1998 when Robert Beckford's book, 'Jesus is Dread' and the journal 'Black Theology in Britain' were published (Jagessar and Reddie, 2007 p 8). These publications support the argument that Black Theology was triggered mainly by the influence of external forces in the form of the civil rights movements, liberative organisations and certain books and articles which spearheaded struggles against racism, slavery and apartheid. The Christian theologians of Black origin promptly and quickly responded to these external events by holding conferences, organising discussions and writing books and articles reflecting theologically on the inhuman systems and practices, which resulted in the emergence and development of Black Theology.

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<sup>10</sup> SASO – South African Students Organisation; BPC – Black People's Convention; NUSAS – National Union of South African Students; UCM – University Christian Movement.

This recalls parallels with the emergence of Dalit movements in India and the struggle against caste discrimination which stimulated Dalit theologians to reflect theologically on the issue of caste oppression and also to promote Dalit Christian movements, besides organising conferences and writing papers. While tracing the background of the emergence of Dalit Theology, Peacock spells out how the work of Ambedkar in relation to the Aryan invasion theory, the promotion of the self-respect ideas of Phule in Maharashtra, the Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu led by Periar, and the emergence of Adi movements in several parts of India have all played a substantial role (Peacock, 2010b p 79).

As Azariah comments, the *National Consultation on the plight of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin* (Dalit Christians), held in 1978 in Bangalore, where two hundred Christian leaders from all denominations gathered, caused debate and discussion leading to the birth of Dalit Theology (Masilamani Azariah, 2000 p 177). Clarke argues that the address by Nirmal in the United Theological College, Bangalore, in 1981 with the paper on *Shudra Theology* is generally agreed to be the real beginning of Dalit Theology (Clarke et al., 2010 p 19). From then on, movements and institutions played major roles in the development of Dalit Theology, which included the promotion of the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement in 1984, the National Convention held in Delhi in 1985 on the theme 'in the struggle of the least of my Brothers and Sisters', and the second convention held in 1986 in Bangalore on the theme 'Ideology and Vision for the Movement' (Devadason, 2008 p 158). Devadason's account establishes that, in a similar way to Black theologians, Dalit theologians responded to external occurrences

and pressures, and reflected theologically to address the issue of caste, which ended up in the development and promotion of Dalit Theology by holding conferences and producing publications.

## **2. The similarity - the significance of Black Theology**

### ***2.1 Black Theology is liberative***

Black Theology is an accepted theology of liberation. The following account aims to explain how Black Theology was conceived as a theology of liberation in the US, South Africa and finally Britain. Cone has unequivocally demonstrated that Black Theology is predominantly a Christian theology of liberation. He states that it is liberative as its aim is the liberation of Black people, and it is Christian as it has its focus on Christ who identified primarily with the weak and helpless. He says Black Theology is never neutral or non-partisan, as it believes that God is never colour-blind and never maintains neutrality between justice and injustice, right and wrong, or good and evil (James H. Cone, 2001 p 5,6). He also argues that Black Theology is categorical in its 'identification with the Blackness' in line with what Paul Tillich described as symbolic nature. Therefore Black Theology is not a theology of liberation in a broader sense of dealing with the oppressive reality experienced by economically under-privileged White people as well, but it is precisely designed to address the issue of 'Blackness', which has been the driving force for White people to exterminate Amerindians, persecute Mexican-

Americans and enslave Black African people (James H. Cone, 2001 p 7). Sebidi defined the Black Theology of South Africa thus:

Black Theology hates to trifle with the social phenomenon of colour. It takes colour seriously because it regards colour as being tragically co-terminus with the 400 years of slavery in the Deep South and the 330 years of blatant discrimination in the southern tip of Africa. In these regions, Blackness connotes man-imposed suffering...the beginning and end of this exercise is the beginning and end of Black Theology (Sebidi, 1990 p 20,21).

While discussing the nature and role of Black Theology in the US, Hopkins states that it responds to the issue of being Black and Christian, and encourages the African American community to work against racism in the light of Jesus Christ and for the full spiritual and material humanisation and liberation of the Black oppressed (Hopkins, 1999 p 181).

When explaining the nature of Black Theology in Britain, Jagessar and Reddie argue that it is interdisciplinary within the larger liberationist framework. They cite the cultural analysis of Robert Beckford and the scholarly input of Reddie in terms of conscientising and mobilising the grass roots Black people to assert themselves against White supremacy. Also Black Theology in the British context unites Asian people as well, and leads to all kinds of academic and creative insights and interpretations in the form of research, Bible studies, publications, etc. (Jagessar and Reddie, 2007 p13). All these factors demonstrate that Black Theology takes the issue of racism seriously, based as it is on skin colour, and argues for the liberation of Black people. In sum, Black theologians have demonstrated the liberational nature of Black Theology that condemns



racism, which dehumanises and enslaves Black people causing them to lose life and dignity. They did not engage with other issues like economic exploitation which affected the White working class as well. The lack of class analysis is the major weakness of Black Theology in Britain. For them, it is only Black colour, the reason for White people to develop a racial motivation to oppress Black people and that has to be addressed. The only concern that needs attention is that many Black theologians use the word Blackness rather than Black colour to define the reason for their oppression. I feel that although Blackness and Black colour appear to be identical, they hold different meanings. Blackness denotes the character or values of Black people and Black colour depicts their skin pigmentation. For White people, it was Black colour that led them to develop racial feelings rather than Blackness. Black theologians used the word Blackness for both its substance and essence, and also to denote colour. In any case, Black Theology as a theology of liberation regarded colour-based discrimination as the main source of oppression, and reflected theologically on the need for the liberation of Black people. Thus Black Theology is termed liberational. In the words of Roberts, 'Black Theology has a special concern for social transformation and the liberation of the oppressed people' (J. Deotis Roberts, 1987 p 51).

Dalit theologians argued in the same way that Dalit Theology is the theology of liberation to condemn and root out caste. They believe that caste is the core reason why Dalits undergo all forms of oppression and therefore they demonstrated that Dalit Theology, being a theology of liberation, should challenge casteism, like Black Theology addresses the issues of colour and racism. Although Dalit theologians understood the

crux of Latin American Liberation theology, which addresses the issue of class and economic exploitation using the tools of Marxian analysis, they differed from the Indian liberation theologians who argued for the larger goal of liberating all those who are oppressed by economic exploitation, including non-Dalits, the perpetrators of casteism (Balasundaram, 1997b p 255).

Indeed race and caste are two different entities, although caste is defined by *varna* theory which is based in part on colour, as seen in Chapters One and Two. However in terms of effecting oppression both appear to be similar as one is manifested in racial discrimination and the other in untouchability. Therefore, for Dalit theologians, it is more than class but caste that matters and that is the main factor to eradicate, like racism for Black people. Dalit theologians therefore developed Dalit Theology as a theology of liberation to destroy caste. This forms a major resemblance between Black and Dalit theologies. There is every reason to believe that Dalit theologians may have developed this insight from the arguments of Black theologians.

## ***2.2 The life-experience of Black people, a significant source for Black Theology***

Black Theology is different from White Theology on many counts. The primary difference is that Black Theology gives importance to the life-experience of Black people, something neglected by White Theology.<sup>11</sup> While arguing for the oppressive

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<sup>11</sup> The term White Theology is not a self-designated name, like Black Theology. Black theologians developed Black Theology as a separate discipline and they called the theology that was in force, mostly reflected and articulated by White people, White Theology.

experience of Black people to be the prime source for Black Theology, Cone cited three important aspects of the life experience of Black people: first is the daily 'life and death' problem of Black people living in a hostile environment of White people; second, their loss of 'identity and personhood' to White people; and third, 'the socio-economic and political oppression on them because of their Black color' (James H. Cone, 2001 p 11-14). He criticised White Theology for its non-recognition of the sufferings of Black people. He remarked that when Black people were oppressed by living in ghettos, dying from filth, rats and dope, shot dead and imprisoned for asserting their rights, White and Black ministers went on preaching about a blonde haired and blue-eyed Jesus (James H. Cone, 2001 p xii). Here he found fault even with Black ministers. Such is the nature of White Theology that it even influenced Black ministers to have a distorted theological insight by ignoring the life experience of their own people. Cone's further observation was that White Theology served the aspirations of White people, and gave religious sanction to genocide and enslavement; but Black Theology viewed Christian theology as a theology of liberation with the insight that the God of the Old Testament was active in the struggle of the Israelites for their freedom. Similarly, in the New Testament, Christ had conflict with Satan, condemned the rich and the powerful, and located his ministry with the poor and oppressed; therefore Black Theology arises directly from the experiences of the oppressed Black people as a Christian theology of liberation (James H. Cone, 2001 p 2, 4-5). Hence it has been demonstrated that Cone argues for the life experience of Black people as the source for Black Theology.

I feel that Cone in the initial years appears to have been very agitative and uncompromising in his position and callous in criticising all White people and White Theology as a whole, as if all White people are racists. It seems that Cone was under the influence of the Black power movement and his aim was intentionally to shock and galvanise Black people into action. Wilmore, another leading Black theologian, also argues along the same lines that Black Theology bases its source in the life-experience of Black people. He states that

Black Theology therefore is a theology that arises out of the need to articulate the religious significance of Black presence in a hostile White world. It is Black people's reflection on the Black experience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit attempting to redefine the relevance of the Christian gospel for their lives (James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 1993 p 371).

While explaining the character of British Black Theology, Jagessar and Reddie argue that liberational praxis – reflected-upon-action and acted-upon-liberation – of Black people is one of the main characteristics of Black Theology in Britain (Jagessar and Reddie, 2007 p 294). These positions recall the statement adopted by the National Committee of Black Churchmen in 1969 which comments that 'Black Theology is the theology of Liberation. It seems to plumb the Black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ...that requires all Blacks to affirm their full dignity as persons and all Whites to surrender their presumptions of superiority and abuses of power' (Prospectus, 1969). These quotes spell out that Black Theology is concerned with the life experience of Black people, and developed its insights to encourage Black people to aspire to dignity, culture and liberation.

This account of Black Theology provides a base to understand how Dalit theologians may have developed this argument from the insights of Black theologians. They criticised non-Dalits and Indian Christian theology. Massey remarks, as seen in the earlier chapters, that Dalits were under caste discrimination for 3000 years; the Hindu Vedas gave birth to casteism which segregated Dalits from mainstream Indian society (Massey, 1997a p 24). Dalit theologians countered the Indian Christian theology which emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which had its base in Western traditions and Brahmanical thought-forms. It neither recognised the suffering of Dalits nor regarded their history or heritage as having any theological significance (Devadason, 2008 p 75,76). Therefore they argued for the necessity of Dalit Theology having its roots in the life-situation of Dalits, and reflecting Dalit aspirations and liberation. Just as all White people would not have been active racists, some western missionaries and a few Indian philosophers spoke out against caste, as seen in Chapter Two. However, Indian Christian theology as a body of theological work seems not to have related to the life-situation of Dalits, which naturally attracted criticism by Dalit theologians. They criticised Indian Christian theology not only for viewing God and incarnating Jesus with Brahmanical thought-forms, but also for negligence in failing to recognise the discrimination experienced by Dalits or being willing to challenge it theologically. Dalit theologians, like Black theologians argued that God was in solidarity with the oppressed and that the life and mission of Christ was for their liberation and so, in the Indian context, God and Christ place themselves among Dalits. This is a vital parallel. However the only difference noted by Massey is that Black oppression goes back 500 years while caste oppression goes back over 3500 years, during which Dalits

lost virtually everything (Massey, 1997a p 67,68). The bottom line is that Dalit Theology, like Black Theology, bases its source in the life experience of the oppressed Dalits.

### ***2.3 Black Theology is counter to White Theology***

Black Theology can be seen as opposed to White Theology in considering its sources. According to Cone, Black Theology has its roots in the Black experience, Black power, Black history and Black culture, besides the traditional sources of revelation, scripture and tradition – but with Black perspectives. *Black experience* negates the definition of religious experience by Schleiermacher, that it is a feeling of absolute dependence on God; on the contrary, it rests on Black people's suppressed existence in the world of White people, who inflict torture, rape and shooting and force Black people to sleep in subways, bitten by rats, living in ghettos, and who criminalised them in the name of maintaining law and order etc. For Black people, *Black power* is manifested in loving themselves, feeling pride in Blackness, asserting Blackness as a beautiful experience and cherishing their way of life; unlike White history, *Black History* deals with the history of slavery, concerning how Black people were made slaves and brought to another land; equally *Black culture* moulds the thought-forms of Black people and encourages them to create their own cultural expressions of music, poetry, prose and other art forms reflecting their own freedom and creativity which had been regarded as inferior by their White oppressors (James H. Cone, 2001 p 24-27).

Similarly, Cone describes the conventional sources of *revelation, scripture and tradition* from a Black perspective as being very different from the position of White Theology. He argues that the revelation of God for Black Theology is Yahweh's involvement in the Exodus experience of Israelites, which offers inspiration to Black people as they see God is on their side. With regard to scripture, Black Theology believes and rests its faith in God as the God of the oppressed, as defined in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament in God's identification with the marginalised, facing humiliation and harassment, which offers a sign of hope for Black people for deliverance from bondage. Black Theology is critical of the White Christian tradition which is manifested, among other places, in Constantinian Christendom, Luther's identification with the oppressors, and Calvin's inaction in the face of political oppression. White Theology supported tyranny by White people and silenced Black people, urging them to turn their cheeks, walk the extra mile and also practice non-violence (James H. Cone, 2001 p 21-38). This argument by Cone provides a strong reason for countering White Theology as it ignores the life experience of Black people and its conventional insights on revelation, scripture and tradition reflect neither the faith nor the aspirations of Black people. Simply put, White Theology posits the absolute dependence of people on God, unmindful of their life situation and aspirations. Cone's argument was totally against the conventional approach of White theologians.

Interestingly, Cone's insight into God and his involvement in the Exodus experience was criticised by another Black philosopher, William Jones, who questioned why, if God is a just God, there is suffering, and also commented that Black theologians

fail to show any event to demonstrate that God is their liberator, as in the case of the Israelites (Jones, 1973). Jones' argument was that while agreeing about Black people's bondage, there is no chance for an Exodus experience as in the case of the Israelites and therefore it is not relevant for Black people to expect an Exodus experience in their journey of liberation. However his critique was rejected by other Black theologians, including Cone, saying it was based on a humanistic approach and was also an external critique by a philosopher (Motlhabi, 1986 p 43,44). Though it was sidelined, Jones' critique raises a pertinent issue not only for Black Theology but also for all theologies of liberation like Latin American theology and Dalit Theology, whose people's history does not contain an Exodus experience. However, the conception of Latin American, Black or Dalit theologians that God is a liberator is to be observed, with particular reference to two aspects – suffering and faith. The bottom line of this conception is that these theologies differ from the perspective of White Theology on God and Christ.

In line with Cone, Motlhabi – while tracing the origins of Black Theology – states that Black Theology rejects most interpretations emanating from White Theology as it sees it as self-serving. Black Theology has rediscovered the original Christian teachings from the distorted message of White Theology through the life-experience and understanding of Black people (Motlhabi, 1986 p 47). This observation accuses White Theology of propagating a distorted and manipulated interpretation of scripture which justified the subjugation of Black people. The rejection of White Theology naturally ended up in an emerging Black Theology.



A detailed description is given by Hopkins as to how Black Theology counters White Theology. He writes that, in contrast to White Theology, Black Theology understands God in the oppressed reality; while White Theology evolves out of a position of privilege, Black Theology sees God in the faces of the disinherited; while White Theology dabbles in esoteric and obscure academic issues, Black Theology anchors itself in a movement against racism; while White Theology teaches that religion and theology are individualistic, private affairs, Black Theology urges a community approach and a collective struggle; while White Theology supports the subjugation of Black life by normalising Whiteness, Black Theology sides with the marginalised; while White Theology deceptively argues about the objectivity of 'God-talk', Black Theology reflects that theology is not neutral; while White Theology speaks of a future spiritual salvation, Black Theology talks about present material freedom; while White Theology considers itself a scientific, classical dispute, Black Theology enthuses the Black poor to think critically about their faith.

Thus White and Black theologies occupy two social contexts which are radically different (Hopkins, 1990 p 54). Although this detailed comparison provides much clearer insights into the positions of White and Black theologies, it may be that Hopkins is too strong in critiquing, generalising about and negating White Theology. It is important to note here that there is no actual discipline of 'White Theology' as described by Black theologians. Furthermore, while the body of theological scholarship termed White Theology by Black theologians may well have been silent in responding to the struggles of Black people, that did not necessarily qualify it for the totally destructive criticism that

it fully and thoroughly supported racism and the shameful behaviour of some White people. Neither all White people nor all White theologians are racists, nor did they support racism. The other important point is that since there is no existence of White theology as a specific discipline one may question Hopkins' blanket assertions. However, Hopkins' account needs to be viewed from his position that the nature and character of Black Theology is different from the theology that existed previously.

Similar to Black Theology, Dalit Theology also was against the Indian Christian theology, which did not address the oppressed status of Dalits. Chapters Two and Three enumerated the criticisms of Indian Christian theology by Dalit theologians for the analogy of reasons put forth by Cone, Motlhabi and Hopkins. Indian Christian theology neglected the life experience, history and culture of Dalits, alongside its dependence on classical and philosophical reflections on revelation, scripture and tradition. In addition, Dalit theologians argued that Indian Christian theology never bothered about the life, struggles and liberation of Dalits in this world but was concerned only for their future salvation. However, Dalit theologians did not name Western Christian theology as White Theology or the Indian Christian theology as non-Dalit Theology, but simply criticised the western-based tradition of Indian Christian theology. In the case of first-generation Black theologians, they were extremely critical of Western theology, named it as White Theology, and condemned it as a slave master's theology for its silence on racism and the subjugation of Black people. In any case, Dalit theologians may have drawn insights from Black Theology as an additional encouragement to counter Indian Christian theology, and viewed God as the God of the oppressed and Christ as the Liberator as

seen in Chapter Three. Dalit Theology views scripture differently from the Brahmanical perspective of seeing Christ as the Redeemer who provides eschatological salvation. Dalit Theology is counter to Indian Christian theology and it energises Dalits by defining God and Christ as Liberators who support their struggles in this material world to challenge non-Dalits and caste oppression.

#### ***2.4 Black culture – a prominent factor in Black Theology***

Mosala argues that the Black cultural hermeneutics of struggle has been one of the main factors in Black Theology for the liberation of its people. He makes a lengthy argument for this position, the crux of which is described below. However, I would like to mention that the following argument seems to be more romantic and a glorification of Black culture as if it had been unproblematic before the arrival of foreigners. This is reminiscent of the argument of Dalit theologian, Appavoo, as seen in the Second Chapter, whose argument of Dalit culture also sounded similarly idealised. However, it is worth seeing the arguments of Black Theologians on the nature and character of Black culture and why it plays a prominent role in Black Theology. Citing Ngugi, Mosala describes how the community's social and political life develops and in that process people evolve language, song, dance, literature, religion, theatre, art, architecture, an education system and a way of life, and thus a cultural life is formed. He portrays how Black culture and religion were connected to the mode of production and how they have been subjugated by the colonial masters. The African primal communal society exercised a non-exploitative mode of production and there existed a culture of

communal life where all people laboured and shared together, and their religious symbols were animals, plants and natural objects. In the later development of feudal society, prior to capitalist society, the exploitative mode of production was introduced, which brought a shift in their culture, and especially their religious beliefs, which were redirected from nature to supreme human beings, the ancestors who protected their community. These two societies witnessed the African people leading a communal life without outside intrusion. When colonisation took place, the mode of production was changed to an oppressive mode alongside the introduction of foreign culture. This new situation forced Black people to adopt Western culture as it appeared to be supreme since it came from the colonial masters. Colonial rulers were well aware that subjugation of people would be more successful by first subjugating their culture. Therefore they suppressed the native culture and religion.

Based on this explanation, Mosala argues that to counteract the domination of a race or community, first the oppressive culture needs to be negated and opposed. Therefore, as African theology armed itself with political hermeneutics, Black Theology should arm itself with cultural hermeneutics to inspire Black people to seek liberation (Itumeleng Mosala, 1990 p 93-99). Mosala describes how a culture, especially Black culture, developed and how it has been jeopardised by Western intrusion. While understanding the positive credentials of Black or African culture, as I mentioned earlier, it appears that he glorifies Black or African culture as being without any oppressive characteristics. One would agree that no culture is free from its own deficiencies. However his belief was that Black cultural hermeneutics has the potential and the

characteristics to strengthen Black people to challenge the alien culture, and return to their indigenous culture.

Similarly, Hopkins argues that Black Theology in the United States and South Africa has a fountain of cultural materials and thought-forms equipped with resistance techniques in the form of songs, work tunes, blues, jazz, chain-gang singing, poetry, plays, novels, games, laughter, dance, short stories, autobiographies, critical essays, novels and various journals revealing theological sources. Black culture holds out enormous creative and indigenous cultural resources and materials for a Black Theology of liberation (Hopkins, 1990 p 177-178). This discourse describes the wealth of cultural forms that exist among the Black community, which manifest challenging and transforming characteristics. Reddie, too, argues for the jazz hermeneutics of Black Theology. He believes that the practice of improvisation of jazz music and scripted drama, as cultural means, could play significant roles in assisting Black people to frame their strategies for their involvement in struggle (Anthony G. Reddie, 2006a p 178). Thus, all three Black theologians referred to above strongly argue for the prominent role of Black culture in energising Black people, not only to oppose White people's perceived superiority, dominance and oppression but also to sustain their culture which has the potential for a creative, collective and liberated life which is both practical and prudent.

Dalit theologians argue similarly, as discussed in Chapter Two. They depict how Dalit culture and religion have been subdued by Brahmanical culture. They defined how some Dalits, if not all, were fond of following the oppressive culture as it appeared to be

supreme, and started following its values and worship patterns. Here one should note that culture is never static, as Jagessar and Reddie comment. In their words, '[c]ulture is never static. Instead there is a continual interplay resulting in dynamism, adaptability, re-interpretation, re-formulation and change' (Jagessar and Reddie, 2007 p 276). But the actions of Dalits in adopting Brahmanical culture, with a desire to raise their social status, did not bring the expected equal status to them, as the notion of caste was too strong. This is analogous to what happened to some Black people who followed the culture of White people, in terms of language, dress-code, food patterns, eating practices and so on, but still found that many White people did not treat Black people equally, owing to colour difference or racism. The other similarity is that both Black people and Dalits own a variety of cultural forms and practices which are sources for liberation motifs, collective living and resistance. As Hopkins puts it, the stories of Anansi the spider, jazz music and the art form of the extended family are some of the cultural forms which energise Black people to rise against White oppression (Hopkins, 1999 p 45). This is another similarity. The drums that Dalits beat stimulate them to invoke and inspire them to rise and fight against the oppressors (Clarke, 1999 p 115). In addition to this, Dalit Theology argues for upholding Dalitness in a similar way to Blackness, which propagates communal life, togetherness, loving, caring and respecting others as equals. Similar to Black Theology, Dalit Theology believes in reorienting cultural practices and their improvisation to challenge the hegemony of Brahmanism and its oppressive designs. Thus, culture forms base for both Black Theology and Dalit Theology.

### **3. The parallel - The liberational themes in Black Theology**

Having seen the parallel in the significance of Black and Dalit theologies, I move on to give a brief account of the liberational themes that these two theologies put forward for motivating the struggling Black and Dalit people theologically to further challenge the oppressive system and forces that are detrimental to their life and dignity.

#### ***3.1 The God of the Oppressed – Black people are chosen people of God***

This theme, as used by Latin American theologians, was used by a number of Black theologians as source of inspiration for oppressed people. Cone argues that God is the God of the oppressed and Black people are the chosen people for God's act of liberation. He offers a range of reasons for this. Just two of his arguments are reproduced here. Cone puts forward his understanding about God and theology thus:

God is not an abstract quality in the being of God, as with Greek philosophy...Yahweh, according to Hebrew prophecy, will not tolerate injustice against the poor; God will vindicate the poor. Again, God is revealed as the God of liberation for the oppressed; Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, God's activity on behalf of the oppressed (James H. Cone, 2001 p 2,3).

He is clear that God is known for his liberational activity, for the freedom of the oppressed from their social, economic and political oppression, as God will not tolerate injustice or wrong done by the oppressors. Equally for Cone, theology is a study of God's liberational activity and not God's being. Similarly, when he argues for scripture as one of the key sources for Black Theology, he comments that 'the Biblical narratives say that God is a God of liberation who speaks to the oppressed and abused, and assures

them that divine righteousness will vindicate their suffering' (James H. Cone, 2001 p 31). This quote needs no further comment as it is clear that scripture offers support for the liberation of the bonded. Therefore Cone's belief is that God could be perceived as the God of the oppressed on the strength of Bible narratives, and thus scripture could be used as a primary source in Black Theology. With regard to the theme that Black people are the chosen people or God's people, Cone argues that God has chosen Black people and stirred their souls to end the 350-year-old inhuman slavery caused by White people. God chose them as his own people not for redemptive suffering but for freedom, as they were enslaved not only against their will but also the will of God. He also argues that God's omnipotent power is with Blacks to demolish White racism for the freedom of Black people (James H. Cone, 2001 p 56). He says that Black people are chosen not to suffer for redemption as traditional theology teaches, but to struggle for their freedom as their enslavement is against God's will. Thus his position is that God is the God of the oppressed and Black people are a people chosen to bring freedom from White oppression.

Dalit theologians have the same position on this theme, which has been extensively dealt with in Chapter Three. Since Dalits are oppressed and discriminated against by non-Dalits based on the caste system, Dalit theologians have argued along the same lines as Cone. They state that Dalits are the chosen people and the liberating God is with them as he is the God of the oppressed. However, the 'chosen people' concept reminds the oppressed community, in this context both Black people and Dalits, to listen to the argument of Palestinian and Amerindian theologians (Sugirtharajah, 2006



p 229, 238) as seen in the same chapter (three). It has been described already that while agreeing that God is the God of the oppressed, the chosen people concept can contribute to the liberated community being manipulated into becoming oppressors of others. Palestinian theologians, as referred to already, have remarked that Israelites who claimed to be the chosen people of God, once delivered from Egypt, became oppressors in Canaan, and for their oppressive acts they even callously claimed that God commanded them to destroy all other nations and communities who lived there for the sake of accommodating Israel in that land (Joshua 1: 1-6 & 3: 9-11 & Deut 7: 1-2). They conveniently forgot the commandment of God that they should always remember that once they were slaves in Egypt and therefore should never oppress others (Deut 15: 12-15). This note of caution amplifies the need for both Black people and Dalits to look at the condition or caution imposed as an important element of the chosen people concept. If they become oppressors, then naturally God, as the God of the oppressed, will take sides with the oppressed community and the newly-oppressed would become God's chosen people. However, the bottom line of the argument of Black and Dalit theologians is that God is with Black people and with Dalits, and has chosen them for liberation.

While tracing the African roots of Black Theology, Roberts pursues this theme with the argument that when the Bible was introduced to African slaves, they were able to derive the liberative meanings hidden by the oppressors. They found Jehovah, a facsimile of the African Supreme Being as he liberated Israelites from Egyptian slavery. The Exodus narrative gave a political and religious meaning to Black people who were

oppressed by Whites. God's commandment to Moses to tell the Pharaoh, *let my people go* has a strong message to Black people to see their inheritance as God's people, and their understanding of the Bible and its narratives were different from that of the slave-masters (J. Deotis Roberts, 1987 p 24). Roberts notes how Black Theology has helped his people to look at biblical narratives differently from White oppressors who have hidden the contextual meaning the the narratives transmit. It helped African people easily to understand Yahweh's phrase *let my people go* and to consider themselves as God's people, correlating their situation with that of the Israelites. Dalit theologians also argue, as seen in Chapter Three, that the emergence of Dalit Theology helped Dalits to read the Bible differently, and helped them to feel that God is the God of the oppressed and would be only with Dalits in their struggle for liberation.

Hopkins, while arguing that the Bible is the first source for the development of Black Theology, depicts the poor Black African-American struggle for freedom against racial oppression as similar to that of Hebrew slaves in Egypt. He parallels the status of the Israelites, prior to and after the Exodus experience, to the situation of Black people in America. He describes the brutality of the slave masters, false cases inflicted on Black people, prejudicial treatment by authorities, anxiety, fear and doubt and also longing for the future, and quarrels with leaders as some of the parallels. The Hebrew scriptures gave them hope which overcame their pain and strengthened their faith (Hopkins, 1999 p 42,43). This articulation affirms the reasons for Black people to inherit God as the God of the oppressed and also the Exodus experience for their encouragement.

In *Slavery, the Bible and the African Diaspora*, Bailey argues that the God of the oppressed not only released the Israelites from bondage but also punished the oppressor. This helps Black people to understand that God is God, God is Just and that they can trust this God. He further asserts opposition to 'love your enemies', 'blessed are you when people revile and persecute you' and 'God forgive them' (Bailey, 2010 p 34). This position of Bailey warrants a discussion. He argues that God not only saved the Israelites but also punished the Egyptians. This interpretation points Black people towards not loving White racists. This position of Bailey is different from that of Roberts who argues that God is for both justice and love. Roberts says the Old Testament doctrine of God was based on justice, but the New Testament teaches love. He draws on the argument of Tillich on forgiveness which is based on justice and love (J. Deotis Roberts, 1987 p 74,77,79). In addition he claims that Jesus means freedom, but Christ means reconciliation. The particularity of Jesus as liberator of the Israelites has been extended by the universality of Christ who brought reconciliation (Roberts, 1974 p 153). Therefore Christian Black people who were suffering should become involved in the reconciliation ministry as well, since they are the chosen people, to bring healing to all in this broken world (Roberts, 1974 p 152). He substantiates his argument by citing the movement of Martin Luther King Jr., which was known for reconciliation, although it also fought for the liberation of Black people (Roberts, 1974 p 182).

Roberts's interpretation of God's love was an invitation for Cone to respond. For Cone, *God is love* means God is for the oppressed. Since Black Theology's position is that God is the God of the oppressed, Cone argues that Black people envision God as a

God of Love but God's love is only for the oppressed. After explaining the view of Marcion on the nature of God in terms of God's righteousness and love, Cone prefers to reject the view of Gordon Kaufmann that God's nature is only to 'love' and the 'wrath' is the disobedience of human begins. Cone criticises this position as it sounds as if the oppression by White people of Black people is a product of their own human disobedience but that God still loves White people because of God's own divine nature of loving, despite their cruelty to Black people. Cone was furious and argued that Black Theology negates this kind of argument. He disputed strongly the position of Roberts and Kaufmann and argued that God's love means God's participation in the destruction of the oppressiveness of White people. For Cone, God's righteousness or wrath is part and parcel of God's love, to engage in the liberation of the oppressed (James H. Cone, 2001 p 68-71). This position of Cone really challenges the normative notion that God is love and his love is for all. Of course, God punished Egyptians but he did not fully eliminate them. However, this debate leads into one particular theme of Black Theology: that God is the God of the oppressed and that God is wholly with Black people in their struggle for liberation, which is the crux to be noted here. At the same time, the question of God's love for all and the notion of reconciliation needs attention as all White people are not racists and they do not want to remain racists forever. However, it is significant to note that at the time of its emergence Black Theology emphasised that God's love is not neutral as God will not take sides with those who do not love 'the other'.

My reading of Dalit Theology helps me to believe that Cone's argument appears to have influenced the conceptual position of Dalit theologians although they seem not

to have handled at length the notion of God's love or reconciliation with non-Dalit oppressors. But this argument deserves a longer debate as, in the exodus narrative, God was against the Egyptians but did not eliminate them completely as God is the God for all. However, the argument of Cone and the Dalit theologians does encourage oppressed Black people and Dalits to view God as the God of the oppressed, and they then become God's chosen people to engage in liberational activity. Dalit theologians seem to have been in line with Black theologians, although, according to my reading, they did not make their arguments with such extensive debates. This theme is common both to Black Theology and Dalit Theology.

### **3.2 Black Theology and the imago dei**

Black people are created in the image of God and therefore they have a right to enjoy their full human status without being discriminated against. Also God's image in them stimulates them to involve themselves in liberational activity. This is a significant theme in Black Theology. Indeed all Christian theologies believe in this concept although many Christians conveniently forget that all people are created in God's image and all have a right to be treated equally. Wilmore describes the essence of the image of God as being imbued with freedom (Gayraud S. Wilmore, 1974 p 215). God's image permeated by freedom is a good concept. Cone, too, argues that the image of God determines the created people's long-time goal of gaining liberation and full humanity (James H Cone, 1973 p 56). He believes that the Biblical emphasis on freedom means that one person cannot allow another to define his or her existence, and *imago dei*

means that the created person's destiny is inseparable from the Creator and therefore if a person denies the freedom of another who is created by God, he denies God himself. Thus Black people affirm their freedom in God (James Cone, 1970 p 137). Mugambi proposes that Man is created in the image God with an injunction that he should live according to the will of God (Mugambi, 1989 p 125). In line with these positions, Hopkins believes that, through the image of God, Black people, besides being children of God and achieving full wholeness, undergo an experience of liberation in order to realise the true image of God in them (Hopkins, 1999 p 73). He further argues that divine power has gifted Blackness, and that is the core of Black Theology, which signifies that Black people are created in the image of God to recognise and enjoy self love, self-esteem and self confidence. This gift of Blackness is suffused with liberation to be offered to the entire Homo sapiens species (Hopkins, 2005 p 8-10). When explaining the characteristics of Black British theology, Lartey also emphasises that '[t]here are aspects of the nature of God that are reflected in Blackness. To eradicate, efface, deny or destroy Blackness therefore is to prevent an aspect of the glory of God from being revealed' (Jagessar and Reddie, 2007 p 291). All these descriptions strongly argue that Black people are created by God and God's image in them is manifested in Blackness, which encourages them to undertake liberative action, as God is for justice and opposes any bondage.

While emphasising the idea of the image of God, Roberts comments that 'Moltmann's discussion on human rights – equal dignity, interdependence of men and women, equal validity of personal and social rights and the interdependence on the

present and future generations – was based on his theological understanding of the concept of *imago Dei* (Goatley, 2003 p 54). This statement of Roberts appears to argue that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a base document for all human rights work in the world today, is a product of the theological insight or interpretation that some or many have derived from this *imago dei* principle. Although it is debatable, his statement still bears a valid point, that Moltmann, who was known for his human rights views among personal circles and within communities, has obtained this insight from a theological understanding of the principle of *imago dei*. Thus Roberts emphasises that every human being is created in the image of God, and therefore has a right to claim and a responsibility to respect the equal status of another human being. Alongside this, Roberts explains that Black Theology demonstrates the Christian perspective that human beings are created in the image of God, whose nature implies the freewill of human beings and also the understanding that God is just. This understanding encourages human beings to express their faith by being actively involved in alleviating human suffering (Goatley, 2003 p 170, 171). These arguments also accentuate how the concept of the image of God encourages Black people to engage in alleviating their oppression.

This is also the position of Dalit theologians, as discussed in Chapter Three, who also argue that Dalits are created in the image of God and therefore have a right to enjoy the same human status as non-Dalits. I believe that the arguments of Black theologians had a substantial influence on Dalit theologians to argue on the same lines. The personhood of Dalits is rooted in the image of God and as such, Dalits become

God's people, with the power and responsibility to challenge caste oppression. They also argue that since Dalitness has been inherited from the *imago dei*, Dalits are called to suffer for transformation. However, Dalit theologians do not seem to have argued for a 'Dalit nation', as they are the sons and daughters of the same soil as non-Dalits, and struggle to live with human dignity in their own land. The question of Dalitness, and self-determination, needs to be given attention since non-Dalits largely frame policies and design strategies for the development of Dalits, which need to be challenged. In that way, this theme and the arguments are relevant to Dalits. In any case, the idea that Dalits can call upon the image of God to claim equal status with all is something that has most likely been derived from the argument of Black theologians (P.Nirmal, 1988 p 79).

### ***3.3 Claiming Jesus a Black person, a Black Messiah***

This is yet another vital theme in Black Theology. Douglas describes Christ theologically as Black. She develops her argument that Black theologians – while exploring the roots of the Black Christ – found him in the history of slavery, and also realised that the White Christ was the centre of slaveholding Christianity, and the Black Christ of slave Christianity. The White Christ was portrayed as a supporter of racism, the Black Christ was essentially a challenger of racism; White Christianity manipulated Biblical texts such as Gen: 9:25, Lev: 25: 44-46, Matt: 8: 23-35 and also Pauline epistles – especially Ephesians – to justify the slave system. But Black Christianity sees the entire life and mission of Christ as a challenger and deliverer. For White Christianity, slaves could still be Christians as the salvation or freedom Christ gives is from the



bondage of sin. But, for slave Christianity, salvation is mainly from physical and historical bondage (Kelly Brown Douglas, 1994 p 10,15,16). The same position was supported by the argument of Campbell that the Europeans constructed Whiteness against Blackness, for which they co-opted Jesus, made him 'one of us', and defined the contrasts, 'us and them', 'civilised and barbarian', 'normal and ethnic', thus exercising their destructive power (John M. Campbell, 2010 p 122). But Black theologians developed a social relationship with Jesus and trusted him as the companion of Black people, born in a manger, identified with the socially marginalised, undergoing the same pain, suffering, humiliation, harassment and killed on the cross (Kelly Brown Douglas, 1994 p 21,22). These three arguments broadly demonstrate how differently Jesus has been portrayed and viewed by White Theology and Black Theology. Black theologians coined the phrases 'slave-holding Christianity' and 'slave Christianity', and demonstrated how Jesus was co-opted by White racists as a supportive figure for their oppression, and how Black people found Jesus to be Black and a companion for their liberation struggle.

Black theologians Cleage, Cone and Roberts also claim that Christ is Black. Cleage, although not a mainstream Black theologian but a proponent of Black Christian nationalism, argues that Jesus was Black ethnically and genealogically as he was born to Mary of an Israelite tribe (Poinsett, 1969 p 101). Cone uses existential theory to describe the Blackness of Jesus who identified himself for the freedom of the oppressed (James H. Cone, 2001 p 213). For Roberts, he uses the insight of the incarnation for his argument, as Christ is universal and particular and, as he identifies with all, he identifies with Black people as well. When others claim a White Christ or a Red Christ, Black

people claim him as the Black Christ, as Christ is Universal Word made in Black flesh (Roberts, 1971 p 137). These three arguments assert the Blackness in Christ, who is against slavery by White people and is with Black people, to redeem them as God-delivered Israelites from their Egyptian bondage. While expanding their arguments, Douglas states that Cleage and Cone are for an 'any means necessary' model as a strategy of struggle, since the non-violence strategy of Martin Luther King Jr. caused more casualties among Black people. But Roberts is for their freedom, and also for reconciliation with White people. The first two theologians above believed that the teachings of Jesus on 'heaven, turning the other cheek and walking an extra mile,' were deceptively interpreted by White Christianity to subjugate and end the disobedience and rebellion of Black people (Kelly Brown Douglas, 1994 p 53-77). As seen earlier, Roberts is also for reconciliation with White people. However his position was criticised by Cleage and Cone as has been discussed above. While claiming Jesus as a Black Messiah, Cleage strongly demonstrates that Jesus was the non-White leader of a non-White people struggling for liberation; Black Americans need to know that Jesus went among the people to root out individualism and identification with the oppressor, and gave them faith to rebuild a nation; therefore, today's struggle in America demands a Black church with a Black Messiah (Cleage, Third Printing 1995 p 3,9).

However Douglas, while appreciating Cleage's position that Jesus is the Black Messiah, comments that his genealogy argument is not fully acceptable as there is inconsistency between Matthew and Luke in describing the genealogy of Jesus. Also, she comments that Robert's argument regarding the universality and particularity of

Jesus, especially his reconciliation theory, does not give an impetus for Black people to own Jesus as being mainly for them. She says that Cone's claim that Christ's ministry among the oppressed is equated to Christ's Blackness does sound relevant (Kelly Brown Douglas, 1994 p 79,81,83). These arguments and counter-arguments emphasise that Black people have inherited Jesus as a co-sufferer and also a supporter for their freedom struggle. Perhaps the first-generation Black theologians needed to be in a situation of motivating oppressed Black people theologically, when a softened approach in relation to the oppressors would not have been perceived as feasible, given the situation. The present situation is different, and furthermore all White people are not racists or oppressors, and therefore the question of reconciliation now seems to have been under-discussed.

Moving on to the discussion of other areas of oppression, and claiming Jesus as a Black person, discrimination on the basis of sexuality that exists among Black people prompted Robert Beckford, a British Black theologian, to prefer to call Jesus the 'Black Christ', as Jesus is for the holistic liberation of Black people, which includes his struggle against the dehumanisation of Black sexuality. He depicts the Black Christ as a Masai warrior who supports the struggle for the sexual wholeness of Black people who have been treated as lesser humans. Also he says 'Jesus is Dread', which symbolises liberation, freedom and empowerment for Black people by the regaining of their human status in a racist society (Beckford, 1998 p 75,146). Moving on to the oppression of Black women, Jacquelyn Grant, a Black Womanist theologian, finds Jesus in the painful experiences of Black women and therefore refers to Jesus as a 'Black woman' who

transcends his maleness to strengthen the struggles of Black women and men in dismantling not only the oppressive structures but also the oppressive images and symbols that perpetuate racism, classism and sexism (Grant, 1989 p 220,221). Delores Williams, another Black Womanist theologian, states that the spirit of Jesus plays a significant role in the insights of Black Womanist theology which encourages Black women's struggles; she argues that Jesus was born to the Spirit of God and a woman and therefore women's faith, their love for Jesus, commitment to life, love, family and politics emerges from the Spirit (Williams, 1993 p 271). Grant also demonstrates that Jesus is the central reference for Christian Black women; they identify with him as he identified with them; as Jesus was persecuted, women also suffer; as he was crucified, women are also raped, their husbands castrated, their children sold and they face a major range of cruelties. In general, Grant endorses the argument of Black theologians that Jesus was with the lowly and, in the American context, he is alongside Black people and his Blackness is not ideological but Christological (Grant, 1993 p 281, 284). In sum, Black women theologians argue that Jesus is their source of inspiration for their struggles, as they find his suffering has a parallel with theirs. As Douglas comments, Slave Christianity found Jesus not to be a spiritual deliverer, as claimed by White Theology, but to be the second Moses who delivered the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage. Likewise Black Theology produced the Black Christ from the slave quarters and hush harbours of Black people (Kelly Brown Douglas, 1994 p 27,29). This detailed account substantiates the fact that Black theologians see Christ as Black and also as a Black Messiah, enabling them to address a range of issues that they face.

When we look into the argument of Dalit theologians calling Jesus Dalit or seeing the Dalitness in him, it appears that they derived this notion and argument mainly from Black Theology. They too argue in the same way but bestow more importance to two aspects. Dalits find the Dalitness in Jesus in terms first, of his birth, his genealogy, and his identification with the marginalised and excluded and second, in terms of the humiliation, suffering and harassment Christ underwent in the course of his redemptive action in facing the Cross. Dalits carry all forms of stigma and suffering from cradle to grave, and therefore they find the Dalitness in Jesus and desire to call him Dalit. But, to my reading, Dalit theologians seem not to have forced the issue to the same degree that Black theologians have, in terms of classism, sexism and patriarchy, to interpret Jesus as Black. Therefore, the next generation of Dalit theologians, which includes Dalit women theologians, has to take note not only of casteism but also sub-casteism, classism, and gender discrimination that cause division and discrimination among Dalits. Dalits face the particular problem of sub-casteism which perpetuates discriminatory practices of exclusion, oppression and even violence among themselves, if not with quite the same vigour that exists between non-Dalits and Dalits. If Dalit Christians have a faith that they represent the image of God and a trust that Christ has Dalitness in him, they need to stop caste practices that they themselves indulge in. Equally the prevalence of division among Dalits in the form of classism, sexism, rural/urban, literate/illiterate distinctions and different faith affiliations should also be exposed and eliminated. The issues of sexuality, gay and lesbian relationships, transgender aversion and related discrimination, intolerance and exclusion do not seem even a starter in the serious debates of the Indian church, or in wider Indian society. However, Dalit Theology

has to recognise these issues and respond with theological insight and understanding. The main and immediate concern is that the emergence of Dalit women theologians is limited compared to Black women theologians. Dalit women theologians need to emerge and challenge Dalit Theology to become more gender-sensitive and balanced. So far, Dalit Theology exists predominantly in the domain of male Dalit theologians, which means Dalit women's perspectives have not been adequately raised and discussed. This is a lacuna in the development of Dalit Theology which needs greater attention. Otherwise Dalit Theology will remain partial and incomplete. Dalit Theology needs to learn this serious aspect from Black Theology.

### ***3.4 Black people are called to struggle – also for the freedom of White people***

Dalit theologians argue that Dalits are the people chosen by God in the Indian context, who struggle for their freedom from caste oppression. But the responsibility of Dalits struggling against caste is not only for their own deliverance but also that of non-Dalits from their caste mind-set. Caste has enslaved both Dalits and non-Dalits equally, one with physical oppression and the other with mental oppression. Therefore the 'chosen people' are called to struggle for themselves and also for non-Dalits, as both are oppressed. This could pave the way for a kind of reconciliation with non-Dalits. Thus Dalits are called to suffer and to struggle for universal liberation. I believe that this position and argument of Dalit theologians might have been drawn from Black Theology and mainly from the Black theologian J. Deotis Roberts.

The first-generation Black theologians differed on the question of whether Black people should suffer for White people's deliverance from a racist mind-set. For Cleage and Cone, the suffering of Black people is endured in order to liberate themselves from White people and they are not called to suffer for White people. According to Cleage, the 'chosen people' concept has two main purposes. One is to deliver Black people from their oppression and the other is that they should build a separate nation. Therefore, Blacks are the chosen people, like the Israelites, who will escape the oppression of White people and build a Black nation, like the promised land of the Israelites (Cleage, 1969 p 73). For Cleage, the 'chosen people' concept means to get away from slavery and develop a separate Black nation; there is no question of any reconciliation with White people.

Cone argues that the 'chosen people' concept has three dimensions. One is that God's selection of people is related to their oppression, the other is God's liberating action and the third God's ownership of them as God's own people as long as they listen to God. He derives his argument from Exodus 19 (James Cone, 1975 p 64). Further, he distinguishes Jesus from Christ: the Jesus of History came to fulfil the divine promise of building a holy nation for the Jews, but the Christ of faith manifests a liberating ministry of suffering, crucifixion and resurrection for a particular community which is under oppression (James Cone, 1975 p 119,135). Although Cone agrees that the resurrection of Christ brings liberation to the whole of humanity, he still argues that in today's context Jesus is a Black man who suffers for Black people in order to destroy Whiteness (James Cone, 1970 p 1087). In sum, Black theologians are not for Black people's reconciliation

with White people, at least not without justice, or for their suffering for White people's deliverance.

Roberts, however, differs from the position of Cleage and Cone. For him, the 'chosen people are special who transform their suffering into victory and thus they become the rod in the hands of God for a redemptive mission to liberate all people. The saved minority has a responsibility to bring liberation to all' (Roberts, 1971 p 59). He claims that Jesus means freedom, but Christ means reconciliation. The particularity of Jesus as liberator of the Israelites has been extended by the universality of Christ who brought reconciliation (Roberts, 1974 p 153). Therefore Christian Black people who experienced suffering should be involved in reconciliation ministry as well, since they are the chosen people, to bring healing to all in this broken world (Roberts, 1974 p 152). He cites the Black movement of Martin Luther King Jr. as being for reconciliation although it fought primarily for Black liberation (Roberts, 1974 p 182). His position and the counter-argument were discussed above.

Beckford, reflecting on the issue of Black people forgiving White people and collaborating with them, refers to the Lord's Prayer – *forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. He is for forgiving but not forgetting. He differentiates 'forgiveness' from 'forgetting'. He cites an example from South Africa, of Black people who forgave the White oppressors but did not forget what had been done to them. Beckford argues that God's commandment to Moses that 'Israelites should not forget their history that once they were slaves in Egypt' does not only mean that they should not become an



oppressive community and offer thanks to God for their deliverance, but also that they should be vigilant in future so as not again to be enslaved by the perpetrators and perpetrators (Beckford, 1998 p 178,179). The question of forgetting could be viewed as 'being reminded of' or 'being mindful of'. This reflection of Beckford in one sense supports the argument for Black people forgiving the oppressors but, in another sense, cautions them to be vigilant to prevent the oppressors rising again. Therefore Black people need to be vigilant and careful to remain free from renewed oppression but also to prevent White people emerging again as oppressors. This sounds as if Beckford is not opposed to Black people suffering for the deliverance of White people as well.

In Chapter Three the arguments of Dalit theologians on the theme 'Dalits are called to struggle for the Transformation' was discussed at length; this includes their suffering for the freedom of non-Dalits as well. Dalit theologians have discussed this theme but differ slightly from the early Black theologians and argue that, since Dalits are the chosen people of God as they gained the God's people status from the no people status, they must suffer for the transformation of the entire society. Therefore their suffering is also for the deliverance of non-Dalits from their caste mind-set. However, they have not argued the case at such great length as Black theologians. In particular the question of 'reconciliation', 'forgiving' and 'forgetting' have not been dealt with at any length. They emphasised that Dalits are called to suffer and struggle for themselves and also for others, like Jesus who suffered for all humanity. This theme is actually common for both Black and Dalit theologies.

#### **4. A brief overview on the position of White theologians on White Theology**

I have explained above how Black theologians criticised the silence of White Theology on the subject of the painful life experience of Black people owing to racism and slavery. However, all White people are not racists and all White theologians did not support the cruelty of racism. David Haslam, for example, is a methodist minister in Britain known for his committed involvement in the cause of Black people in South Africa. There are others in various parts of the world, who have voiced their opposition to the inhuman practice of racial discrimination. However, not practising racial discrimination or speaking out against racism and slavery is different from reflecting and arguing theologically upon the issues of Black people. This parallel can also be drawn with non-Dalits and the question of Dalit theology. All non-Dalits are not supporters of the caste system and some do not practise caste discrimination. But this is a different issue from how non-Dalit theologians look at and challenge caste when they reflect and argue theologically, considering but not living the caste affected situation of Dalits.

Here, I would like to consider the reflections and expressions of a few White theologians about the silence of White Theology on the issue of the oppression of Black people. Although there is no separate discipline of 'White Theology', Black theologians used this term to describe the traditional western theology which they encountered when formulating their own reflections. Black theologians were critical of White Theology's silence on the questions of racism, slavery and the victimised life experience of Black people. We have seen that they called White Theology the slave master's theology and

Black Theology a slave's theology. Cone has gone to the extent of stating that White theologians who do not publicly oppose or write against racism are part of the problem and also enemies of justice (James H. Cone, 1999 p 257).

Perkinson, while examining White Theology. comments that the privilege of 'White race' and Whiteness throughout history is the reason either for its silence or for its interpretation. He explains how Whiteness has accrued power by opposinbg itself to 'colour'. According to him the

Whiteness emerges historically as a perceived difference, economic exploitation of, political dominance over and social superiority to peoples of 'colour'; Whiteness has gathered meaning to itself in ever-varying social and theoretical forms...as White Christianity, White supremacy, White racism and White normativity (Perkinson, 2004 p 153-155).

His position is that White privilege, Whiteness and White supremacy are the core reasons for looking at everything from a White perspective. Similarly, Cassidy and Mikulich, while commenting on the silence of White Catholic theologians, observed that White theologians simply assume that everything is peaceful; they are not cognizant of history; their silence on racism and White privilege bespeaks the contradiction between their claims for a universal, ontological human equality and the reality of social, political and economic privilege; White theologians consciously or unconsciously accept and assume the universality of their norms (Mikulich, 2007 p 3-4). Another White theologian, Curran acknowledges, or in other words confesses, that White privilege is the primary reason for his failure to recognise and deal with the problem of racism in society and in the church (Curran, 2007 p 80). Nilson, another White theologian, while confessing his silence on the question of racism, states that the problem faced by White theologians is

that they find it difficult to interpret a theology from non-traditional sources: sermons, hymns, devotions and narratives (Nilson, 2007 p 29).

Haslam, while arguing for global racial justice, painfully states how as a White Christian he was often concerned, angered and ashamed at the arrogance of White people and their notion of White superiority. He calls for a theology for Europe, a theology of struggle, to help White people to discover a way of being Christian in a world of continuing racial inequality and injustice and, too frequently, one of hatred (Haslam, 1996 p 4, 151). Leech, an Anglican priest, who worked for racial justice in Britain, criticises Christian fundamentalism, which seeks a Christian theology to justify its doctrine of racial superiority in the Bible. He argues that Christian theology and the Christian church should provide insights mainly to students in Britain on working for racial justice within British society (Leech, 1988 p 4, 202).

While these represent the few but strong statements of some White theologians, Cone, besides calling for academic theologians to break the silence about White racism within their discipline, identifies four reasons why White theologians in general keep silent on the issue of racism. They are that White theologians do not talk about racism because they do not have to; their talk about White supremacy will arouse feelings of guilt among them; it will engage Black people's rage; and they are not prepared for a radical distribution of wealth and power (James H. Cone, 2004 p 139). On the same lines, Reddie cites the failure of the Christian theological framework in Britain in terms of its silence on the White hegemony of Christendom and the Christian-inspired White

power brokers of the state; in sum, a White head to rule the rest of the body, which thus enables normative White power in all religio-cultural situations to continue untouched and untroubled (Anthony G Reddie, 2010 p 22).

This overview presents the main (though not the only) reasons for the conspicuous general silence of White theologians and White Theology on the subject of racism, which however, should not be interpreted as condemning all White people or White theologians as supporters of racism and the practice of slavery. This applies to Dalit Theology as well. By virtue of non-Dalitness, the non-Dalits tend to feel that caste practice is normative and that society is functioning without problems. In fact, the non-Dalits, with an imbibed feeling of superiority, might see the uprising of Dalits as an act of disobedience or revolt, as explained earlier. This attitude encourages non-Dalits to unleash violence on Dalits. Non-Dalit Theologians are also unable to look at the issue of caste from the perspective of Dalits and therefore they argue for an Indian Christian theology from a western framework, with Brahmanical insights. These similarities elucidate the similarity between White Theology and Indian Christian Theology which was challenged by Black and Dalit theologians.

##### **5. Salient similarities and dissimilarities between Black and Dalit theologies and further insights to be drawn by Dalit Theology – a final comment**

This concluding overview is based on what has been discussed so far and therefore no references are repeated. Black Theology has its origin on different soil –

the US, South Africa, Africa, north of the Limpopo River, and Britain. But Dalit Theology is only from India as yet. Black Theology emerged in the 1960s and Dalit Theology in the 1980s. Black theologians emerged from all these four geographical areas but, thus far, Dalit Theology is only from India. Although Black people are largely the same in Blackness, the nature of their oppression has differed, if not in a major way, from the US to South Africa, to Africa and Britain. When South Africa was under apartheid, other regions were affected by slavery and exclusion. However, the role of White people as the oppressors is one and the same in all these regions. In India, there was no apartheid but untouchability, which amounts to hidden apartheid. Womanist theologians emerged and they argue for their space and their rights within Black society, church and theology. But among Dalits, women Dalit theologians have only now slowly started emerging. Although Black culture appears to be identical in all countries, it does vary from country to country. This is the same with Dalits as their culture has a slight variance from state to state, and among sub-castes. Black Theology is contextual and liberative, as is Dalit Theology. It is race and class that Black Theology is concerned with mostly and the same is the case with Dalit Theology in terms of caste and class. Both theologies are beginning to address the issue of patriarchy and argue for equal space for women. Black Theology is far ahead in taking up the issue of sexuality but Dalit Theology does not face the issue adequately as yet. Both theologies are against using only Marxian tools of analysis to identify the problems in society. While Black Theology was against White Theology, Dalit Theology was against the Indian Christian theology.

The emergence of Black Theology was encouraged by external factors, e.g. the Civil Rights Movement, and same is the case with Dalit Theology which was hastened by the emergence of secular Dalit movements. African American people have strong, solid and vociferous leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. a Christian, and Malcolm X, a Muslim. Dalits too have such leaders, mostly at regional level only, except Dr. Ambedkar, a Buddhist at the national level. In short, both communities, Black people and Dalit people, share the same kind of inhuman status at the hands of the dominant racists and casteists, and are forced to live in segregation, subjugation, humiliation and harassment. White Christianity and Brahmanical Hinduism supported the dominant oppressors. Black Theology and Dalit Theology emerged as counters to the dominant theologies by giving importance to the life-experiences of the oppressed. Both are contextual and liberative. Both view God as the God of the oppressed. Both view freedom from worldly oppression as a key element of salvation. Both consider the concept of the Kingdom of God as a place for the oppressed to live a freed life amidst the values of justice, equality and peace. Both Black Theology and Dalit Theology aim to strengthen the faith of ordinary Black and Dalit Christians.

Both theologies have their own challenges, both internal and external. For Black Theology the vital internal challenges are to address the issues of classism, sexism and sexuality. The external challenge is to join hands with White working class people in order to address the problem of extended and intensified capitalism in the form of neo-liberal policies and programmes which marginalise both the Black and White working classes. With regard to Dalit Theology, major internal challenges are sub-casteism,

classism and sexism. Another is to find a way of relating to Dalits of other faiths, who form the majority of Dalits in India. A third is to evolve strategies to join hands with those non-Dalit oppressors who will oppose neo-liberalism as it exploits both Dalits and non-Dalits equally. However, both theologies appear to be still mainly in the domain of intellectuals and academics, and need to develop as Practical theologies to reach out and engage with ordinary Black people and Dalits for the energising of their faith to oppose all oppression, internal and external. The Blackness and Dalitness of Christ will guide them in their struggles.



## **Chapter Five – Practical theology as a transforming practice**

### **1. Rationale for this chapter**

Chapters Two and Three discussed the idea that Dalit Theology emerged as an Indian Christian theology of liberation, anchoring its source in the oppressed life experience of Dalits in general, and Dalit Christians in particular. It has evolved clear theological insights to shape the faith perspectives of oppressed Dalits, in order that they may challenge caste oppression. Having read the well-articulated significance, themes and inspirational insights of Dalit theologians in challenging caste-affected ground reality, and having three decades of field experience in opposing caste practices inside and outside church, I came to the realisation that all these discussions of and deliberations upon Dalit Theology have not adequately engaged with grass roots Dalit Christians, who are in constant struggle against caste practices but largely with a secular perspective. While there is nothing wrong in organising a struggle with secular perspectives, being a Dalit Christian and Dalit rights activist, I am convinced that the well-formulated themes of Dalit Theology have the potential and ability to enlarge the faith perspectives of Dalit Christians in order to intensify their struggle against caste with an active theological stimulus to add to their secular perspective. Therefore I feel that if Dalit Theology, which largely remains, as I suspect, a theology of church leaders and academics, emerges as a Practical theology and engages with grass roots Dalit Christians by means of a shared Christian praxis through the 'action-reflection' process, it could serve as an effective mode of practice, thereby enabling genuine liberation.

Having this rationale in mind, this chapter discusses the definition, nature and variety of models of Practical theology, as portrayed by a range of theologians, and also the 'action-reflection paradigm' as a viable method to be used in Practical theology to influence the change-agents, the Dalit Christian activists, who engage in transforming the oppressive reality. The chapter ends with a brief description of the field-study, to gather information on the present status and relevance of Dalit Theology and its theological themes among grass roots Dalit Christian activists in their struggles against caste oppression.

## **2. Practical theology**

### ***2.1 Definition and significance***

Theology has remained largely in the classic and systematic domain for centuries. However, of late, the field of theology has begun to witness the emergence of a contextual discipline known as 'Practical theology'. The very expression 'practical' implies the importance of 'practice' and, as Tracy explains, its characteristics concern the practical dimensions of scripture, Christian doctrine and church history. It deals with God, the church and especially with what the Christians do in this world (Tracy, 1983 p 61-82). It has its traditional sources but the special feature of Practical theology is its concern with regard to practice in relation to what Christians do in this world as a response to their life-situations. This view is corroborated by Forrester, who believes that practice in practical theology means, 'involving in some action, repeating behaviours,

developing skills and enhancing professionalism', and when practice has a pre-link with a theory then 'practice becomes a praxis' - 'a praxis to effect transformation among Christians and the world, through its theological understanding' (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 1-7). This position was reaffirmed by Gutiérrez who argues that 'people know the reality of the situation that they live in and while engaging in praxis, they transform and shape the world' (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1983 p 59). Groome also emphasises 'praxis by the people' but defines the word people as 'a faith community', and also states that 'such praxis is not merely by a group of scholars reflecting on a community's behalf' (Thomas H. Groome, 1980 p 229).

These ideas indicate the characteristics and significance of Practical theology. It is defined as a Christian theology having its source in scripture but as praxis. It concerns the practical action of the faith community, not merely its intellectual explorations, to transform the world. However, as Forrester strongly argues, 'Christian Practical theology believes in changing, transforming and transfiguring realities, not with human effort alone, but with the help and act of God' (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p27). This affirms a theological perspective of Practical theology: that the people's action is generated with the help of God. As Groome describes, a faith community involving itself in a participative dialogical pedagogy could be facilitated by the process of shared Christian praxis to bring about change (Thomas H Groome, 1991 p 135). Thus Practical theology affirms praxis by the affected faith community, having its source in scripture, with a theological faith that God is with them in their struggle.

## ***2.2 The history of Practical theology***

Tracing the roots of Practical theology and its true meaning, Forrester argued that, prior to the Middle Ages, theology was understood as 'faith seeking understanding', and remained with monks largely in monastic settings. In the Middle Ages, since universities were developed in Europe, theology became an academic discipline regarded as a theoretical or practical science. In the Early Modern era, especially the period of Enlightenment, theology stood along with medicine and law, but it was Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century who wrote substantially on the practical side of theology (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 33-34,36). This depiction asserts that theology was, to begin with, in the domain of ecclesia and moved into the field of academia, until Schleiermacher pressed for it to have a practical space. Schleiermacher termed theological study as philosophical, historical and practical using the analogy of a 'tree's root, trunk and branch' and thus made Practical theology the 'crown of theologies'; nonetheless as a science, theology is a fiefdom of the church leaders, and not for all (Schleiermacher, 1990 p 8). Though this definition brought credit to Schleiermacher for arguing the practical side of theology, and held the same to be the crown of theologies, he still fixed it within the domain of the church. Karl Barth, a twentieth-century proponent, also argued that theology cannot be equated with the discipline of the sciences, but it is related to God, and therefore it is the function of a church more than a university since it is concerned with the work and witness of a believing community.

All theology is practical, as all types derive from the proclamation of the Gospel, and deal with the work of prayer, study, service and love (Barth, 1965 p 169-171). Both Schleiermacher and Barth gave primary importance to Practical theology but mainly to ecclesia and not to academia. Barth, particularly, spent the best part of his life on *Church dogmatics*, basing his arguments on philosophical and theological reflections and insights, mainly centered on the implication of the practical side of theology and therefore during the time of the Holocaust, he was responding to the context of Nazism more than the freedom of the church (Barth, 1956 p 783,793). Thus the practical side of theology, or Practical theology, began to emerge in the nineteenth century and ran through the twentieth century as a separate discipline, expressing its concerns about contemporary realities. However, Forrester notes that 'Practical theology was recognised as an academic discipline, a long time back in Vienna in 1774 and Tübingen in 1794, although it appeared as technical training for church workers' (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 40). Thus one could easily discern that Practical theology has its roots back in the eighteenth century, but emerged as a distinctive discipline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For the purposes of the present thesis, this brief survey is sufficient to trace the origins of Practical theology. This chapter will continue to discuss its nature and types in more detail as this will help in analysing the practical dimensions of Dalit Theology, which is the main focus of this research.

### **2.3 The nature of Practical theology**

The nature of Practical theology has been discussed by many theologians but only a few have been referred to here in order to give an overview of how it has been portrayed. As seen above, Schleiermacher saw Practical theology both as a science and a clerical activity, and Barth regarded it as closer to ecclesia than to academia as a response to the contemporary reality. The radical Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, offers a helpful description of the nature of Practical theology. He argues that

the future life and action of church, goes beyond what can be deduced from dogmatic ecclesiology and from a methodical, sociological and theological analysis of the present time; practical theology itself becomes free evaluation, decision, a part of the free historical activity of the church...complete separation from theology as a scientific branch of study, and as decision or prophecy is impossible for historical man who can never step outside the course of his own history (Rahner, 1968 p 57).

Although his position on Practical theology correlates with what has been discussed by Schleiermacher in terms of its status as a science and its proximity to the ecclesia, Rahner insists that the church has a role to play to respond to the human situation as humans cannot step out of history. Thus all three, Schleiermacher, Barth and Rahner, agree that the nature of Practical theology is to reflect on a given situation theologically and to respond to the same, discerning the action of God while continuing to remain as a distinct science with an ecclesial interest (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 36,37,40).

David Tracy describes the nature of Practical theology as a public theology which relates not only to academy and church but also to the public and society; the 'challenging and transforming' nature of Practical theology has a concern for the

distribution of goods and services, and for the exercising of power to maintain justice, control conflicts and for a variety of cultural expressions (Tracy, 1981 p 6-7). Tracy's explanation seems to be an expansion of Rahner's argument as he focuses on its relationship to the public and society as well. He emphasises the liberationist or transformative side of Practical theology and demonstrates its concern for challenging the injustices and transforming the conflicts that arise in society. These positions remind us of how the Liberation theologians of Latin America interpreted the nature of theology as a practical enterprise to deal with the oppression of the poor. For Gutiérrez, liberation is not just better living conditions but a radical change of structures, and a social revolution (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1974 p 32, 36-37). Gutiérrez not only sketches out theology's efforts for better living conditions but for a total, longstanding change in political and economic structures, especially for the poor and downtrodden. Thus he insists on change in the root causes of poverty. In line with Gutiérrez, Green offers a detailed definition of the nature of Practical theology. He terms Practical theology an applied theology that has the insight to turn the world upside down; he bases his argument on the disciples of Jesus, especially Simon Peter, who was not an academic or scholar but was called by Jesus a 'Rock'; he had a practicality that brought change and results, and Practical theology can arouse the Church to address people's life-situation, instead of only talking about salvation, and to transform the oppressive situation so that people might envision the values of the Kingdom of God in this world (Green, 1990 p 2-7). This illustration of Green demonstrates not only the potentially transformative nature of Practical theology but also its stimulatory insight in encouraging the church to become involved in alleviating any oppression of believers, enabling them

to experience the values of the Kingdom of God here and now. Green even differs with the traditional and eschatological understanding of the Kingdom of God, which could be realised by salvation only at the end of this life. As a Practical theologian he argues that the Kingdom of God need not necessarily be an eschatological vision but could be envisioned now by obliterating the repressive designs of the forces of oppression.

Equally, the Feminist theologian, Stevenson-Moessner, describes Practical theology along the lines of Schleiermacher's 'clerical paradigm' but argues that it could develop pastors to see the 'people as church, and not the pulpit or altar', contrary to the teachings and training of other theological disciplines (Stevenson-Moessner, 2008 p 7-8). This is another vital interpretation helping to define the nature of Practical theology. As Stevenson-Moessner states, Practical theology is different from other traditional theologies because its emphasis is primarily on people rather than pulpits or altars as the vital part of the Church. This means that more than preaching, sermonising or performing rituals, Practical theology is in tune with the plight of the people. In general, Practical theology is less a specific discipline and is more a general category in which practical ministries are located.

It is good to sum up with the argument of Forrester who points to the very significant nature of Practical theology – its liberative nature. He divides public Practical theology into two kinds. One is 'magisterial' and the other is 'liberationist'. While magisterial public theology offers teachings from above, liberationist theology brings solutions from below, out of experience. While describing a Practical theology from



below with a Christian faith, Forrester cites the transforming ministries of Mother Teresa, Bishop Tutu, and Newbigin (Duncan B Forrester, 2000 p 65,67,118). While understanding his description, the example warrants a discussion. To an extent, Archbishop Tutu could be considered as a theologian whose earlier reflections were of liberational content and solutions. But although Mother Teresa and Newbigin reflected from their grass roots experiences, they cannot be considered as liberational but largely transformational, as they did help to improve the lives of the downtrodden by deconstructing structures and systems. Boff also argues that practice is the root of Liberation theology; it starts with action and leads to action – action for justice, for the renewal of the Church and for transformation in society (Boff and Boff, 2007 p 22,39).

In sum, the nature of the Practical theology which emerged in the nineteenth century and developed in the twentieth is people-centered and transformative, and its domain expands beyond ecclesia and academia into the public sphere and the wider society. Although its sources are in scripture, it interprets the insights and the faith differently so as to function as a form of praxis, to challenge the oppressive situations of the poor, exploited and discriminated against. As Wood and Pattison suggest, the essential characteristics of Practical theology include – besides other things – transformational activity, truth and commitment, contextuality and situation-centeredness, and a basis in reflection, analysis, and constructive and interrogative approaches (Pattison, 2000 p 13-15). Dalit Theology can also be described in this way as largely a Practical theology with a liberational character focused on eliminating caste oppression. However, unfortunately it appears to be mostly staying within the church

and academia. Its liberational character needs to engage with grass roots Dalit Christians, to shape their faith theologically in order to strengthen their ongoing struggles.

## ***2.4 Different models of Practical theology***

The origin, significance and nature of Practical theology lead us to look into its different types or models. A brief description is offered here.

### ***2.4 (i) Practical theology and Pastoral theology***

Theologians often use the terms 'Pastoral theology and Practical theology' in their discussions. Sometimes they overlap. Therefore, it is good to discern whether they are one and the same, or different. Both Pastoral theology and Practical theology appear to be identical but claim not to be the same. According to Pattison, Pastoral theology is older and deals with the tasks of healing, guiding, reconciling and sustaining the Christian community. It draws its origin from the New Testament where Christ was termed the Good Shepherd who takes care of the sheep or flock. Thus it takes care of pastoral care, religious education, preaching, counseling and involvement in social ministries, to guide and support the Christian community for a healthy spiritual life. But Practical theology, in addition to all these aspects of pastoral care and guidance, activates Christian belief and behavior into action to change society even beyond the church community (Woodward, 2000 p 1-5). This definition demonstrates that, although

both appear to be one and the same, in reality they are quite dissimilar. While Pastoral theology is in the domain of the church and takes care of the spiritual life of the Christian community, Practical theology moves beyond ecclesia and church community, and very importantly it not only activates Christian faith but is also involved in action to transform present reality. Therefore this definition is more than adequate to understand the qualitative difference between the two theologies. The additional remark of Paul Ballard strengthens the argument. He remarked that in Britain after the second World War both of these theologies, despite growing due to North American influence, have been taught not only in theological colleges and seminaries but have also been introduced into publicly funded Universities, including Birmingham. Beyond the clerical paradigms, Practical theology has come to the attention of laity as well, including non-Christians and Black-majority churches (Ballard, 2000 p 61-66).

Dalit Theology, by virtue of these arguments and its articulation by Dalit theologians, could certainly be termed a Practical theology, since it has its concern for addressing the issue of caste, draws on the life experience of caste affected Dalits and also focuses on encouraging them to challenge the oppression. However, according to my experience, it largely remains within the boundaries of clergy and theological seminaries and institutions. Thus its practicality in terms of engaging with the grass roots Dalit Christians as a shared Christian praxis and activating their faith and struggles with theological insight are still extremely limited. Therefore, for me, Dalit theology, is as of now a practical theology in an abstract sense, and needs to enlarge as a praxis by engaging with the struggling Dalit Christians.

#### 2.4 (ii) *Practical theology as applied theology*

Alastair Campbell defines Practical theology as applied theology, as civil engineering is an applied form of physics. According to him, Practical theology is concerned with specific social structures inside and outside the church for their renewal and restitution. The central focus is not merely 'mission and acts of charity', but widens its concern to the whole of church life – *kerygma*, *koinonia* and *diakonia* – with a lateral relationship and interplay between ideas and action. It is 'situation based', and forms concrete proposals to restructure life-situations (Alastair Campbell, 2000 p 79,84-86). This definition affirms that only by application does a theology become practical. Campbell remarks that Christian Practical theology is an applied theology, as it operates beyond missionary and charity involvement, and widens its concern to preaching, fellowship and service to the community. In addition, it translates its ideas into action to change oppressive structures. Campbell's emphasis on application is affirmed by Veling who remarks that, while theology is generally known for its speculative enterprise in thinking about the questions of God, faith, belief and the religious meaning of life, Practical theology is about applying our faith and belief in the real world (Veling, 2005 p 5). These illustrations help to demonstrate that Practical theology is an applied theology. Considering this definition, Dalit Theology is indeed a Practical theology as it has the potential of liberational ideas to address the issue of systemic oppression in church and society. However, the liberational ideas and transformative insights of Dalit theology need to be translated into the form of an action by engaging with the grass roots Dalit Christians. According to my experience, the application of ideas to actual situations has

still not been adequately achieved, although Dalit Theology possesses the potential of an applied theology.

#### *2.4 (iii) Practical theology as transforming practice*

Feminist theologian Elaine Graham claims 'practical theology as a transforming practice'. She argues that Pastoral theology is concerned with the theory and practice of individual care and the tasks of pastoral ministry – worship, preaching, social action, Christian care and community building. But when Pastoral theology expands itself to a Practical theology, it helps faith communities to practice what they preach and to preach what they practice. Citing Nancy Eisland's 'The disabled God', Graham argues for the transforming practice: 'the sharing of Eucharist is the sign of broken body for broken people and the scar that the transfigured Christ still carries, motivates the faith community for transformation, solidarity and reconciliation' (Graham, 2000 p 108,112). Graham is categorical that Pastoral theology and Practical theology are different. But she argues that the former does expand its character into the latter, when it helps the faith community to practice what it preaches and vice versa. This is a significant remark to note. It seems that – according to Graham – any theology, when it helps the faith community to practice what it preaches, could be described as a Practical theology. However her second remark correlates with the position of Green, Gutiérrez, Boff and other liberation theologians, as seen earlier, that Practical theology is a transformative set of ideas which motivates the believers for transformation, solidarity and

reconciliation. Therefore for Pastoral theology to become a Practical theology it needs to develop a transformative element.

Dalit Theology needs to take note of this prerequisite of 'preaching and helping the believers to practice what has been preached'. Preaching and practising are integrally related. Largely this does not seem to happen now at the grass roots. In the Indian situation this is the case not only for Dalit Theology but also with other theologies as they do not seem to follow adequately the dictum of preaching and helping the believers with practising or performing their faith. Clergy and theologians largely stop with preaching or writing only. Therefore this position of transforming practice, which involves both preaching and practising, is vital for Dalit Theology. In line with the argument of Graham, Dalit theologians, besides articulating liberational ideas, should also help the faith community, in this case the Dalit Christians, to involve in transforming practice. This will lead to praxis. For that to happen, Dalit theology needs to be engaged with the struggling Dalits, through shared Christian praxis, for its development as a Practical theology.

#### *2.4 (iv) Practical theology as a theology of hermeneutics and a hermeneutic vocation*

Hermeneutics is defined as interpretation of a theory and it is a matter of saying, explaining and interpreting (Palmer, 1969 p12). The word 'hermeneutics' derives from the Greek word '*hermeneuein*', meaning 'to say, to express, to announce, to translate, to interpret' (Palmer, 1969 p12). In simple terms it deals with 'who' said 'what', and 'why'. It

is a theory of what must be done in relationship to the interpretation of texts (Ricoeur, 1991 p 21). Biblical hermeneutics has been widely known as the interpretation of scriptural texts.

Heitink calls Practical theology a theology of hermeneutics. He argues that the central focus of Practical theology lies in linking tradition and experience. It deals with how the words of scripture, which were beneficial to the people of the past, have been helpful in today's context for those who are under oppression to engage in action for their liberation. Practical theology brings meaning, hope and strength to change and renew a life situation. Hermeneutics not only brings out the parallels but also offers a source of inspiration and confidence for those under oppression to seek to struggle for change. Therefore Heitink calls Practical theology a theology of hermeneutics (Heitink, 1993 p 192-193). A very succinct description has been developed by Heitink on the importance of hermeneutics. He argues that the hermeneutics in Practical theology should both inspire the oppressed and develop their confidence to undertake liberative action, in the same way as it was beneficial to those in the past. Therefore, in Practical theology, hermeneutics, or the interpretation of scripture or tradition, should inspire the oppressed community to become involved in transformative action.

Edward Farley expands these ideas still further. He calls Practical theology a hermeneutics of vocation. In his perception it is a reflective activity of believers, and it cannot be reduced merely to an academic exercise, since its concerns are mainly related to the everyday life of ordinary people. He further argues that Practical theology

bases its strength in hermeneutics, since human beings live in real life situations and they also try to interpret the situations of the past and present accordingly. This leads them to discern and interpret situations theologically in order to respond. Therefore, Practical theology derives its reflections and tasks not merely from clerical pedagogical education but from the pedagogy of whole church education. Thus Practical theology's concerns are not only related to traditional interpretations but linked to contemporary situations, and are not limited simply to clergy but become tools for lay people who wish to transform their situation (Farley, 2000 p 118-125). Farley cites three important aspects of the characteristics of Practical theology, i.e. 'the hermeneutics of situations of past and present', 'not only the clerical pedagogical education, but also the pedagogy of ordinary people' and 'their theological reflections'. In a nutshell, the hermeneutics of Practical theology rests with the situation of ordinary people, and their theological reflections to transform that situation. As Barth says, even God is known by 'history and his deeds' (Barth, 1963 p 9).

Although all practical theologians are not necessarily liberationists, this summary of the theological reflections of a range of Practical theologians on the nature, character and models of Practical theology demonstrates that Practical theology has sufficient insights to shape the faith perspectives of the oppressed, in order that they may change the oppressive ground reality that prevails in their life and society. Dalit theologians, mostly on a par with Black practical theologians, reflect upon caste oppression with their theological insights, to eliminate this pernicious system for the liberation of Dalits. But the main gap or lacuna is that all these interpretations and linkages do not seem



sufficiently to have crossed from the clerical or academic domain to reach out to the grass roots laity, in order to orient them theologically to engage in liberating activity. Since these reflections need to cross the boundaries of ecclesia and academia, and engage with grass roots Dalit Christians – the struggling people – this thesis proposes the method of action-reflection as a viable tool to share and exchange the insights and themes of Dalit Theology.

### **3. The ‘Action – Reflection paradigm’, a method in Practical theology**

Being a Dalit rights activist engaging with grass roots Dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular, I am aware that the people who are at the forefront of the struggle have become familiar with the method of action-reflection, to help develop their plans and actions. They use this method to discuss the ideological position of Marx or Ambedkar while organising struggles against class and caste oppression. As discussed above, there is nothing wrong in spearheading struggles with secular perspectives. However, since they are Dalit Christians, and Dalit Theology has sufficient insights and interpretations to strengthen their faith and intensify their struggles, they could be theologically oriented to maximise their action for liberation. Here comes the question of utilising the method of action-reflection, which they are familiar with, to play the role of sharing the contribution of Dalit Theology among them. This method on the one hand would facilitate the process of a shared Christian praxis of the themes of Dalit Theology with grass roots Dalit Christians, and on the other hand would help them to reflect theologically during their action-reflection exercise or during the process of planning and

organising struggles. Thus, this action-reflection paradigm will be relevant and helpful to achieve the desired purpose of disseminating Dalit Theology insights without too much difficulty. Two aspects are discussed here: one is how this action-reflection paradigm has been viewed by theologians, especially Practical theologians, as a method to be used in Practical theology. The other aspect addressed is how this model will be helpful for transferring the themes and insights of Dalit Theology to grass roots Dalit Christians, and how they may then be enabled to use it in their action-reflection struggle process.

### ***3.1 Definition, significance and nature of action-reflection***

Since Practical theology, besides other things, can be understood as a transforming practice through shared Christian praxis, to challenge tyrannical systems and structures in order to change oppressive reality, a substantial number of practical theologians argue for an action-reflection paradigm as a viable method to theologically influence the actors involved in the action.

The pro-liberation educationist, Paulo Freire, sees action-reflection as a transformative process among human beings who seek change. He states that human activity is based on 'theory and practice' and when they both join together it emerges as 'praxis', which has the potential of transforming reality. Citing Lenin, Freire argues that 'when a revolutionary theory is put into practice in the action-reflection paradigm, it wields the power to transform oppressive structures' (Freire, 1993 (1970) p 125). He argues that theory can be understood by struggling people, and put into action by a

relevant strategy, only through an action-reflection process. He further argues that the term 'dialogue' has the essence of 'word' which correlates both – reflection and action. When both act together it brings about the desired results. One without the other would lose substance and vigour. Freire states that 'action without reflection is mere activism and reflection without action is verbalism' (Freire, 1993 (1970) p 87). This quote emphasises the importance of both action and reflection. Mere action without reflection and mere reflection without action will not produce a desired result. As Freire further expounds,

mere action without reflection will make those who involve in action as only objects, who are vulnerable for manipulation. The intellectual exercise, reflection and activism should work together to form a praxis to effect change. The true reflection is not a call to an arm chair revolution but it leads to concrete action to transform the oppressive system and structures (Freire, 1993 (1970) p 65).

He goes to the extent of calling people objects if they act without reflection, and of stating that they are vulnerable to manipulation as they are not guided or oriented by reflecting on theory. Therefore, any person who has a strong foundation in theory cannot easily be manipulated or overcome. This can be seen even in the current struggles of Dalits. When they follow the insights and strategies of either Ambedkar or Marx, they sustain their struggle with a great vigour. If not, they easily fall prey to the cajoling words of casteists or classists and become vulnerable to downfall. Paulo Freire's whole emphasis on 'action-reflection' as a strategy for the liberation of the oppressed appears truly meaningful.

Looking at this statement of Freire, this model looks very helpful in enabling Dalit Theology to reach out to the grass roots and then find a place in their plan of action.

Freire argues for two things: one is dialogue and the other is praxis. Both are interconnected. Through dialogue the themes of Dalit Theology could easily be shared with grass roots people. Since the majority of them are either illiterate or semi-literate, dialogue is the best means of sharing the themes. For example, Dalit Theology talks about God as the 'God of the oppressed'. This kind of insight could easily be put into the process of dialogue between Dalit theologians, or any other appropriate communicators, and the grass roots actors. The process would help them to raise questions, and get clarification to understand the argument put forward by Dalit theologians. Biblical narratives could also be shared as a means of enabling them to understand this insight. Consequently, having understood the theological insight, they would use this insight in their action-reflection process for organising and intensifying struggle with a strong faith perspective. It would help the struggling people to reflect theologically. This theological orientation would strengthen their faith and further motivate them to become involved in actions. Here the second argument of Freire, the praxis, comes to the fore. The theologically-oriented people will engage in struggles, and thus theory and action will work together to bring the desired result of challenging and eliminating caste practices. On the same lines, Gutiérrez argues that theology must be a critical reflection not only epistemologically but also materially in this world, to address the socio-cultural issues of the Christian community. Otherwise, theology would deceive both the self and the other. Theology in the first place is a critical reflection and a critical attitude which produces pastoral activity. Citing Congar, he emphasises that theology should also reflect on the facts and questions derived from society, instead of depending only upon classical sources of revelation and tradition. Reflection in the light of Christian faith should lead to

pastoral action. Theology as critical reflection and praxis should be a theology of liberation for the transformation of human history and human kind (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1988 p 55-59). Thus, Gutiérrez is arguing for the importance of the action-reflection process in order to generate a theological response to people's living reality; he offers a vivid argument that critical reflection on theology should not necessarily end with the classical sources but should also consider the life experience of the people, whereby it would strengthen their Christian faith to lead to transformative action. He persuasively states that when action-reflection is put into practice, theology will qualify itself as a theology of liberation.

The position of Gutiérrez could help Dalit Theology to consider the action-reflection paradigm and help grass roots Dalit Christians critically to reflect on the socio-cultural issues they face with their Christian insights and faith. For example, Dalit theologians argue that 'Jesus is a Dalit'. This theological proclamation is based on the birth, life and mission of Jesus. Also, it denotes the present-day situation of Dalits and their suffering life.

Therefore this proposition could be put forward for reflection by Dalit Christians, with suggested explorations of the manger where Jesus was born, his life of suffering, and the humiliation and harassment he faced at the hands of the oppressors. All these have parallels to Dalits' own life situation. An action-reflection process on themes like this would assist grass roots Dalit Christians to reflect theologically, and would

strengthen their faith to intensify their transforming action. This is how Dalit Theology could become fundamentally a Practical theology of praxis.

Groome, while describing the need for Christian religious education, argues in detail for a shared Christian praxis which is based in reflection and action. Reflection is a crucial component for a Christian community which engages in praxis for effecting change. Reflection about the self and the social context are essential when becoming involved in action. While reflecting, one has to analyse the present situation, 'not to look at realities just the way that they are' but by reflecting critically on ideologies and strategies. Equally the 'past' should also be critically reflected upon to unearth the historical past, and from there only, might one read the reality of the present for potential action. Similarly, it is imperative to reflect about the future with imagination. Thus critical reflection on present, past and future will lead to changing and liberating activity. When Groome uses the word 'critical', he does not use it negatively but in a positive sense, meaning to analyse reality in order to lead the Christian community to engage in a shared praxis for freedom and liberation (Thomas H. Groome, 1980 p 184-188). In sum, Groome illustrates significant aspects of the reflection process which include a critical theological analysis of the past, present and future of a situation, and also of the ideology and strategy used to sharpen the action for a freedom struggle.

This description reminds us how the action-reflection paradigm could help Dalit Christians to reflect on the past, present and future of their life situation and the acts of God. For example, the 'Exodus experience' is a well-accepted theme described by Dalit

theologians. Through reflection, struggling Dalit Christians could compare their painful experience, past and present, with that of the Israelites suffering at the hands of the Egyptians, and reflect on how the God of the oppressed liberated the Israelites from their oppression and led them through the wilderness. This kind of theological insight could become a further source of motivation for the Dalit liberation struggle through their action-reflection process. It would strengthen their faith theologically, more than any secular ideologies, to look at the past, present and the bright future, by involving themselves in struggle, with God's help.

Robert McAfee Brown (Brown, 1993), calls Liberation theology a 'critical reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God'. He sees the word praxis as 'reflection and action'. He states that it is not 'either to reflect first and act next or to act first and reflect next'; rather, both should go together. However, he believes critical reflection should be in the 'light of the word of God'. This quote emphasises that Christians should not simply follow the Marxian way of approaching reflection but espouse a Christian way of reflecting. The basis for the Christian form of reflection and action is the Word of God – scripture, tradition and also human consciousness. Such action–reflection would bring liberation to the people from unjust, oppressive social structures (Brown, 1993 p 57-60,91). Brown's description insists on three important aspects, namely, praxis is nothing but action and reflection, both should go hand in hand, and the process must be in the light of the word of God. His criticism of the Marxian approach invites discussion. The Marxian way of reflection cannot be dismissed easily as it has its own strength and ability to motivate the working class all over the world, especially in 'third world'

countries. However, Brown's call for theological reflection is essential for Christians to shape their faith perspectives to become involved in transforming activity. For working class people who are also Christians, both these reflections would be helpful for an intensified motivation. In particular, the idea that God is with them will give an extra boost to intensify their struggle.

This thesis of Brown's has relevance for the present-day action-reflection approach of Dalit Christians. Of course, they follow the reflections of Ambedkar and Marx for strategising their actions. But as Brown argues, if their reflections are further extended to scripture and tradition it would largely enhance their motivation and also of their understating the significance of their struggle in terms of the formation of the values of the Kingdom of God in this society, besides being encouraged by knowing that God is with them in their struggle. This theological reflection would be helpful for being a catalyst for their action. But so far they are not adequately trained to reflect theologically, and this has to be introduced to them through the action-reflection process. For example, Dalit theologians argue that 'Dalits are called to struggle for transformation'. This statement suggests that Dalits are similar to the chosen Israelites, and that they are called to struggle. Chosen people are used by God for bringing change, and therefore Dalits in the Indian context are the chosen people who are to suffer to bring change in the world. These kinds of theological concepts or interpretations need to be put before struggling Dalit Christians to stimulate them to reflect theologically. This could then help them to have an intensified faith and a strong source of motivation to continue their struggle for transformation. As Brown says, this is the Christian way of looking, listening,



judging and proceeding further. This is perfectly possible within the action-reflection paradigm.

Christine Dodd, while describing incarnational theology, argues that God is working for liberation, and we as individuals and a Christian community need to join him in this transforming work. While doing so, there should not be a polarity between contemplation and radical action but both should go together. Thus, Dodd accentuates a Christian mode of reflection and action in bringing change in the world by joining God's transforming work, even to the level of sacrificing oneself like Christ (Dodd, 1999 p 19-20). Dodd argues for an action-reflection process. This position, that 'God is already in work for liberation', reminds us of the position of Dalit theologians. They too argue, as seen in Chapters Two and Three that God is already engaged in working to liberate Dalits from the chains of casteism, and our responsibility is to join in God's work. This insight, that God has already started the liberating activity, and that they must participate in 'just a joining' in this struggle, will really give a strong motivation to the struggling grass roots Dalit Christians. This notion would strengthen and activate them more effectively as it demonstrates to them that this is not their fight but the fight of God, and they are just supporting God. These kinds of theological inputs are possible through the action-reflection process.

On the same lines, several other theologians talk about various aspects of theological reflection and action. Inderjit Bhogal argues that holiness in prayer, protest and politics will challenge oppression, and change the world. For him 'prayer is not just

about kneeling and seeking the intervention of a remote heavenly deity. It is political action because it is about transforming world' (Bhogal, 1999 p 60). Bhogal compares 'reflection to prayer' and 'protest to action'. Thus reflection gives strength to analyse the situation and motivates people to become involved in action. This argument would be a good motivating factor for Dalit Christians. Such a theological position could be placed within the action-reflection process, whereby the grass roots Dalit Christians striving in difficulties would engage in regular prayer in order to be strengthened to engage in activity for their liberation.

While describing the effectiveness of a 'case method approach', Wilson and others argue that a practical theologian should be a reflective practitioner. They bring parallels from the things Jesus does and call Jesus a practical theologian who knew fully about the people and their life-situation, and taught them through stories and parables to change their attitudes. They also refer to a particular Dalit case study which illustrates how a Dalit sought conversion to Christianity with some reflection on how scripture imprinted a sense of courage in him to challenge caste discrimination. Thus, the action-reflection process has been defined as an important method to be used by practical theologians for pastoral ministry (Henry S Wilson, 1997 p 3, 27-40). John Reader analyses the need for the reconstruction of Practical theology in the context of economic globalisation and its various impacts in society. Reader lists the contextual issues as offshoots of globalisation, which include climate change, economic growth in China and India, emerging conflicts for sharing water and oil, military tension between different nations and also religious confrontations in many parts of the world. To address these

issues theologically, Reader suggests a normative critique with the ideas of spiritual reflexivity or reflexive spirituality – a messianic vision of what human beings are capable of becoming and doing. Reader gives importance to reflecting on the contextual situation, with the help of a spiritual base to challenge the oppressive status quo (Reader, 2008p 129-131). Citing Latin American Liberation theologians, Rowland and Vincent describe how they helped the Christian base communities to reflect on the Bible to engage in action to challenge oppressive realities. They argue for the method of ‘see, judge and act’. The people were motivated to see the realities through their experience and to judge the situation with reference to Biblical narratives, and then to act to change the structures. Thus, the action-reflection method is justified by these authors as a Christian approach (Vincent, 2001 p 12,13).

The above illustrations talk about the Bible, its narratives and the messianic vision, all of which are to be used as reflective tools to change the contextual situation. All three demonstrate a theological perspective for looking at oppression, exclusion and exploitation. In the context of Dalits, they face similar situations of social exclusion and economic exploitation. But the grass roots Dalit Christians need to analyse their situation with the help of the Bible, and reflect on Bible stories or narratives theologically. This needs to happen quite often. Therefore, the action-reflection paradigm could be used as a viable method to help them understand their oppressed life-situation theologically. That would assist them to strengthen their faith and prolong their struggles.

An immediate and very pertinent argument could be drawn from three theologians who not only argued the case but also used this method extensively in their work. It is helpful to look into their argument, experience and interpretations to demonstrate parallels with the argument for enlarging Dalit Theology as a Practical theology, using the method of the action-reflection paradigm. Reddie (Anthony G Reddie, 2003), a Black practical theologian, Nicola Slee (Slee, 2004), a feminist theologian, and Mukti Barton (Barton, 1999), a Black and Asian female theologian, argue for using the action-reflection model for the theological education and conscientisation of people, especially youth and women. Reddie discusses the earlier models of education for liberation like *Echoes*, created for African-American youth; *Umalusi* for South Africans, Paulo Freire's *Conscientization* for Latin Americans, and Hope and Timmel's *Critical Awareness and Knowledge* model for South Africans. In all these models, while studying the presence of action-reflection praxis as an important methodology, Reddie found them inadequate to provide a comprehensive approach for a Practical Black Theology which could address the issues of exclusion and oppression. As a Practical Black theologian, for him the action-reflection praxis should incorporate theological insights and comprehensive faith orientation for the education and liberation of Black Christians in Britain (Anthony G Reddie, 2003 p 70,71,81-85, 176-177). Reddie is categorical that there is not only a requirement for action-reflection but that 'faith oriented theological insight is the need to form part of action in reflection' for evolving a model for education for liberation. This argument of Reddie supports the argument of this thesis. Dalit Christians already follow the model of action-reflection in their struggle for liberation. But, as Reddie argues, they need to be strengthened with 'faith oriented theological insight' as articulated by Dalit

theologians and that could be the vital component of the action-reflection paradigm which would bring the desired result. That would also enlarge Dalit Theology as Practical theology. Dalit Christians already reflect upon the approaches of either Marx or Ambedkar, but the faith-oriented theological approach which Reddie formulates would certainly enhance their faith and inspire them for a vigorous involvement in transformation.

Slee has investigated the process and patterns in her study on women's spirituality and faith development. For her, Practical theology is concerned with the relationship between 'Christian belief and practice' where praxis – first to act and then to reflect – has a significant place. While integrating the concerns of Practical theology and the Christian education for pastoral care with particular reference to the faith development of women, Slee recounts different forms or models of doing theology which include experience, exploration, theological reflection and committed action. In her own words, she calls it 'practice of reflexivity' – to examine critically and explore analytically in order to gain insights into gender relations (Slee, 2004 p 6-7,51). Here too, although Slee's work was among educated British people, I see the crux of action-reflection in sharing experiences, critical explorations and theological analyses. This forms a base for a Christian utilisation of the action-reflection method and is different from the practices currently in force among grass roots Dalit Christians. Such a component of sharing and analysing forms part of theological reflection and would help Dalit Christians to perform actions with a Christian motivation.

Similarly Mukti Barton, in her research on Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh, working with the scriptures as source of empowerment, concludes with the significance of action-reflection as a methodology. While discussing theology in dialogue, she extensively portrays how orthodoxy-doctrine takes primacy over orthopraxis-action reflection, in the institutionalised churches which help to subjugate women. She argues that not only theological theory but also theological praxis is essential for women to engage in an action-reflection process to empower themselves with the assistance of scripture. Contextual studies of Biblical narratives as a hermeneutical circle, and the related actions, really help to bring justice and peace to the world and to women (Barton, 1999 p 139-142). Although the phrases 'orthodoxy-doctrine and orthopraxis' are unusual even among literate people, Mukti Barton is convinced of the method of theological praxis for empowering women, using scripture as the source, but clearly argues that action is essential along with scripture-based reflection. This thesis agrees with this position of a theological praxis which emerges from Biblical narrative and hermeneutical approaches which have also been discussed by Dalit theologians extensively. This type of hermeneutics and theological praxis needs to be applied through the action-reflection process among grass roots Dalit Christians.

Thus, the action-reflection paradigm has been portrayed as a viable method within Practical theology to challenge oppressive realities and bring change in the practices of individuals and communities, both for their empowerment and their liberation. However, there is a qualitative difference between the model of theological reflection and action, and the Marxian or Ambedkarian models of action-reflection.

Theological reflection energises the faith that God is with the believers in their struggle, with varied references and narratives described in scripture, which inspire believers more than other perspectives to challenge and change the oppressive realities. Taking this position seriously, I am convinced that the theological action-reflection paradigm could be used as a viable method for Dalit Theology to reach out to grass roots Dalit Christians to energise their faith and intensify their action against caste.

#### **4. Dalit Theology to emerge as a full Practical theology**

##### ***4.1 The need for 'action-reflection' method***

The main focus of this research is to enlarge Dalit Theology to become a full or participative Practical theology of praxis, to engage with the grass roots to enable them to be involved in action that incorporates theological insights. Therefore this thesis argues for the method of 'action-reflection' to facilitate the process of shared Christian praxis, as an appropriate and relevant pattern within the relevant context, as it has already been found fitting by various theologians. The foregoing discussion is sufficient here to outline the definition, nature and different models of Practical theology and to indicate how best the method of action-reflection can help to develop a Practical theology to engage with ordinary Christians wrestling with oppressive situations. Charles Singaram, a Dalit theologian, while arguing for a suitable method for making Dalit Theology into a systematic theology says that '[i]f we understand theology as an activity

which involves articulating the reflections of a particular faith community, then the issue of method will become a procedure and a tool' (Singaram, 2004 p 6).

In line with his description, this thesis proposes the 'action-reflection paradigm' as a viable method, procedure or tool to enlarge Dalit Theology into a Practical theology to engage with Dalit Christians for formulating and sharing ideas, and framing insights with the special purpose and aim of transforming caste-based oppression. However, the research focus in this work is different from that of Singaram. He argued for a method of systematisation as he felt that Dalit Theology is fragmented and disorganised, and as a result was not able to perform its tasks and responsibilities as a liberational pedagogy to function as a facilitator and praxis (Singaram, 2004 p 233-235). While appreciating his contention that there is a need for the systematisation of Dalit Theology, the focus of this research goes beyond systematisation in the sense that even such a systematised or organised theology would require further development to move from the corridors of ecclesia, academia and the intelligentsia in order to engage with the 'grass roots', and to play the role of a shared praxis which will intensify the faith and struggles of oppressed people. The present work addresses this stage of development, a part of the process of progress into a full Practical theology. For this to happen, the question of method is significant and 'action-reflection' seems to be a viable method for Dalit Theology to develop as a Practical theology and to function as praxis among the grass roots.

Similarly, another Dalit theologian, Devadason, concludes his recent research, *Towards a theology of Dalitism* (Devadason, 2008 p 1,30) with the remark that 'Dalit



Theology's first and foremost task is to empower the inner person of the Dalits and to strive for empowerment at all levels in all spheres; in the final count, all strivings should lead to an inclusive humanism which affirms the identity and humanity of the Dalits within the human community' (Devadason, 2008 p 232). Here too, it is recommended that Dalit Theology should empower Dalits, and their striving should lead to an inclusive humanism which is the acknowledgement of the value of Dalitism and of Dalits for their identity and humanity. While agreeing with this argument that Dalit Theology's core value comes from empowering Dalits for their identity and humanism, this thesis questions how this can happen unless Dalit Theology engages in depth with Dalit Christians, with its theological insights and themes. Therefore, the immediate need is for a method to engage with them, and that method could be action-reflection. With this conviction, the present work proposes the method of action-reflection as a kind of field education or community education, which has already been identified and introduced as a tool to enlarge theology as a participative Practical theology and also a liberational praxis. In the words of David Lyall, field education is the locus for a Practical theology (Forrester, 1990 p 107).

Finally, it is useful to summarise the present argument for the need for Dalit Theology to emerge as a practical theology in terms of engaging with grass root Dalit Christians through the method of action-reflection. As seen in Chapters Two and Three, Dalit Theology has relevant definitions, insights, nature and models that are intended for a Practical theology, as this is described by many practical theologians. In line with the definition of David Tracy, it is certainly a Christian theology, as it has its source in

scripture and tradition, along with the source of the life-experience of Dalits aiming for transformation. With regard to the focus, as argued by Moltmann and Boff, Dalit Theology has the central focus of 'faith' as its motivational force, leading to transformative actions. As described by Gutiérrez, the purpose of Dalit Theology is to change the caste reality, and definitely to do this from below. In line with Groome, Dalit Theology emerged from the experience of the people, although the ideas were articulated by certain Dalit scholars. Thus Dalit Theology, by-and-large, shares the definition, insights and nature of a Practical theology, as defined by these prominent practical theologians.

Equally, Dalit Theology, as seen in the same chapters (Two and Three), conforms with many of the features associated with the different types or models of Practical theology. Examining the argument of Pattison, Dalit Theology is different from Pastoral theology as it reaches beyond pastoral care to change the reality and, in the Indian context, this is caste. In line with Campbell, Veling and Swinton, Dalit Theology is an applied theology as it aims for reconstruction of caste-based social structures with the help of scriptural narratives and insights. Dalit Theology is also liberational and possesses a hermeneutic vocation, as per the definitions of Elaine Graham and Edward Farley, as it interprets Biblical narratives to inspire the struggles of Dalit Christians to challenge oppressive practices. As argued by Slee, it is a reflexive practice and, in line with the descriptions of Reddie, Groome and Barton, Dalit Theology has the potential to function as praxis. Thus Dalit Theology contains the ingredients for different models or types of practical theology.

In the light of this background, there is no doubt that theoretically or conceptually Dalit Theology can be defined as a Practical theology. But the significant question or concern is how best Dalit Theology can be made absolutely practical in terms of engaging with grass roots Dalit Christians in sharing and translating its concerns and themes, which is essential for a Practical theology to be actually practical. Equally, how far has Dalit Theology facilitated the process of theological orientation among Dalit Christians for shaping faith perspectives and enthusing Dalits to intensify their actions as praxis? It was my own subjective perception, owing to my grass roots experience, that Dalit Theology's insights or theological orientations have not yet adequately engaged with grass roots Dalit Christians. One of the core aims of this research, however, was to test this hypothesis and produce verifiable evidence for whether Dalit Theology has its presence at least among grass roots Dalit Christian activists who spearhead struggles or simply remains in discourses, books and discussions among Dalit intellectuals, ecclesia and academia. If Dalit Theology is found among grass roots then it has to be further strengthened, and if is not, then it has to be carried, shared and instilled. In either case, a method is absolutely necessary, and for me 'action-reflection' is a viable method to be used for developing Dalit Theology as a Practical theology. It is important to reiterate here that this method is not entirely new to grass roots Dalit Christians as they are familiar with discussing and interacting with the ideologies and strategies of Ambedkar and Marx. The only gap or lacuna is that theological insights have not been communicated to them via this method to enable them to reflect upon and interact with them. Thus, I am of the strong opinion that the same action-reflection method could be used to transmit theological insights to ordinary Dalit Christians. This method would

enhance the faith perspectives of Dalit Christians, which would empower them theologically to intensify their struggle. While Charles Singaram found deficiency in Dalit Theology, and argued for its systematisation (Singaram, 2004 p 169), and Devadason focused on its need to empower Dalits, I argue for the method of action-reflection to develop it as a Practical theology which will function as a form of shared praxis to empower Dalits for vigorous liberational interventions. After all, 'the ideas are never the message of Gospel: Action is' (Rahner, 1968 p 132).

#### ***4.2 The limitation of this method***

Having laid out the aims of this research, it is imperative to look at the limitations of the method adopted. The method of action-reflection cannot be argued to be foolproof. For that matter, no method is free from lacunae or deficiencies. First, the action-reflection paradigm works best when seen as a practical method and not just a concept or theory. As such, theological action-reflection is a tool to analyse and interpret God's words and mission in a given context. The second is that this tool is vulnerable, if not completely so, as it is in the hands of the facilitators and actors. It is quite normal for any concept or theory to be put forward in a given context, however its success or actualisation largely depends upon the persons who handle the method and their communication of the concept or theory. Therefore, there are three major limitations to this method: concept, context and actors. In addition, it also depends on the perception and capacity of those who receive and use this tool, both the facilitator and receiver. Hence the success of this method is largely realised in or related to, the constancy,

consistency and eloquence of the process of sharing, reflection, dialogue, discussion, interpretation and interaction. Obtaining the desired result by using this method depends on these factors and might be limited or affected when any of these factors is changed. As a tool, this action-reflection method is constant and consistent, but its efficiency in producing results depends on the factors discussed above. Despite this limitation, as of now, this method is viewed as appropriate, not only by practical theologians but also by educationists, and social and human rights activists, who hope for and are committed to change in society. On that count, action-reflection is a viable method for Dalit theologians to share their thinking with grass roots Dalit Christians, and for Dalit Christians to receive and analyse that thinking within their life-situation.

In light of the need for the development of Dalit Theology as a Practical theology, and the identification of a viable method for achieving this, I undertook a field study to test the extent to which Dalit Theology is perceived among grass roots Dalit Christians as having significant status and relevance in their struggle against caste oppression.

## **5. Field study**

### ***5.1 The need***

Dalit Theology is contextual and liberational. It also claims to be practical as it emerges from the life-experience of Dalits and has liberational themes and insights to inspire caste-affected Dalits with theological perspectives to intensify their faith and

struggles. However, my hypothesis as already explained is that, while Dalit Theology has the potential of a Practical theology in terms of its theoretical definitions, nature and character, it is not absolutely practical as a transforming practice or agent in the field as a shared praxis, because its insights and themes have not sufficiently engaged with the affected grass roots Dalit Christians and influenced them theologically. This hypothesis demands a field study to engage with a couple of research questions as mentioned in Chapter One: (i) how significant is Dalit Theology as a source of motivation for Dalit Christian activists who are already leading the struggle against caste oppression? Deriving an answer to this question would help to test my impression that Dalit Theology is currently a practical theology only in thought, not in practice, in terms of engaging with and motivating the grass roots Dalit Christians; (ii) in what ways might Dalit Theology be challenged to reformulate its ideas as a result of developing as a participative praxis? The dialogical process of this field study and particularly this question may bring some liberational ideas, if any already exist among the struggling activists, which would help Dalit theology to expand its reflections and insights. Thus it might help Dalit theology to become a Practical theology of participative praxis.

## ***5.2 Details of field study***

I hail from Tamilnadu, a southern state in India where Dalit Christians are at the forefront in spearheading the struggle against caste oppression inside and outside church. Tamilnadu was, therefore, chosen as the focus for field research for two main reasons. First, as an activist of long-standing, my connections in this state provided a

ready means of access for me to meet with Dalit Christian activists, church leaders and theologians. Second, since the method of personal interviews was used to collect data, my ability to communicate with the grass roots Dalit Christians in the local language (Tamil), offered a broader range of interviewees, a greater possibility to understand the thoughts and attitudes of interview subjects, and a means of conducting research directly with the grass roots Dalit Christians, many of whom are not able to express themselves fully in English. The interviewees were selected with clear criteria. However, it is worth noting the subjective nature of this choice of location and the implication it has on the outcomes of this field study. There is every possibility that the outcome might have been different, if not entirely, if the same work has been undertaken in another state.

The intended duration of this field study was four months, from October 2010 to January 2011, and a study team of fifteen people was formed to gather qualitative data. All members of this team were Dalit Christians from the grass roots, involved in church activities and also in struggles against caste inside and outside the church. Although it was planned to select and interview fifteen activists, in the course of the interview, it was decided to include one more person as many interviewed persons suggested to interview one member of the clergy who is involved in struggles. Out of the sixteen, nine were grass roots activists and leaders, two came from leadership positions in state-level networking organisations but are involved in grass roots activities, and five were clergy who work among grass roots congregations. This research team was selected with the intention of maintaining balance with regard to denomination, gender, sub-caste, literacy

and geography. These people brought with them varied knowledge, experience and orientation. Alternative Forum for Dalit Christian Liberation (AFDCL) assisted in identifying and selecting the study team.

The study involved 'in-depth' personal interviews with open-ended questions, although a model questionnaire was carried as a guide for bringing out the information relating to the status of Dalit Theology among the interviewees. These questions included information-gathering questions on the characteristics of the action-reflection paradigm that is in existence among the struggling people. Interviews were carried out in Tamil and recorded. The assistance of an independent translator for an unbiased recording, transcription and English translation of the interviews was obtained. The ethical procedures evolved and maintained by the University of Birmingham, in which this research project has been undertaken, were followed throughout.

The information gathered in the field-study was assessed, analysed and examined theologically and suggestions are formulated in the next chapter for developing Dalit Theology a Practical theology of praxis to engage with and inspire grass roots Dalit Christians.



## **Chapter Six – Dalit Theology in Action: Reflection among the Grass roots**

### **1. The hypothesis and research question**

Dalit Theology, as already described, emerged as a counter to Indian Christian theology, anchoring its source in the life-experience of caste-affected Dalits as well as scripture. It is contextual since it addresses the painful discriminatory experience of Dalits. It is liberational as it theologically reflects upon the plight of caste oppression and has potential to energise the faith of Dalits to involve themselves in the struggle for liberation. As described in Chapters Two and Three, Dalit theologians interpreted Biblical narratives theologically and articulated them with inspirational themes for motivating Dalit Christians to shape their faith perspectives to sustain their struggles, in order to challenge the caste system and regain their human dignity and personality.

However, as explained earlier, this thesis explores the hypothesis, based on my long experience as a Dalit rights activist with a Christian faith that Dalit Theology's well-articulated and deliberately narrated insights and themes remain mostly within the circles of ecclesia and academia, mainly in the form of discourses, books, articles, conference topics, discussions and deliberations. Having read upon Dalit Theology, I developed a strong view that Dalit Theology – having such an impressive, motivational and theologically insightful approach to liberation – needs to break the academic and ecclesiastical boundaries and develop its nature and character as a Practical theology of shared praxis to engage with ordinary grass roots Dalit Christians, who have been in a

constant struggle against caste oppression using mainly secular perspectives. This hypothesis and the discussions developed in Chapter Four on the insights drawn by Dalit Theology from Black Theology, and in Chapter Five on the nature, character and models of Practical theology as praxis intended to engage with the affected people to liberate them from caste oppression, have necessitated the formulation of pertinent research questions as mentioned in Chapters One and Five: (i) how significant is Dalit Theology as a source of motivation for Dalit Christian activists who are already leading the struggle against caste oppression? (ii) In what ways might Dalit Theology be helped to reformulate its ideas as a result of developing as a participative praxis? Deriving answer to these questions through a field study would help to check my hunch that Dalit Theology is currently a practical theology only in thought, not in practice, in terms of engaging with and motivating the grass roots Dalit Christians; and in addition the dialogical process of engaging with grass roots may bring out some liberational ideas which already exist (if there are any) among the struggling activists. These would help Dalit theology to expand further its reflections and insights. Thus it might help Dalit theology to become a Practical theology of participative praxis.

Therefore, a field study in the state of Tamilnadu in India among the grass root Dalit Christian activists using the means of qualitative research was undertaken. Here I would like to state that Dalit Christians are spread all over India but their population differs from state to state (Synod, 2010). As explained above, Tamilnadu is one of the few key states where Dalit Christians are in constant struggle against caste within and outside the church. To verify and explore the research questions, I found, a qualitative

research method in terms of selecting a few Dalit Christian activists who are in constant struggles against caste oppression is sufficient as they would largely represent the theological views of the larger Dalit Christian community. Therefore, I selected sixteen activists, both laity and clergy, with clear criteria. They mostly represented the rural congregations but are spearheading struggles with the utmost vigor. I had an in depth interview with each of these persons to collect the data for the analysis of this research focus.

Before venturing into the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the interviews, the salient features of qualitative research, the significance of the interview method, the methodological challenges faced during the field work, and the immediate implications of observations made on the ground during this exercise are summarised.

## **2. Qualitative research and the interpretative paradigm**

Qualitative research is a well theorised method known for its open-ended approach with a range of perspectives – social, political, pastoral, gender-oriented, empirical and narrative-based (Swinton and Mowat, 2006 p 29). For McLeod, 'it is a process of careful and rigorous inquiry into the aspects of the social world' (McLeod, 2001 p 3). In addition, qualitative research develops a separate identity to approach the world 'out there' by analysing the experiences of individuals or groups and their interactions and communications (Kvale, 2007 p x). These characteristics of qualitative research – a range of perspectives, and a process of rigorous enquiry and analysis –

suggested it as the appropriate method for interpretation in this thesis, rather than a quantitative method. Caste, being a social issue, could be addressed from a theological perspective and the practicality of Dalit Theology could be inquired into and analysed with the help of this method.

When qualitative research combines with Practical theology, among its various methods and approaches, 'it gives importance to interpretation', as human beings are by nature interpretative creatures involved in exploring the meaning of their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998 p 3). Since Practical theology and the qualitative research method deal with human beings and their experiences, 'interpretation' becomes a prominent component for this research, as it assesses and interprets findings concerning the status of Dalit Theology and its relevance among ordinary Dalit Christians.

However, as Kvale puts forth, 'the major part of qualitative research is based on text and writing – from field notes and transcripts to description or interpretation and finally in the presentation of findings' (Kvale, 2007 p xi). This definition emphasises collection of data, its description, interpretation and presentation. Conforming to this model, the present research project used an 'interview method' in order to extract information on the status of Dalit Theology among Dalit Christians in their action-reflection struggle process, and in order to assess and interpret the data collected with a view to presenting findings and recommendations.

### **3. Interview – a viable method**

Interviewing is a widely known means of collecting information. Interview, at its simplest level, is conversation and interaction between human beings. Kvale argues that

human beings talk with each other, pose questions, provide answers and interact in their daily life. In this method, the interviewer poses questions, listens to the interviewees and they share views, form opinions and mainly interact their lived experiences and aspirations. Therefore interview is only inter-view and interaction is inter-action where knowledge is constructed and information is extracted (Kvale, 2007 p 1).

For Kothari,

personal interviews with structured questions largely help to extract information and data which are essential for intensive investigations. Interviews with open ended questions facilitate the interviewer to gather supplementary information on the characteristics, environment and reflections of the interviewees which are of great value for assessment and interpretations (Kothari, 1990 p 97-99).

In addition, interview builds a social relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Interview is not just one person asking questions and another giving answers but a co-operative activity in which both work together to establish the truth of the matter (Gomm, 2004 p 166, 169). In addition, interaction with interviewees will illuminate their understanding and insights. As Koshy spells out, 'use of questionnaires within a qualitative study often provides ideas for further exploration...it can illuminate human feelings and provide rich insights into actions and their consequences' (Koshy, 2005 p 86). King and Harrocks comment that interviews have become a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary life and the most commonly-used method of data collection in qualitative research. The interview method can be either face-to-face, or by telephone or internet, based on the topic of the researcher (King and Harrocks, 2010 p 28, 1). For Berg, interviewing is an art, a skill and an innate ability of a person who interviews and

forms a face-to-face social interaction (Berg, 2009 p 101). These definitions and descriptions show that this method is useful in two ways. One is to extract information from the interviewees and the other is to illuminate insights between interviewer and interviewees.

I was convinced that through the method of interview, I could collect information for assessment and interpretation with a view to framing an answer to the research questions posed. In addition, it would cause some immediate impact upon the perception of the interviewees. Therefore, this method of interview/conversation was selected for field-work. Conversation was an extremely privileged part of the interviews. Two meetings were organised with interviewees, one at the beginning of this process and the other at the end. Before, and at the end of every interview, I , being in some capacity an 'insider' as a Dalit rights activist involved in struggles for a long time as well as an 'outsider' as a researcher, conversed with the interviewees freely. This combination of conversation and interview helped both me and the interviewees – the practitioners – to 'reflect back to have a fresh look at things, a potentially transformative gaze' (Helen Cameron et al., 2010 p 148). Thus, I found this method valuable in interacting with interviewees and in revealing the distinct theological insights, if any that were present among the interviewees in their action-reflection struggle.

#### **4. Methodological challenges**

The interview method has its own methodological deficiencies or challenges. As Kothari argues, this method is expensive, time-consuming and susceptible to systematic errors, besides chances for biased sharing and the offering of imaginary information by the interviewees, which is sometimes unavoidable (Kothari, 1990 p 99). While considering these weaknesses in the interview method, the current project was largely able to overcome these challenges. Adequate funds for undertaking this field-work were raised, the state-level network – Alternate Forum for Dalit Christian Liberation – gave assistance in identifying genuine and committed interviewees who were able to express their views, and nearly four months were allotted for undertaking the exercise. In addition, my own background enabled me easily to establish rapport with the interviewees, and thus limit the likelihood of them offering biased or imaginary information. A congenial atmosphere was created to further increase the likelihood of extracting genuine responses from the interviewees. Thus the possibility for systematic error was minimised. As Berg argues, a good rapport with the interviewee forms a sense of common ground for both interviewer and subject and that leads to a successful outcome (Berg, 2009 p 130-131). Though a good rapport was built in, I anticipated with some concern that the interviewees would sometimes not come out fully and openly with their theological views, insights and understanding, as they were aware that I am a Dalit, a Christian and also a senior campaigner who knew them and the Dalit context. The other concern was that their propinquity to me would make interviewees uncomfortable with sharing openly their theological insights and reflections, lest it induce me to form a

negative opinion of them, or jeopardise their future relationship with me. I sought to avert these concerns by an open, simple and gentle approach from the beginning, which generally enabled them to share all their views with great interest, care and enthusiasm. I did not intervene in the middle or pose my opinion of any sort, not even a gesture, on the views of the interviewees. I provided a free space and atmosphere for their sharing, and never sought to make them feel that I was more knowledgeable than they were. I made an effort to make them feel that I was one of them. This approach provided them with space and confidence for a very open sharing without hesitation or reluctance.

King and Harrocks mention the interview atmosphere, the creating of which could be seen as one of the methodological challenges to this approach. They argue for a very positive physical and psychological atmosphere, privacy and a maximum time for the interview of 45 minutes to an hour (King and Harrocks, 2010 p 42-43). I was conscious of this challenge and aimed to overcome it by visiting places selected by the interviewees. The interviewees chose places local to them, mostly churches, church-related buildings, and offices of Non-Governmental Organisations. They were physically and psychologically comfortable as they were in their own community and the interviews were held in a place where they have personal, easy and regular access. Privacy was fully ensured as I did not allow any other person to be involved in the interview except the transcriber/translator and an assistant, who helped by managing the recordings with appropriate introductions. The interview timing was lengthy but that was managed by allowing intervals and supplying refreshments.



Kvale argues that the power asymmetry is one of the other methodological challenges. Although an interview is a conversation between two people, in practical terms the researcher holds a position of greater power as he/she has structured the questions for his/her research, he/she is scientific – always in the position of posing questions – and he/she holds the power to initiate manipulative dialogue to extract the information that he/she needs, which might encourage him/her to hold the monopoly of interpretations (Kvale, 2007 p 14-15). This is a really practical challenge. However, I was able to lessen the danger, as I was not an outsider either in terms of experiencing caste oppression or organising struggles against caste. Equally, I was not entirely new to the interviewees. I have been raising the issue of caste for a long time in this state, and was, therefore, a familiar figure for the interviewees, if not personally known to them. Further, Alternative Forum for Dalit Christian Liberation (AFDCL) identified the interviewees and had informed them about me, my credentials in the Dalit cause and my area of research. This provided a feeling between me and the interviewees that we were one, with regard to identity, involvement and commitment. Therefore, the question of holding a position of power, exercising monopoly or proneness to manipulation was minimised. Of course, an element of a power imbalance is to be expected, because of differences of age, experience and knowledge between researcher and interviewees, which cannot be avoided in any interview model and process. As far as possible this challenge of power asymmetry was reduced to the minimum, by practical steps and vigilance on my part.

Another important challenge related to ethical issues. King and Horrocks talk about the observance of ethical principles concerning the rights, dignity and safety of the

participants, and the governance of research (King and Harrocks, 2010 p 105). Kvale also insists that obtaining consent from the interviewees, maintaining confidentiality and protecting them from any consequences, are other areas of concern in the interview method of qualitative research (Kvale, 2007 p 27-28). Berg, too, talks about the rights, privacy and welfare of the community or individuals who form the locus of the research (Berg, 2009 p 60). Ethics is a crucial element in any research involving human beings. Therefore, I exercised the utmost care in handling these concerns. I explained to the interviewees my research topic, focus and purpose of field-study. I shared with them the participants' pamphlet that explained the objective of the research and the expectations of the interviewees. Willing, informed consent was obtained and a memorandum of understanding was signed by both researcher and interviewees. I explained the possible risk-factor that at a later stage their identity could be unearthed and possibly traced by a third party, even if anonymity is maintained in the present thesis. Therefore, I gave them the option of not joining the process and also the right to withdraw at any time in the course of the interview, in case they became uncomfortable with the process of offering information. I took extra care to explain these concerns in all larger conversations and also before venturing into each and every interview. Therefore, this challenge was overcome. Furthermore, two other factors contributed to fostering a positive response to these interviews, despite the possible risk of subsequent identification. First, all the interviewees were activists already involved in struggles and they were figures known for their activism, both within and outside the church. Second, this research project is focused on an issue which affects the larger community, and the entire country is aware of this issue. Therefore there was no reason to assume any extra risk factor either for

people who came forward for these interviews, or in relation to the material that they shared. In any case, no one withdrew either in the beginning or even in the middle, which hopefully was proof that the interviewees were fully in support of the project in offering their co-operation and sharing their views.

A further challenge was the shared understanding of certain terminologies and the perceptions of the interviewees. Though all members of the laity were grass roots Dalit Christian activists who were already involved in struggle, many of them did not understand terminologies like 'action-reflection' or 'theological reflection'. Action-reflection was a terminology or a phrase commonly used by theoreticians and elites. But the ordinary rural activists were not familiar with such terms and their meanings. Their terminology was expressed in simpler terms, like 'meeting prior to struggle for planning and again to meet for a review, and further planning if there is a need'. They also did not have an idea of a 'cycle', as defined by theoreticians or theologians. In addition, they were not systematic in the process of 'meeting-execution-meeting' as a cycle or a process. Whenever there was a need, they immediately met, planned and immersed themselves in struggles. That was their practice. In such meetings, they had the practice of sharing about the oppression or victimisation suffered, and then planning for a struggle involving certain demands. If there was a need, they would meet again for the same demands or for any new demands. They were not like the communities of Latin America wherein there was a regular and systematised struggle-process in place. However, this challenge relating to terminology was overcome, as I explained to them in their vernacular and in terms familiar to them the concept of the action-reflection cycle.

Thus, I put my questions differently when I tried to extract information on their action-reflection struggle-process and the presence of a theological insight in their discussions. I simply used the words like 'meetings, organising struggles, review meetings, further planning meetings' etc. This was understood by them and they responded. At the same time, the state-level network leaders understood these terminologies and they responded easily to such questions. Thus, this challenge was overcome.

Perhaps the final challenge was the literacy level of the participants in these interviews. A few could be considered to fall below the level of semi-literacy (they were not educated even up to a basic school level), a few were semi-illiterate (up to school level) and a very few were literate (graduate level). This being the different range of literacy levels, I had to put the questions differently with each interviewee, according to their educational qualification, standard, perception and understanding. For the very semi-illiterate and semi-literate interviewees, I talked to them in a very simple language and accent to ensure that they understood the questions. The translator also helped the interviewees to understand the questions and facilitated the gathering of information from them. Mostly the interviewees struggled when asked questions related to theology, Dalit Theology, theological insights and reflections. I and the translator helped them to understand the questions. Thus this challenge was overcome. In sum, I believe the methodological challenges were overcome, especially using the method of personal interview, due to the simple, cordial, serious, but down-to-earth approach adopted.

## **5. Limitations**

There were a few practical limitations faced in the field work. The first was that the Alternative Forum for Dalit Christian Liberation (AFDCL) found it difficult to select participants/interviewees who satisfied all the criteria designed to maintain a balanced sample of opinion (namely, gender, age, literacy, denomination, geographical location and sub-caste). In particular it was found to be difficult to identify Dalit Christian activists with the capacity of articulating or explaining their views from the sub-caste *Arunthathiar*. Equally it was difficult to find activists who were regular attendees of church, had knowledge about the institutionalised church, were involved in church-based religious activities, were familiar with Biblical narratives and insights and able to articulate the same. The other is that, generally, the grass roots-level activists were comfortable with actions but were less comfortable with reflection or articulation, including concerning theology. A further practical difficulty concerned the timing of interviews. During the period of the field study all were busy in preparation for the Christmas celebration. It was particularly difficult for clergy to offer time as they were pre-occupied with Christmas worship preparations and celebrations. Tamil Harvest Festival (Pongal – also the celebration of Tamil New Year, in January) was another event which posed some difficulty in fixing times with the participants. The availability of the translator also had to be accommodated. However, these problems were able to be managed by my own determination and the excellent cooperation of the translator.

## **6. Actualisation of interviews**

I was involved in all preparations for the interviews. These consisted mainly of the preparation of the questionnaire and other mandatory requirements for field-work with people, viz. a participant information leaflet and consent form to satisfy ethical standards. AFDCL helped to identify the interviewees in accordance with the demographic categories already discussed. However, I also identified interviewees through my own contacts by talking to lecturers at the United Theological College (UTC) (Bangalore) and Tamilnadu Theological Seminary (TTS) (Madurai). I mainly sought clergy who have had access to Dalit Theology and through whom I could contact potential Dalit Christian activists/interviewees in the grass roots who are close to church-based activities as well.

One larger meeting was organised at the beginning with the probable interviewees. In this meeting, I shared the objective of the research, its focus and the need for field-work in the form of personal interviews. I also explained the criteria for the selection of participants, and how they were contacted by AFDCL and by me directly with the help of UTC and TTS. In addition I explained that I would go to where they lived to interview them, at a date convenient to them. Very importantly I insisted that it was mandatory that their consent to be interviewed should be voluntary and explained their unequivocal right to withdraw at any point during the interview if they were not comfortable, or felt uneasy with this interview. I assured them that I would not disclose their identity in the research thesis. I also stated that I would meet all expenses relating

to this interview process and that they were not expected to spend anything in terms of travel, food and other related expenses. This was followed by some clarification questions from the participants. After all these, I initiated a general discussion about the Dalit situation inside and outside the church, and the involvement of the participants in challenging caste practices and particularly their struggles. This preliminary meeting helped me and the probable interviewees to understand each other and the whole dynamic of the interview process. Through this meeting, I was able to finalise the inclusion of some participants. The rest were selected with the assistance of UTC and TTS.

After this initial meeting, I arranged dates and time to meet each participant individually. Each interview proceeded with a 'warm-up' session. The translator was there to transcribe the interview and to assist with sharing in the vernacular and an assistant – my wife – was also there to help both interviewees and me by taking photographs and notes on important points. Each interview lasted for two to three hours as there were around fifty questions categorised in five major areas. During the interviews, breaks and refreshments were provided. At the beginning I introduced myself, the research topic, the focus, the need for the interview and how that particular interviewee was identified and selected. I then summarised and handed over the *Participant Information Pamphlet* and requested their voluntary presence and acceptance. I requested them to sign the *Consent Form* to ensure their acceptance with a free will. Each interview began and ended with a prayer. By this means I encouraged the interviewees to share their experience, insights and struggles in a cordial,

transparent, pleasant and tension-free manner, but in a very meaningful atmosphere. At the end of the whole interview process, a final, larger meeting was organised. All those interviewed were invited to share further information, if any, collectively. I made use of this opportunity to thank them as well for their co-operation. It was altogether a memorable exercise.

While planning for these interviews, I thought it fit to identify grass roots Dalit Christian activists who are strong, active and committed in addressing caste, who not only lead struggles but also lead their people against discrimination in the places where they live. Since a qualitative not a quantitative research methodology had been selected, clear criteria were worked out, maintaining all balances, to identify activists who represent and lead grass roots Dalit Christians. In total sixteen people were interviewed in the field although originally it had been planned to interview only fifteen grass root Dalit Christian activists. As the field study unfolded, the fifteen original interviewees strongly suggested and recommended one more member of the clergy who had played a vital role in organising and leading struggles at the grass roots. Therefore I could not help but include that person as it would further assist in verifying the research questions. Out of sixteen Dalits interviewed five were clergy, seven were women, two were heading state level Dalit movements.

Later, I also met twelve Dalit theologians in different cities – Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Madurai – and interacted with them about my research focus, and listened to their opinions on the practicality of Dalit Theology among grass roots Dalit



Christians and its relevance to ordinary people. Although not a component of the initial field-study plan, while engaging in the interviews, I felt that it was helpful to listen to some active first- and second-generation Dalit theologians, to understand their views on the status and relevance of Dalit Theology to the grass roots. It was a very positive experience, in terms of organising the field-work and interacting with those who were in struggle against caste inside and outside the church.

## **7. Immediate implications**

The interaction with grass roots Dalit Christian activists in the form of interviews of over two hours per person was a great experience for me. Although I have had a grass roots involvement from a human rights perspective for many years, the subject matter of this research, and its theological perspective, was relatively new to me. I already carried my own theological insight and reflections with me and therefore approached the interviews with a widened perspective, including human rights and theology. It was altogether a different experience when I met with struggling activists, whether they were already known to me or not. The ways in which I raised questions about God, faith, Biblical narratives, theology, Dalit Theology, and other theological insights and reflections helped me and, apparently, the interviewees to reflect upon their personal, religious and life struggles. The questions, conversations and interactions helped them to feel that there was a vital need for them to read, understand and reflect on theology and particularly Dalit Theology. The interviewees felt that, being Christians, there was every need for them to widen their perspectives to address the issue of caste with the

help of a proper theological insight. It also appeared to have been helpful for them to understand the necessity for regulating their action-reflection process with theological insight and reflection, in addition to their secular perspectives. They said that they would demand more from their local pastors and the church to instill in their faith proper theological insights, and to address the issues of their life-situation, especially caste oppression. They also shared that they would start reading the Bible differently and would begin to interact with the Biblical narratives which connected with their own lives. They appeared to have gained a rudimentary theological knowledge, if not enough, within a two- to three-hour interaction, on how to look at God and Christ as liberators and comforters. They also appeared to be more convinced of the benefit of this theological insight for challenging caste, which was not present in their previous involvement in the struggle.

#### **8. Analysis of the themes – their status and relevance among grass roots – discussion, analysis and interpretation**

This section attempts to assess and analyze the materials and data collected during the field interviews. As a methodology for assessment and interpretation, the theological themes articulated by Dalit theologians and discussed mainly in Chapter Three are compared and contrasted, converged and diverged, with the outcome of the field-work. This helped to study the status and relevance of Dalit Theology in terms of its significance as a source of motivation for the grass roots Dalit Christian activists for their struggles against caste and also the existence of any liberational insights among them

which would help to reformulate Dalit Theology as a Theology of shared praxis. It should be repeated here that out of sixteen people interviewed, five were clergy. I should make it clear, at the outset that the understanding of the clergy of the themes articulated by Dalit theologians was different from that of grass roots activists. However, their sharing on the presence of Dalit Theology among the grass roots is similar. On the whole, my intuition and the hypothesis were proved to be true: that Dalit theology is yet to make its presence felt among the grass roots as a source of motivation.

The analysis has the following three features: (i) summarising of the themes discussed in Dalit Theology (ii) summing up of the expression of the Dalit Christian activists with regard to their understanding of such themes and (iii) my analysis and interpretations based on the information shared during the field work.

### ***8.1 Theme: God as ‘God of the Oppressed’***

This theme, ‘God as the God of the oppressed’, was articulated by a number of Dalit theologians, as discussed in Chapter Three. Mainly they refer to the Exodus narratives and argue that God is the God of the oppressed, that God’s preferential option is for the oppressed, and that when the oppressed people cry God liberates them from bondage by sending Moses as they have become God’s people from the status of no people. These being the main arguments of Dalit theologians with regard to this theme, my main question is whether this theme and related arguments have a place in the faith perspectives of grass roots Dalit Christian activists as an inspirational and

motivational force in their struggles against caste. Through interviews, I found that grass roots Dalit Christian activists have the very simple and ordinary understanding of God as the God who is always with them, blesses them and protects them, but not with the kind of insight or perception of God, as described and argued by the Dalit theologians. They involve themselves in struggles with a simple and traditional faith that God is creator, Father, comforter, refuge and enabler. They love, fear and worship God as a great God. They believe in prayer. They pray for God's help and for relief from all suffering, which includes caste discrimination inside and outside the church. Thus, they pray to God as protector and comforter to defend them from the pathos, agony, atrocity and persecution that they meet with at the hands of non-Dalits. They also pray for success in their struggles, not necessarily with the perception that God as the God of the oppressed is with them and offers them a preferential option, but with a strong and simple faith that God is their protector, and will be with them in their struggle (see Appendix 7: pages - 21, 30, 40, 49, 58, 68, 79, 88, 97, 106 and 115 wherein the laity have shared, "first time I hear this; God hears our prayers; (they name two Dalit pastors and said) pastors sometimes say so; we are told like that but church behaves differently; no idea; God is always with poor and us").

This theme of 'God as the God of the oppressed' includes the phrase 'Exodus experience' or 'Canaanite experience' as described by Dalit theologians. This did not correlate with the life situation and struggle of Dalit Christians as expressed in the field interviews. They were told and were aware of the Exodus story and the occupation of Canaan. But the interviewees do not compare their situation either with the Exodus of

the Israelites from Egypt or the uprooting of the Canaanites from their own native land, as argued by the Dalit theologians. These points seem to be just the intellectual reflections and descriptions of Dalit theologians. The ordinary grass roots Dalit do not seem to have space or opportunity to be exposed to such ideas or to infer such reflections or arguments for themselves. In the interviews, other than the priest and pastors, almost all activists viewed the Exodus and occupation of Canaan as a story in which God's power and grace are depicted. For the theme 'Exodus experience - God's preferential option is for the oppressed and God sent Moses when Israelites cried', see Appendix 7: pages - 21, 30, 40, 49, 59, 68, 79, 88, 97, 106 and 115. The laity mentioned as follows: "we know this story; God sent Moses to liberate Israelites from sinful Egypt; Moses led them to Canaan". This shows that the grass roots Dalit Christians are aware of this story but they were not motivated to relate this theme to their situation for shaping up their faith perspectives differently, or had not been given the theological perspective to do so.

The other point is that, as described above, Dalits were neither a chosen people who enjoy a preferential option nor are they slaves in another's land waiting to be freed. As seen earlier, they are generally believed to have been made into untouchables in their own land by Aryan invaders. There is no need for them to think of or inherit a promised land like Canaan. At most, they might expect the perceived invaders, the so-called 'Aryans', to leave their soil but this is not possible as 3000-3500 years have passed since these events supposedly took place and there is no clearly defined 'Aryan' population, which could be evicted from India in any case. If the Exodus experience

were to be viewed, perceived and interpreted as additional leverage in the struggles of Dalits, then it could be shared with them by the Church or by Dalit theologians, but this does not seem to have happened so far.

The same theme carries further suggestions that 'no people' will become 'God's people', and 'God has a preferential option for the oppressed'. These are also new areas of understanding to the grass roots Dalit Christian activists. I found that this notion hardly exists among them in the way that Dalit theologians argue. They all say that they are God's people in a very traditional, faith-based affirmation but not in the significant sense that their oppressed status has granted them the special status of God's people. Also, they say that all Christians are God's people (see Appendix 7: pages - 21, 31, 40, 49, 59, 68, 79, 88, 97, 106 and 116. The laity have shared on this theme, "first time I hear like this; no idea; not much heard about this; we were not taught like this in the church; we are always God's people; Dalit pastor says like this; I do not understand this; all are God's people; we are always God's people").

This emphasises that they have the very traditional understanding that they are God's people always and not in the manner that Dalit theologians argue. I have a view on this. The idea of Dalit theologians that 'no people' have become 'God's people' could be based on two perceptions. One could be the conversion of Dalits to Christianity and the other could be the correlation of their oppressed status with the notion that God is the God of the oppressed. If conversion is defined as the criterion for becoming God's people then the question will arise about the status of the majority of Dalits who remain

non-Christian. Are they not God's people? Or if all Dalits, whether Christian or non-Christian, owing to their oppressed status, are defined as God's people, then the question will arise of why God did not act for thousands of years if God's preferential option is for the oppressed Dalits, both Christian and non-Christian. In addition, this argument would likely raise the question from non-Dalit Christians, who also embraced Christianity, of whether they, therefore, are not God's people? If conversion is claimed to be a parameter for enjoying the position of God's people, non-Dalits equally have been converted from a non-Christian religion to Christianity, and they are also God's people.

The further reality is that, even if such interpretations are valid enough to energise Dalits to strengthen their faith and sustain their struggles, those interpretations seem not to have been shared with grass roots Dalit Christians. It also increases the doubt whether even traditional Church leaders and church workers have such insights among them. Even if the church leaders have gained such insights, in the Indian context – when non-Dalits are in influential church positions and have hierarchical status – it is unlikely that they are going to share such insights with Dalit Christians, whether among the rural grass roots or in urban churches. In any case, if such insights are shared, that may have an additional leverage to empower Dalits to further intensify their struggle. But, the Church leadership which largely remains in the hands of non Dalits would find it difficult to empower Dalit Christians with such messages to rise against their own hegemony and authority. In addition, there is every possibility that such perceptions of 'no people' and God's 'preferential options' for the oppressed may increase and deepen the conflict that already exists among congregations which are polarised and in tension.

Therefore, there appears to be a significant gap between the thought processes of Dalit theologians and the perception of Dalit Christian activists. The latter have a simple but strong faith that God is their protector. What has been given to them by the Church, they have absorbed. The Exodus story was explained to them in a traditional and general manner, to show the power and the grace of God and to demonstrate in a very magnificent and grand manner that God will save them from misery. But the story never seemed to have been told with any special link to the oppressed life-situation of Dalits. Therefore, they pray with the belief that God will answer their prayers and protect them, but the theological or intellectual descriptions of Biblical narratives, and the arguments developed by Dalit theologians, do not seem to have found a place in the minds or perceptions of grass roots Dalit Christians. The questions raised in the interviews on 'no people-God's people' and 'God's preferential options' were quite new to them. Many said that they were hearing this kind of phrase for the first time although they were able to understand its relevance for their life, when it was explained.

Equally, there does not seem to exist any thinking that, once Dalit Christians cry, God will send a person like Moses to release them from caste bondage. Instead they have a feeling that they should rise themselves as Moses. They are well aware of the story of Exodus, as seen earlier, and see Moses as a person of God who was sent to liberate Israelites as they were the chosen people. Therefore, there exists a very ordinary and simple belief and faith that if they pray, God will comfort them; they see God as a comforter (see Appendix 7: pages - 22, 31, 40, 50, 59, 68, 79, 88, 97, 107 and 116. The activists shared on this theme, "I know God sent Moses to liberate Israelites;



to lead them to Canaan; we hear Moses in church but not in real life; Moses was a man of God ; every Christian should become like a Moses; every Dalit should become a Moses; first time I hear this”).

In a way, the arguments of Dalit theologians, instead of capacitating or energising the people under oppression to rise against the oppressive situation, by motivating them rather to expect someone to come and do miracles and fight for their rescue and well-being, are perceived as overly cinematic. The other reaction is that this narrative has an inapplicable specificity: God listened to the cry of God’s own chosen people. God’s option for the oppressed is for God’s own chosen people only. In this argument it is not clear whether God will listen to all those who cry. Since Israelites are God’s own people, God had a responsibility to respond and listened to them and sent Moses with all necessary power. In the case of Dalit Christians, it seems that for the grass roots it is a step too far for them to feel that they are chosen people, like the Israelites. Evidence of such a chosen status never appeared in the history of their ancestors, as it did in the history of the Israelites. In the event that Dalit Christians should feel that caste oppression is the main or basic reason for God’s chosenness, or his response to their cry, then Dalits in other faiths who form the Dalit majority are also under crude caste oppression. In such a reality, it is not Dalit Christians only, but all Dalits who should become God’s chosen people, and God has to respond to the cry of all Dalits. This is not possible as long as Dalits of other faiths worship other gods. They cannot become a chosen people as the God of Israel was described as being against those who worshipped other Gods. Also the chosen people killed the people of the seven nations

who worshipped other Gods. Therefore, if Dalit Christians think that they are the only chosen people, then it is difficult to retain their relationship with their own brothers and sisters in other faiths. Alternatively, Dalits might think that, irrespective of their faith affiliation, all Dalits are the chosen people of God as an oppressed status is the only criterion for selection as God's chosen people. Thus, these kinds of reflections can only occur among theologians and during the interviews it was not possible to get a sense or feeling from the Dalit Christians that they are convinced by the argument that if they cry, God will send a Moses to help them. They do not see God in the way that the Dalit theologians reflect and argue. In sum, these kinds of reflections do not seem to be present in the thinking of ordinary, local Dalit Christian activists.

The reality is that, owing to their social, economic and educational status, Dalit Christian activists who are at the grass roots do not seem to have access to such insights and reflections. It does not mean that they do not have the capacity or ability to understand them, but it appears that they have not been exposed to such theological studies, perceptions, insights and sharing. Second, as they shared, no church worker, leader, theologian or Dalit theologian seems to have gone adequately to the grass roots and seriously explained themes like these to energise their faith and motivate them to see God in their struggle against caste. Therefore this theme seems to remain among theologians and intellectuals, and might continue to do so until serious or substantial efforts are taken for sharing it among the grass roots. However there is, nevertheless, a possibility of enriching the faith of ordinary Dalit Christians and further motivating them to sustain their struggle with such theological insights in the future. In sum, Dalit Christian

activists have a simple faith that God is their protector, they believe in prayer and they pray for God's help, assistance and protection from all sorts of oppression. Why is it not sufficient for believers to pray for God's protection instead of taking inspiration from the Israelites and their Exodus experience?

Thus, this theme and the ground reality makes me think that if God is the God of the oppressed who responds to the cry of suppressed people, as depicted by the Dalit theologians, then by this time, by virtue of this aspect of God's nature, God should have listened to the 3000 years of crying by Dalits and should have liberated them from caste bondage. It seems that God listened to the cry of God's own 'chosen people', the Israelites, who were under oppression in an alien land. But in the case of Dalits they are, of course oppressed, but they are neither the chosen people of God nor in another land. Therefore this parallel does not make a valid connection to the status and suffering of Dalits. This recalls the theological debate between William Jones and James Cone on the same issue of God as the God of the oppressed. Cone has a presupposition about God and his preferential option for the oppressed and therefore, other than the Exodus experience, he saw the incarnation of Jesus as proof, fulfilling God's preferential option and liberating activity (James Cone, 1975 p 191-192). But Jones argues that the Biblical narrative of the Exodus experience was for the chosen people, the Israelites, and the suffering and struggle of Black people was the post-resurrection event of the incarnated Jesus (Jones, 1973 p 119). There was no evidence in the life of Black people that God or the incarnated Jesus had a preferential option for them. This sounds pertinent to the life and struggle of Dalits as well. There has been neither the evidence for Dalits to

demonstrate that they are the chosen people, nor that God's preferential option is for them, although they have been in the chains of caste for thousands of years. These kinds of theological interpretations and arguments were developed in the domain of theologians, whether Black or Dalit. Unmindful of all these debates and discussions, both Black people and Dalits continue in day-to-day struggles against race and caste. For them, the faith is simple but strong that God is creator, protector and refuge, and will be with them. Therefore it appears that Dalit Christians need not necessarily have the same perception or position as Dalit theologians in viewing God as the God of the oppressed, but a simple or traditional faith that God is their refuge and strength is also sufficient to undertake struggles. However if such powerful themes are extended to the grass roots they would enhance their motivation to intensify the struggle. Alongside this, such an engagement would bring the existing strong but simple faith of the struggling people back to the academy, which would help Dalit Theology to reformulate its themes.

## ***8.2 Theme: Dalits as full human beings under the concept of 'imago dei'***

Christian theological anthropology, as Cameron observes, is concerned with God and human being, as both are interconnected. It is concerned with the creation of the world, human beings in the image of God, the incarnation of Jesus, and his life, death and resurrection. It is also concerned with the divine calling and human response for personal and social transformation (Charles Cameron, 2005 p 53-61). This theme of Dalits being human beings as they are created in the image of God has been carried by several Dalit theologians, including Massey, Rajkumar, Nirmal, Prabhakar, Larbeer,

Devasahayam and Balasundaram. We have seen their arguments (elaborated in Chapter Three) that this image has given the inspiration and responsibility to Dalits to be involved in struggles to transform the caste situation. However, the core of their argument is analysed below in association with the interviews conducted among the grass roots Dalit Christian activists.

Massey and Rajkumar, while arguing for the image of God in Dalits, trace Dalit history and explain how the Hindu scriptures, the *Rig Veda*, and the interpreter, Manu, have described Dalits not as the creation of God but as bastards, polluted and impure, with no right to enjoy the fullness of humanhood (Massey, 2006b p 7-31) & (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b). Generally, the grass roots activists seem to be aware that they are created by God and exist in God's image. They all say that all are created in the image of God but they do not seem to have in-depth knowledge of any corollary right to enjoy the fullness of being human, as argued by theologians based on the concept of *imago dei* (see Appendix 7: pages - 22, 31, 40, 50, 59, 69, 79, 88, 98, 107 and 116. All of them said, "All are created in the image of God; one interviewee asked, if all are created in the image of God then why we are treated like this?").

As seen above, this theme has its roots in theological anthropology. The words of Cameron emphasise three characteristics – a human being is created in the image of God, there is a divine calling for social transformation, and there is the response of the human being. The argument of Dalit theologians by-and-large reflects these three important features. Nirmal argues that since Dalits are made in the image of God, their

'no people' status has changed to 'God's people' status, and therefore their liberation does not end with realising some rights and privileges but grows into an equal status in order to enjoy the fullness of their birth, descent, life, death and resurrection. Also Nirmal argues for equality between men and women as both are made in the image of God (P.Nirmal, 2006 p 222). This elaboration is insightful and correlates with the definition of Cameron, but whether the grass roots Dalits have such discernment is a question to be reckoned with. When I interacted with the struggling activists in my field study, I was not able to find that such an understanding existed among them. They say that they are aware that God has created all and therefore they are also in his image but they are not exposed to such concepts as *imago dei* as defined and put forward by theologians. Nor do they seem to have been given a chance to reflect that there is a divine call and that they need to respond, since they claim the image of God. They seem to have had no opportunity, so far, to reflect that there is a divine call and that they need to respond for the purposes of social transformation, and also that they were once 'no people' and have now become 'God's people', or that their liberation is in reclaiming their full humanity. At most, they have a feeling that they are created by God; but they have a very general feeling that they have a right to be treated as equals, on a par with others, as they are also human beings. This, too, they shared when these questions were raised and explained. Otherwise, they say that they engage in struggles, not necessarily with this type of theological or conceptual understanding, but as a routine uprising against discrimination. I am, furthermore, of the view that the utility of this concept is limited because Dalits of other faiths are also involved in struggles and for them this concept of the 'image of God' does not have a role to play. Even the argument that men

should treat women equally, and that women can claim equal status based on the *imago dei* principle, is seemingly largely absent. Women claim equality with men not necessarily with this theological understanding but as the birthright of every human being. Generally, women's movements, mostly secular in nature, claim equal rights. Their claim is not necessarily based on the image of God principle or concept. In a secular or feminist perspective such demands are put forward and men are forced to respond. Therefore, struggles for equality are not necessarily based on the *imago dei* principle, as claimed by Dalit theologians. Investigating the status of this theme among Dalit Christian activists largely reveals its absence

Similarly, Larbeer's interpretation that Dalits, being made in the image of God, have become a messianic community, possessing a messianic hope to make a messianic intervention to transform caste oppression and regain their fullness (Larbeer, 1997 p 389-391) is not found among the Dalit Christians whom I interviewed. When this interpretation was shared with them they said that it was the first time they had heard ideas like 'messianic community', 'messianic hope' and 'messianic intervention' (see Appendix 7: pages – 21, 31, 40, 50, 59, 68, 79, 88, 97, 107 and 116). The interviewees said, "first time hearing like this; no idea; I am already working for my people; I am telling my people to rise against caste; I am called to work for dignity; no answer; nothing like this was taught in the church").

The reality is that they do not have an opportunity to reflect on such thinking, and these reflections do not seem to have been shared with them in sermons or in other

ways. Among theologians it is quite casual to reflect on and discuss such matters, but among local activists it is conspicuously absent. In sum, this theme of '*imago dei*' has potential for strengthening the faith, motivation and struggling spirit of the grass roots Dalit Christians but as of now they do not seem to have any such perception. They simply accept that they are created and made in the image of God when such themes are put before them. The descriptions and reflections of Dalit theologians around this theme are largely an intellectual, academic exercise which does not appear, so far, to have reached ordinary Dalit Christians.

### **8.3 Theme: *Jesus a Dalit and Christ a liberator***

Dalit theologians are of the view that Jesus is a Dalit and Christ is a Liberator. Nirmal quotes Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba in the genealogy of Jesus. Like Dalits, all these three were described as seduced, impure or polluted in one way or another (M. Azariah, 1990 p 226). Nirmal introduces this parallel by calling Jesus a Dalit as Dalits were described as polluted by birth according to Hinduism. As already discussed, Dalits were described by Hinduism as having been born out of the despised relationships between the low caste *Shudras* and the other three oppressor castes (Massey, 2006b p 7-31) & (Peniel Rajkumar, 2010b). This theme, though, warrants further discussion. Referring to Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba as women who are seduced, impure and polluted shows the sexist interpretation of a male theologian. Nirmal, while asserting the defiled status of these women, does not blame the men in these narratives for their acts of seduction or rape.



However, this kind of notion did not seem to exist among local Dalit Christian activists. They view Jesus Christ as God, as God's son (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 31, 40, 50, 59, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 116. The interviewees shared, "Jesus is God; my god; how are you saying Jesus is a Dalit?; No idea; Jesus was with poor; Jesus worked for Dalit of his times; I am yet to understand this; I do not understand why are you saying Jesus is a Dalit"). They seem not to have been exposed to the idea of Jesus as Dalit. Dalits do not, in any case, accept the Hindu explanation for their birth. In fact, Dalits will deny and object to such a description. Therefore, even the reflection of Dalit theologians connecting the birth of Dalits with that of Jesus, who came in the genealogy of Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba, amounts to accepting the definition of Hinduism concerning the birth of Dalits. It may be a useful reflection for intellectuals, who read and interpret the Bible in different ways, and compare and contrast it with Hindu scriptures. If such a reflection is shared with Dalit Christians, they might look at Jesus as being close to them in the sense that his birth was also despised like theirs. In this respect they might view Jesus a Dalit. But currently, the grass roots Dalit Christian activists do not seem to have such a view and understanding.

Arulraja justifies calling Jesus a Dalit by quoting his life and mission. For him, Jesus was a son of a carpenter, who identified himself with lepers, tax collectors, immoral women and Samaritans, who broke the rules of Sabbath, who touched the sick and the dead, ate without washing his hands, cleared out the temple, and so on (Arulraja, 1996 p 66-117). Dalits are also like this, living in poverty and leading a life of deprivation and segregation. It is eye-opening to read this comparison. However,

ordinary Dalit Christian activists do not seem to have had the chance to compare the birth of Jesus and his mission with that of their life and livelihood. Since Arulraja is a theologian, he is able to develop this kind of interpretation using this comparison but for ordinary Dalits, although they are aware of Biblical narratives that Jesus was born in a manger and brought up by Joseph, a carpenter, and lived mostly in Galilee, for them, he is God. Since they suffer under systemic socio-economic oppression that includes caste, they believe that Jesus will save them. If they were to have reflections like Arulraja, there would be no difference between a theologian and an ordinary worshipper. I did not find, as described above, that the notion that Jesus is a Dalit and Christ is a liberator exists among these Dalit activists. They seem to have had no opportunity to think about Christ as liberator but very much as a redeemer and comforter. They have a very strong faith that through his suffering, Christ redeems everyone from sin and offers salvation (see Appendix 7: pages – 20, 29, 38, 48, 57, 67, 78, 87, 96, 105 and 114. They shared, “Christ died for the sins of the world; Christ suffered for my sins; he died for my sins; he died for the sins of the world; he suffered to give us heaven; suffered to give a new life to us; Christ suffered against injustice; he questioned the oppressors; I do not understand Christ a liberator; our pastor says Jesus died for our sins; Jesus’s suffering leads to salvation; Jesus died to help us in this world”). This concept raises another argument as well. If Jesus is a Dalit and Christ is a liberator, he should already have liberated them from caste bondage as they embraced Christianity around three hundred years ago, and have challenged caste in one form or another for three thousand years. In addition, I agree with the view of Franklyn Balasundaram that the birth of Jesus in a manger or his suffering was a divine option and not an enforced oppression, which can

be seen as a disgrace. In comparison, the birth of Dalits into untouchable status is not an option but a social stigma concocted and forced upon them with the sanction of the Hindu religion. Furthermore, if Jesus is called a Dalit, then the non-Dalits within Christianity would not only get angry but would strongly object to such an inference, and would accuse Dalits of defiling and despising Jesus. Jesus is for them as well. At most, one could think that Jesus had 'Dalitness' in his birth, life and mission. Even that has not been shared with Dalit or non-Dalit Christians. Arulraja's reflection that Jesus is a Dalit will help and motivate Dalits to own him, to sustain their faith and intensify their struggle with a renewed vigour, but at the moment this idea does not seem to feature in the thinking of grass roots activists.

Nirmal also calls Jesus a *Dhobi* or *Bhangi* – a washerman or sweeper, and both distinctive Dalit roles – as he has Dalitness in him. He has cleared the dirt in society like Dalits, and acted as a suffering servant who was rejected, like Dalits, and therefore he may be considered a Dalit and a liberator (M. Azariah p.224). Ordinary grass roots Dalit Christian activists do not seem to have access to such ideas or thought-forms. I have already cited above how the activists have viewed Jesus, as their God, and Christ, as their redeemer. They are not able even to imagine Jesus as a washerman or sweeper although he identified with the poor and marginalised people during his life-time. Further, as Balasundaram argues, Dalits will not glorify their act of cleaning the dirt or excrement of the community, as this is forced upon them as a polluted people, whereas the act of Jesus was his own voluntary choice (Balasundaram, 1997a). No Dalit would like to remain as a suffering servant to others by force forever and this is not an aspect of

Dalitness to be glorified. This concept may be good for Jesus who was a Jew and a teacher, who suffered for the sins of others by his own will or that of his Father. For Dalits, the filthy, unclean and stigmatised jobs and the suffering that they face are forced on them against their will. It is not a voluntary option for Dalits but an enforced compulsion and oppression. Moreover, Dalitness should be understood as a collection of virtues – honesty, transparency, forgiveness, caring and a propensity for collective living – and not only as a subservient but also a subversive identity. In addition, Dalitness could be interpreted as an action of resistance and rebellion for regaining lost dignity. Therefore this insight is debatable and, in any case, at the moment this idea does not seem to feature in the thinking of struggling activists.

Prabhakar argues that Dalits, through their dehumanised existence, see the saving act of Jesus as a liberative action and see that he is a liberator (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997b p 405). As seen above, these kinds of reflections do not exist among ordinary activists. They do not connect the saving act of Jesus with an act of liberation from their caste bondage. For them, the action of Jesus is intended for all, saving them from sin and ensuring eternal life. This is the teaching that came to them. Connecting the liberating action to that of salvation is a theological reflection and does not find a place in the thinking of grass roots Dalit Christians. Therefore, seeing Christ as a liberator from their socio-economic bondage and dehumanised status does not seem to be present. But they very much see Jesus as a Saviour who saves them from their sins and offers salvation. This has been the prime teaching of the Church and Dalits listen to that carefully and believe accordingly. Of course if shared, the idea of Christ as liberator

would give them energy to sustain their life and struggle as Dalits. They will be able to understand, once it is explained to them, that for Dalits salvation means liberation from caste bondage. Nonetheless, at present they view Christ as a redeemer and saviour.

Nirmal's thesis is that the 'Nazareth Manifesto' appears to be only for Dalits and for their liberation (M. Azariah p 227). The term 'Nazareth Manifesto' is something new and unheard of, to ordinary Dalit Christians. I did not find such a view among those I interviewed (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 31, 40, 50, 59, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 116. The activists shared, "first time I hear this; no idea; not heard in church; hearing first time; talks about freedom and Dalit liberation"). When I interacted with them, they said that they had heard of manifestos of political parties at the time of general elections. This means that this thought or insight of calling the 'proclamation of Jesus a Manifesto for his life and mission' so far does not seem to have been shared with them. Therefore they are not able to see it as a manifesto carrying liberative slogans or assurances for their release from socio-economic oppression, as theologians suggest. When the contents of the Nazareth Manifesto are explained to them, they see it as a hope being offered by God to those who are in distress or oppression. However, in my view, it is not appropriate to see this manifesto as being only for Dalits as Nirmal argues, as it is for non-Dalits as well, who are in other kinds of bondage. For them also the Nazareth Manifesto brings meaning and hope. It is because Nirmal is so enthusiastic or passionate towards the cause of Dalits that he argues as he does. In any case, the village-based Dalit Christian activists do not have such a perception, although a few have heard of what Jesus said. Manifestos are popularly known to people as being

related to political party elections in a democracy. Further, in the Indian context, as I have observed, manifestos are never properly or fully implemented and realised by the parties once they come to power. Therefore this kind of an illustration runs the risk of being viewed negatively in the minds of the poor, owing to their perceptions and experiences of the political process. Further, if it is a manifesto as understood in secular terms, it has not brought liberation in the life of Dalits so far and there is no monitoring mechanism for its implementation.

Prabhakar's argument that the eschatological vision of Jesus that 'the first shall be the last and the last, first' means that Dalits can claim Jesus as a Dalit and Christ as Liberator (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997b p 410-419) is hardly found among Dalit Christian activists (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 31, 40, 50, 59, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 116. The activists said, " if we humble ourselves God will lift up us; Bible tells so; our Pastors say like this but they behave differently; no idea; pastors say that in heaven we will be like this; complete reversal in the kingdom of God; it will be in heaven; Dalits will enter into kingdom of God"). Eschatological visions and interpretations are mostly in the domain of theologians and it is not possible to see such insights amongst ordinary people, Dalits or non-Dalits, urbanised or rural. This notion or understanding is not found among the grass roots activists. For them, the concept of first and last is a symbolic metaphor for a place in heaven for those who suffer in this world. The other linked theological insight is that because of the eschatological hope of the last being the first, Dalits cannot be pushed to be last 'forever', as harassed, humiliated and rejected. Dalits need not and cannot remain in this position for the sake of the eschatological reward at the end. As

Massey shared with me when we met him in Delhi, 'even the status of 'Dalits' needs to be got rid of, as they want to enjoy full freedom like any other person'. He argues that Dalit status is not to be glorified but to be dropped in the long run, as it denotes oppression, humiliation and subjugation, though it provides vigour to transform the same. His position – that Dalits cannot remain Dalits forever in this broken status – is debatable. In fact, Dalit means broken people. Of course, they need to come out from this oppressed brokenness to enjoy the fullness of human beings. However, I believe that if the term Dalit denotes Dalitness, and refers to a community with laudable values of loving and caring, and respecting equality, justice and inclusiveness, then it need not be dropped but should be sustained and cherished.

In sum, this theme of 'Jesus a Dalit and Christ as liberator' is hardly found in the minds of the ordinary Dalit Christians although they understand that Jesus was with the poor and the marginalised and lived against injustice. For that reason, they do not seem to consider him as a Dalit but they are happy that Jesus lived among the downtrodden. They understand to some extent that Christ is a liberator but they do not relate this to their situation as argued by Dalit theologians. They view Christ as a liberator with a very general and normal understanding of the term. They largely view Jesus as God's son, indeed as God. His mission is to deliver people from the bondage of sin. He is a redeemer and salvation is only through him. They do not see him as a Dalit, in the manner defined by many Dalit theologians, nor do they see Christ as a liberator from socio-economic oppression. They have a general notion and faith that Jesus will liberate them from their misery, if they pray. They were not trained to understand Christ as a

liberator in the way that Dalit theologians argue. Second, since Jesus came as a poor person by divine choice, Dalits cannot use this argument to glorify their poverty or remain forever in poverty, as in their case this has been forced on them through caste and other exploitations. Therefore these kinds of illustrations neither find a place in nor seem relevant to the thought-processes of ordinary Dalits. These concepts could, however, be shared with them, to motivate them to feel that Jesus came as a poor person and that his mission was to save all of humanity, but very particularly Dalits who are in acute distress, owing to caste practices which result in social discrimination and economic deprivation. This theme needs to be handled carefully.

#### ***8.4 Theme: Dalits are called to struggle for transformation and also for the liberation of non-Dalits***

Dalit theologians by-and-large argue that Dalits are called to struggle. They see this as the mission of Dalits in this world in line with what the incarnated Jesus did. Massey describes Jesus's incarnation as identifying with the poor and disadvantaged to face even the Cross, in order to bring transformation and justice. According to him, this incarnation energises Dalits to engage in struggles to change the status quo (Massey, 1997a p 92-93).

The interviews undertaken as part of this study did not show that grass roots Dalit Christian activists have this kind of understanding. They view Jesus' incarnation as saving this world from sin. But they say that they are struggling already. They do not



connect their struggle with God calling them to struggle for transformation. Instead, their oppressed experiences have forced them to be involved in struggle (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 31, 40, 50, 59, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 116. They say, “I am helping poor and people to struggle; my family is in struggle; I am telling our people to struggle; we are already in struggle; we struggle for a long time”). They do not relate their struggle with that of Jesus or their responsibility to join him for a transformation as Dalit theologians argue. There is a difference between the reflections of theologians and the understanding of the people.

Prabhakar believes that Dalits understand the Dalitness in Jesus, who came to the world not to be served but to serve, and therefore they need to struggle to transform the devilish caste-oriented society into one where God’s rule of justice and peace will be established (M.E.Prabhakar, 1997b p 419). Dalit Christians do not seem to have had the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the concept ‘not to be served but to serve’, as described by Prabhakar. They do not correlate this with an understanding that their suffering is on a par with Jesus, and occurs in order to change society. This quote, ‘not to be served but to serve’, appears to them to be a simple teaching that human beings need to be more humble and less aggressive, and that they should not expect others to serve them, but that they need to serve others. Thus, Dalit Christians, or for that matter, any Christians often have a very simple or ordinary understanding of serving others. Therefore, the persons who were interviewed did not have the theological insight described by Prabhakar, about serving or struggling for others since Jesus came to serve humanity. I have already cited the understanding of the struggling activists. Also

their service to non-Dalits or the wider society is an enforced one, and their survival is based on their service. Ultimately, they want to be rid of this subjugated status and enforced service. Therefore it is natural that they do not have the understanding that their service is to transform society but rather, they see it as being necessary for their own survival. They struggle for their lives, and oppose caste, but not necessarily with the understanding described by Prabhakar. The struggle of Jesus is something different from the struggle of Dalits, as Jesus struggled to redeem the whole of humanity from their sin, but the struggles of Dalits are to defeat caste, which dehumanises them. Equating their suffering and Jesus's suffering cannot easily be accepted by Dalits as it could justify their subjugation. In case this quote has a theological meaning then non-Dalits should not expect Dalits to serve at all times or force them to serve. They are also created to serve others and not to be served.

Faustina suggests the parallel that Dalits have the status of exiles in their own country and that they have to struggle with the help of God to regain their status (Faustina, 1997 p 99). This is true according to the historical narrative widely adopted by Dalit rights movements. This status has continued for over 3000 years and as Dalit Christians they have faced a similar status for 300-400 years, clearly demonstrated by the requirement to term them Dalit Christians and not simply Christians. Their struggle has been from day one of their embracing Christianity. Their way of seeing the help of God in their struggle does not accord with the descriptions of the Dalit theologians. Ordinary Dalit Christians see God as the One who is there to provide a good life with comfort, safety and salvation but not necessarily as a God of liberation, as long as caste

oppression continues strongly in Christianity. I have not dealt with this separately in the interviews but through their sharing it is clear that Dalit Christians have been struggling for generations. They do not relate to the concept of the exile status, though they are forced to live outside the village. The church also did not address adequately this exile status of Dalits from the day it came to Indian soil. Therefore, they are sure that they are in their own homeland but discriminated against, rather than being exiled. Consequently, the descriptions of theologians are different from existing reality in the perception of grass roots Dalit Christians.

Similarly, Dalit theologians argue that Dalits are also called to struggle for the liberation of non-Dalits, who are mentally under caste oppression. Once caste is transformed by the struggles of Dalits it will release non-Dalits as well from their caste mindset (Massey, 1997a p 99). When this was raised with the interviewees, they did not seem to agree with the argument, as they said, as if with one voice, that non-Dalits will not relinquish caste and caste mentality. For this one question, they all came out with the same answer (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 32, 41, 50, 60, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 117. They say, “non Dalits will not come out of caste; non Dalits will not remove caste from themselves; they are oppressors and they will not drop caste; no mercy for kitten in the mouth of dogs”). Their apprehension appears to be too strong, owing to the acute oppression that they experience from non-Dalits, for this kind of notion that Dalits should struggle for non-Dalits to exist among the grass roots. The ground reality is such and therefore they are not able even to contemplate that they should struggle for non-Dalits as well. However, if this kind of theological idea is shared with them, it will help them to

look at non-Dalits sympathetically, as they are also under caste oppression mentally. So far it does not appear to have happened.

Besides these themes, I raised questions with the interviewees about who their source of motivation for challenging caste and organising struggles is. Almost all interviewees said that it is Ambedkar, the icon of Dalits, and local Dalit leaders. A couple of them, while considering Ambedkar as their leader, say that Jesus is their motivator (see Appendix 7: pages – 19, 29, 38, 48, 57, 67, 77, 87, 96, 105 and 114. They say, “Ambedkar our leader; Jesus is God; Jesus gave talents to Ambedkar”). This shows that the themes articulated by Dalit theologians in their reflections and writings have not adequately reached grass roots Christians who are in the struggle against caste. There are more chances for them to develop this kind of an insight if it is properly shared with them and it will definitely be a source of inspiration to intensify their struggle against caste on behalf of non-Dalits as well.

### ***8.5 Theme: Salvation for Dalits is liberation from caste***

Christian eschatology deals with the last times in terms of the future of this world, the second coming of Jesus, the resurrection of all those who have died, judgment and the Kingdom of God. However, Dalit theologians argue that for Dalits it is not only final salvation, but liberation from caste, which represents their full salvation. Gnanavaram says that, for Dalits, salvation is freedom from caste and its oppressive structures to enjoy justice and peace (Gnanavaram, 1997 p 477-478). This theological reflection

appears to be relevant, considering the plight of Dalits but again, this understanding is hardly present among ordinary Dalit Christians (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 31, 41, 50, 60, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 117. They say, “salvation is from Jesus Christ; salvation is from sin; salvation is for all; I work for salvation; Jesus gave us salvation; I understand Dalit liberation is salvation but it is not told by church; no idea; salvation is for all; all of us need salvation from sin”). For them, as already discussed, salvation is predominantly freedom from sin, and the belief that Jesus has brought salvation. They do not connect the world of caste with that of the final happenings. This idea of full salvation emphasises that for Dalits the caste system brings more agony than sin, and therefore Gnanavaram argues that its elimination is salvation for them in this world but this interpretation does not seem to be in the minds of Dalit Christians. They do, however, want to get rid of caste and live in justice and peace.

Massey’s argument is that since Dalits embraced Christianity they are assured of salvation but that this is only half salvation, and that full salvation for Dalits is to escape from caste oppression (Massey, 1997a p. 94). He agrees with Gnanavaram’s statement. For both of them, full salvation is based on the annihilation of caste. However, the absorption of this understanding by the grass roots is largely missing. Of course, the grass roots want to challenge caste, and escape from its oppression. But they are not able to connect this with the idea of salvation. The Indian Church appears not to have given such teachings or concepts to its congregations. It simply talks about a traditional understanding of freedom from sin, for which Jesus came and died and assured us of salvation. This perception is predominant among ordinary Christians. They are not able

to connect salvation with freedom from worldly oppression. The word 'salvation' denotes freedom from sin, and that is set in their minds. The other difficulty is the understanding of 'half salvation'. For Massey, it is possible to divide salvation into half and full, but for ordinary people, this is not possible. This argument also leads me to raise the question of whether salvation is ensured only to those who embrace Christianity. If that is the case, then it sounds as if the majority of Dalits who are still in other faiths will not experience salvation. This leads to a major doctrinal debate. The other alternative conclusion is that salvation cannot be divided into quarter, half and full according to our convenience. Massey's argument is based upon the importance of annihilating caste as a source of oppression, and a means of preventing the enjoyment of freedom by all, and to that extent the argument has validity. In any case, Dalit Christians at the grass roots have not been introduced to this kind of thinking, so their perceptions cannot be judged.

A further argument is that the struggles of Dalits against caste will bring salvation to non-Dalits as well, since they are under the mental oppression of caste through their caste mindset, while Dalits are under physical, social and economic oppression due to caste (Massey and S.Lourduswamy, 2003 p 129). This image, of Dalits struggling for non-Dalits has been discussed earlier. As stated there, ordinary Dalit Christians do not seem to have any idea that their struggle is to bring salvation or liberation to non-Dalits as well. Of course, non-Dalits are also under caste oppression as they are caught in the mental oppression of casteism but this kind of interpretation is quite strange and alien to the understanding of ordinary and even educated Dalits and non-Dalits. Many strongly caste-minded non-Dalits will neither be prepared to abandon nor to exit the caste system

as it would be detrimental to their status, pride and the privileges that they enjoy in the name of caste, nor will they accept that they possess a caste mindset and that the struggles of Dalits will liberate them from this. Equally, Dalits do not have the inclination that they need to struggle for the freedom of non-Dalits as well. For Dalits, non-Dalits are the oppressors and enjoy all sorts of dominance, power and privilege. As already discussed, Dalits do not possess enough insight or generosity to struggle for the purpose of releasing non-Dalits from the oppression of their casteist mindset, even if this would be a by-product of their victory over caste. In short, for theologians and academics, this kind of reflection and interpretation sounds very pertinent, and also it gives a positive meaning or credit to Dalits as they struggle even for their oppressors, and to eliminate this social evil which is satanic. But for ordinary Dalits, non-Dalits are their oppressors and enemies. Dalits do not have any notion or perception that they should struggle for the liberation of them as well. It is too much for Dalits to perceive that their struggle is for the well-being of non-Dalits also. Therefore I did not find such an understanding among grass roots Dalit Christians, either in connection with questions of salvation or eschatological responsibility. Salvation they view in simple terms, connecting it with sin in relation to the end of the world. In addition I raise again the same concern raised earlier: if Dalits enjoy half salvation because they embraced Christianity with the promise of salvation, and full salvation only with the elimination of caste, then should not the same principle be applied to non-Dalit Christians as well? Since they also embraced Christianity and the assurance of salvation, they too enjoy only half salvation and full salvation should only be possible after their caste mindset is eliminated, and that too, as argued by Massey, by the struggles of Dalits. Moreover, this

interpretation of salvation evades the question of Dalits in other faiths who also struggle against caste oppression.

The understanding described above represents the views held by grass roots Dalit Christian activists concerning salvation. Similarly, when asked about their understanding of the Kingdom of God, which has been described by Dalit theologians as a parallel to Dalit culture and Dalitism, the grass roots activists expressed it with a spiritual understanding only. They do not seem to have understood the way that Dalit theologians argue (see Appendix 7: pages – 22, 32, 41, 51, 60, 69, 80, 89, 98, 107 and 117. They say, “no idea about Kingdom of god and Dalit culture; not understood; no idea; God will bring his kingdom; kingdom of God where Jesus is; all will live together at the end”). This does not mean that Dalit theologians are unrealistic in glorifying Dalitism – the culture of Dalits – and aligning it with the values of the Kingdom of God, as Dalitism is claimed to embody inclusivism, equality, justice and harmonious living. The only lacuna is that these ideas have not been presented in a way that grass roots Dalits can apprehend. If they could be shown the relationship between the Kingdom of God and Dalitness, then perhaps they would view salvation differently and relate it to release from worldly oppression. There is, therefore, a clear gap between the discernment of theologians and that of ordinary Christians.

In any case, I was able to see that, although the perceptions of Dalit Christians at the grass roots are different from those of Dalit theologians, the traditional way of understanding salvation or the Kingdom of God has certainly empowered Dalits to



remain in Christianity, and has psychologically strengthened them to engage in struggle with the hope that they will be freed from the bondage of sin and caste. However, the specific themes of Dalit Theology, for me, still have every potential for energising the faith of Dalit Christians further and for providing a source of greater motivation and inspiration in addition to other secular liberational perspectives. Up to now, they have not been shared adequately, despite the existence of Dalit Theology for around thirty years.

### **9. The perception of Dalit pastors/priest on the status and relevance of Dalit Theology**

Themes of Dalit Theology and its status among the grass roots have been discussed in detail. The fact has also been discussed and analysed that the lay leaders of grass roots Dalit Christians do not have the same understanding with regard to the major themes that have been developed and argued by Dalit theologians. When interviewing Dalit pastors and priests, however, I found that they are more in tune with the perception, themes, ideas and Biblical narratives developed and argued by Dalit theologians. They said that they have access to Dalit Theology in their seminaries and theological colleges. They have read books on Dalit Theology, if not constantly and in depth, and have contacts with Dalit theologians, although not very regularly. They have either studied or attended some programmes or meetings on Dalit Theology. Therefore, they can reflect upon and interpret Dalit Theology in line with Dalit theologians, if not at the same length as Dalit theologians. They view God as the God of the oppressed. They

see the image of God as providing a special basis for Dalits to claim human status, dignity and equality, on a par with other human beings, which also gives them a responsibility to transform society. They see that the struggles of Dalit Christians will bring liberation to both Dalits and non-Dalits. They agree that the Church has to intensify its mission to support the struggles of Dalit Christians and to encourage Dalits of other faiths to rid themselves of the caste system. However, they all agree that the perceptions of grass roots Dalit Christians are not in line with the perceptions, reflections or arguments of Dalit theologians. They invariably shared that there is a significant gap between the perception-level of Dalit theologians, even pastors, and Dalit Christians as a whole. They also observed that Dalit Theology – or any theology for that matter – did not cross the threshold of seminaries and theological institutions. They were of the view that the church hierarchy is mostly in the hands of non-Dalits. Of course change occurs slowly, and it is not possible for pastors or priests to talk about caste in the church. Even among congregations there exists polarisation, and it is difficult to talk about caste or challenge local churches overtly as congregation members are uncomfortable about preaching or teaching on such matters.

However, they did say that, since they are Dalit clergy, they do have access to Dalit Theology, and they are convinced by its perceptions and arguments. They do act differently from non-Dalit pastors, based on the theological education they received, and through the insights of Dalit Theology, in addition to their own experiences of discrimination. The ground reality, though, is that they are not in favour of talking about caste or its oppression, or overtly challenging caste and changing systems and

structures. They blame the church hierarchy – Dalits and non-Dalits – for this situation. They are unhappy that even the Dalit hierarchy is hesitant in talking about caste in the Church due to the fear of losing support from non-Dalits. Congregational attitudes conform to the same pattern. In sum, the status of Dalit Theology among the grass roots is largely very weak and inconspicuous (see Appendix 7: pages - 124-129; 135-139; 146-150; 155-159 and 166-172).

Sharing with pastors and priests reminded me of my conversations with Dalit theologians whom I met during the course of my field-study in a number of cities and theological colleges. They defend the idea that Dalit Theology is contextual and liberative, and argue that it has found a place in academia and ecclesia. When I shared about its inadequate presence among ordinary Christians, they insisted its relevance to grass roots Dalit Christians as praxis to further motivate them to transform caste practices. However, they feel that it is not their role or responsibility to engage with the grass roots and that this needs to be done by the Church and church workers. This includes clergy and lay leaders who have got their contacts, connections and various relationships with grass roots church members and believers. They agree that their reflections and writings are in the form of books and articles, and also find a place as discussion topics in a range of seminars and conferences. The theologians feel that all these need to be translated, simplified and shared in various forms and styles with those who are at grass roots level, in order to energise their faith and struggles. Also, they suggest that faith perspectives and insights that already exist among the grass roots in the form of songs, slogans, stories, colloquial expressions, resistance gestures, and

even the traditional drum beatings, could also be theologised to exemplify the expansion of Dalit Theology.

Therefore both priests and pastors, and also the Dalit theologians, argue that there is real potential and relevance for Dalit Theology in terms of motivating and energising struggling Dalits to sustain their faith and struggle. This theology also has a role to play among non-Dalits in challenging their caste mindset and in changing their attitudes and perceptions to be more sympathetic to Dalits and to oppose the evil of caste.

#### **10. The status and the need for Dalit Theology to become a Practical theology of praxis**

As seen above, Dalit Theology needs to develop as a Practical theology of praxis to reach out to the grass roots to share its theological insights and reflections as a source of motivation. Such an engagement would additionally strengthen the faith of struggling Dalit Christians to intensify their struggle with a renewed vigour. In addition to this, during the course of engagement, Dalit Theology will also gain the practical insights from the struggling grass roots people to reformulate its themes. For example, even a simple faith that prevails among the grass roots that 'God is my father, protector and refuge' is sufficient for the struggling people to continue their struggle, instead of thinking that 'God is the God of the oppressed; God's preferential option is for the chosen people; and God will listen to the cry of the chosen people'. This simple faith is sufficient

to approach God or to cry out to God. This ordinary faith does not demand a preferential status or a promised option of God. Similarly the simple faith that 'I believe in prayer; God listens to my prayer and answers to protect me; and also gives victory to me' is more than enough for any struggling people to sustain their struggles, instead of claiming that 'they have become God's people from a no people status'. Equally, the simple faith that 'I am created in the image of God' is sufficient to gain strength for challenging oppression, instead of analysing the concept of *imago dei* and developing an inspiration based on that principle. Along the same line, the proclamation and the mission of Jesus that 'he incarnated; lived among the ordinary people; and opposed the oppressors' is sufficient without jargon like the Nazareth Manifesto. In addition, the faith that 'God is with me in my struggle' is enough for them to involve in struggle, rather than thinking that 'Christ served for others and therefore I need to serve others'. The same is true for an understanding of salvation and the Kingdom of God. The struggling people need not necessarily seek to equate their struggles and liberation with salvation or the values of the Kingdom of God. Their practical faith that God will give them strength and provide them victory could also be sufficient to spearhead their struggle. The very ordinary and traditional meanings of salvation and the Kingdom of God are already playing a substantial role in sustaining the faith and strengthening the challenge to caste oppression of grass roots Dalit Christians.

Thus, Dalit theology through its engagement with the grass roots could have the opportunity to reformulate its themes on the basis of the theological insights of struggling people, though they appear to be ordinary and simple. This would help Dalit theology to

expand its liberative themes alongside the intellectual reflections of Dalit theologians. This does not mean that the well articulated themes of Dalit Theology are not necessary or out of place for the grass roots. Of course they would be largely and immensely helpful for the struggling people to further shape their faith and obtain additional inspiration and sustained motivation besides secular motivations and ordinary faith orientations. Therefore, engaging with grass roots is a serious necessity for Dalit Theology to emerge as a Practical theology of praxis.

This analysis, based on the outcome of the field work, demonstrates that although there is potential for Dalit theology to be a source of motivation for the struggling grass roots Dalit Christians, currently it does not make its presence adequately felt. Thus my hunch and hypothesis are proved correct, namely, that as of now, Dalit Theology remains in the domain of academia and ecclesia. However, there is a greater need for it to emerge as a Practical theology of praxis to engage with the grass roots in order to become an action-based liberational theology. But the way in which Dalit Theology could be carried to the grass roots is an important question. On the basis of this analysis, I spell out briefly some suggestions in the next chapter for possible ways in which Dalit Theology could engage with the grass roots.

## **Chapter Seven – Conclusion: Making this work – Proposals for a Transformative Pedagogy.**

### **1.The need for a proposal**

Chapter Six elucidates that Dalit Christians, especially the majority who live at the grass roots level, struggle against caste oppression mostly with secular perspectives but with a strong traditional faith that God is their protector, listens to their prayers and is with them in their struggle. It has also been argued that the liberational themes, articulated well by Dalit theologians, and which have the potential to enhance their motivation theologically, seem substantially not to have reached grass roots Dalit Christians. Therefore, there is a greater need for Dalit theology to emerge as a Practical theology of praxis, to engage with grass roots Dalit Christians to energise their theological insights to sustain their ongoing struggles. For this to happen there is a need for a suitable methodology to carry Dalit Theology to the grass roots. This chapter tries to suggest a methodology to develop Dalit Theology a Practical theology of praxis.

### **2. Methodology – to be relevant to ground reality**

Any methodology that addresses people's issues should be relevant and helpful to the ground reality of the people for whom it is designed. As elaborated above, Dalit Christians are largely poor, rurally based and not adequately educated. Though they are faithful and regular attendees at church and worship, they do not seem to have had any

serious opportunity or space so far to gain access to theology and especially to Dalit Theology. Through the interviews I noticed that there appears to have been no adequate or serious effort initiated by the Church or the clergy to introduce theology or Dalit Theology to grass roots Dalit Christians in order to help them address the issue of caste within or outside the Church, except for a few nominal or sporadic efforts made by Dalit pastors and priests in certain pockets. In addition, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, Dalit theological literature is mostly in English and only now are some sporadic efforts being made to publish books or literature in the vernacular. Also, since the literacy level of grass roots Dalit Christians is low and they remain in rural areas, they are not greatly benefitted by such materials when they come in the form of books and articles, regardless of language. Even for those who have education and function as activists they do not have access to such theological books and literature, which are mostly available only in urban areas, in colleges and institutions. Furthermore, the grass roots are seldom invited to participate in theological conferences and discourses, which have largely become the domain of the educated, and those in positions of power in the Church and ecclesiastical institutions (see Appendix 7: pages – 20, 30, 39, 48, 58, 67, 78, 87, 96, 106 and 115. They all say: “we have not attended any such meetings or conferences; we have not read any books on Dalit Theology; we have not been invited for such meetings”). As a result, as of now, the theological insights of Dalit Christians are conspicuously underdeveloped. Of course, they remain Christians by faith, but not with sufficient liberation-oriented faith perspectives to inspire them theologically to engage in actions to challenge caste, and transform Church and society. Their faith is largely limited to viewing God as their Father and Creator, and so they worship Him. They



believe in prayer and pray largely for their basic needs: protection, well-being and salvation and of course it helps them to involve in struggles. Therefore, they seem not to have been adequately informed of Dalit theological perspectives which might help them to oppose caste. While there is nothing wrong with simply having a faith in God to initiate their struggle against caste, I feel that it needs to be further shaped and developed as a liberative faith, which will help Dalits to intensify their struggle. Therefore, there is an urgent need for Dalit Theology to emerge as a Practical theology, to engage with grass roots Dalit Christians and to nurture in them faith to sustain and intensify their struggles to set them free. As the interviewees said, such an engagement with Dalit Theology would act as a catalyst to shape their faith theologically in order to intensify their ongoing struggles to transform the caste system, in addition to the perspectives of Ambedkar. Furthermore, such a method would help to identify the basic faith and insights that exist among the grass roots, which could help Dalit Theology to enlarge its themes and motivational insights. The only question is how to bring this about. This ground reality demands a relevant methodology for Dalit Theology to interact with grass roots Christians.

### **3. The Proposal: Transformative informal education**

#### ***3.1 Its broader definition***

Thirty years of grass roots experience and recent wide reading have helped me to choose and propose the methodology of transformative informal education for

developing Dalit Theology as a Practical theology. This method would help the grass roots Dalit Christians who are mostly rurally based and inadequately educated. Informal education is different from formal education. It is otherwise known as non-formal or adult education. While formal education is universally known for its institution-based, systematised learning, informal education is learning through everyday life-situations, mainly by means of involvement and action. However, all informal or non-formal or adult education is not necessarily transformative in character. When the transformative character of conscientising and motivating the oppressed to engage in action to challenge and transform the oppressive system is absorbed, then informal education becomes a vital and viable tool for transformation. I am therefore of the strong opinion that a transformative informal education method could play the role of an educational catechism to Christian theological perspectives, particularly Dalit theological perspectives, among grass roots Dalit Christians to inspire and facilitate the process of praxis, of action for change. As Walters says, it is a life-transition education, having concern for effecting both personal and social change (Walters, 1993 p 68). In line with that argument of Gutiérrez, it could play the role of a liberating evangelisation (Nickoloff, 2003 p 236). This method has got a range of characteristics and features for conscientisation, inspiration and motivation, in order to organise struggles for transformation. Basically, a transformative, informal method of education has certain characteristics which include inducing and helping the oppressed to gather informally, to participate in dialogue and discussion, to reflect and analyse on the causes and reasons for their oppressed position, to help them to become conscientised, and to make them own the process of strategising. All this enables them to take collective decisions to

engage in struggles to transform the oppressive system and structures. Furthermore, this transformative informal education uses many different techniques, namely, discussion groups, interactions, workshops, dialogues, conversations, street plays, dramas, skits, songs, cultural performances, community actions and campaigns, to enable the oppressed to become conscientised and involved in transformative actions. The characteristics and the features of transformative informal education are described and discussed in order to demonstrate that this is a viable method for enlarging Dalit Theology into a Practical theology, and thus for engaging with grass roots Dalit Christians in order to change the caste scenario.

### **3.2 *Its main characteristics***

As described, informal education *per se* is not necessarily a transformative education. However, in the form presented here, informal education, in a broader or general form, could assume the transformative character of conscientising and motivating the oppressed to become involved in the action-reflection process of liberative praxis. This assimilation would develop the general character of informal education into a transformative one. Thus, transformative informal education would take a particular form, like non-formal or adult education, but the qualitative difference is that it would become transformative. In the words of Freire, informal education is primarily a liberative education, different from a teacher-student type of narrative education, which is rather akin to the concept of banking, having a character of depositing and domesticating (Freire, 2000 p 71-73). In line with this definition, the proposed

transformative informal education method could help oppressed Dalit Christians to become theologically conscientised and motivated to involve themselves in action for their liberation from caste oppression. It differs from a classroom education, which is widely known as narrative, formal or academic. As Freire says, classroom education has been designed by the oppressors to maintain the status quo in society, which tends to increase social segregation, and perpetuate and widen class distinctions **(Freire, 1983 p 10)**. Thus transformative informal education helps the oppressed, here the Dalit Christians, to participate in reflecting and interacting theologically, once the theological input is shared with them informally. They become the owners of this action-reflection process, and this feeling of ownership provides them with energy, confidence and power to sustain their struggles. As Freire precisely puts it, informal education can be seen as the pedagogy of the oppressed. It is developed by them and not by the oppressors. The oppressed themselves are the owners of this education, and they participate in a process of reflection to engage in transforming activity to overthrow oppressive systems and structures, ensuring liberation and gaining full human personality (Freire, 1993 (1970) p 48-49). This is what this thesis also argues. My emphasis is that when transformative informal education conscientises Dalit Christians with theological insights, that will lead them to own the process of action-reflection and become collectively locked into transformative action. This amounts to *praxis*.

Transformative informal education will help Dalit Christians to free themselves from being dictated to by others from outside, but it will also help them to reflect and act on their own. Freire argues that informal education is against the 'banking' concept of

narrative, classroom or formal education. Formal education, especially in India, may encourage students or participants just to memorise and accept mechanically what is given to them. There is insufficient space for interacting or reflecting upon the opinion or view of the recipient. The participants simply have to listen to and agree with what is given to them by the 'educator'. But informal education allows the oppressed to reflect and interact, individually and collectively, to become conscientised and involved in struggles – even with a revolutionary character – in order to change oppressive systems and structures in their favour (Freire, 1993 (1970) p 71-75). Although the present day education system in many parts of the world has brought many changes in terms of giving space and opportunity to the students to reflect upon and interact on the basis of their own view point, it mostly helps to maintain the status quo and does not provide sufficient opportunity to look critically at the oppressiveness of a system and to energise the students to challenge and change the same. But informal education is a mass education which helps a community to reflect and interact to effect change in the system and the structure. This is the core of informal education i.e., to enable people to become conscientised and involved in transformative action on their own, and not under the direction or diktat of an outsider. Freire introduced this method among the base communities in Latin America, to conscientise the people in order to rid themselves of economic exploitation and regain their self-esteem. When he was invited to introduce an educational system in Guinea-Bissau, a west African country which had liberated itself from 500 years of Portuguese rule, he used the same pedagogy, in the name of an Adult Literacy Program, to educate the people to leave behind the colonised education model and promote a praxis model for reconstruction (Freire, 1978 p 7-9). In both of these

contexts, it produced positive results. The same transformative informal education method could be introduced in order to disseminate the Dalit theological insights among grass roots Dalit Christians.

Hence, I agree with Freire on the essence and overall objectives of informal education as a method for ensuring liberation, and propose the same method for Dalit Theology to engage with grass roots Dalit Christians. Once a theological orientation is shared through this method, Dalit Christians may gain space to reflect and interact theologically and understand that God and Christ are with them in their struggle, as Dalit theologians argue. In the words of Green, 'theology is contemplative, instructive and transformative and it helps us to discern God's presence and to work with him for transforming ourselves and the society' (Green, 2009 p 113-114). Therefore, the uniqueness of the transformative informal education method is that ordinary Dalit Christians would be given sufficient space to participate in dialogue and critical reflection, and gain faith-oriented motivation for the activation of their struggle. In the words of Groome,

this participative pedagogy actively engages people in dialogue and faith sharing; commitment to education that is just and emancipatory; promoting critical consciousness; ongoing conversations; and agency for social transformation, honoring God's presence in people's life in the world' (Thomas H. Groome, 1980 p x).

Transformative informal education is also broadly known as non-formal education, and it aims to challenge oppressive cultural norms and power structures. According to Niehoff, it provides space for the disadvantaged to participate, communicate and enhance their skills, in order to make orderly changes to the cultural norms and power structures that

stand in the way of an equitable social and economic framework (Neff, 1977 p 8,12). The other distinctive characteristic of informal education is learning through sharing, and interaction in the workplace, within families, in community organisations, in social actions and in social and political struggles (Foley, 1999 p 7). This is a vital phenomenon among Dalit Christians as they already have the practice of sharing their views and insights as part of their collective life. Therefore, if theological insight is shared with them, they can discuss it in their families, workplaces, and community gatherings and meetings, which will enable them to reflect and act. One more important characteristic of informal education is its proximity to 'dialogue', which is very common among Dalits. As Willis and Walter state, 'dialogue is an inspiring approach, to challenge other humans in love and equality to undertake a process for liberation' (Walters, 1993 p 83). Through dialogue, theological insights can be shared among Dalit Christians and they will carry the debates forward with their fellow Dalits. Transformative informal education promotes both reflection and action. Hope and Timmel quote the words of Freire when discussing the 'Training for Transformation', that 'reflection without action is mere verbalism; action without reflection is pure activism' (Hope and Timmel, 2001 in preface p 2). These descriptions substantiate the argument for introducing the method of informal education to facilitate the process of action-reflection in Dalit Theology in order to enhance engagement with grass roots Dalit Christians in the manner of a fully practical theology.

### **3.3 *Its salient features***

The main features of transformative informal education, such as discussion groups, action-reflection workshops, songs, street plays, local cultural performances and community actions have been listed above. Each one appears to be separate, but they are interconnected. Any single method could be developed along with any other, with the aim of conscientising and motivating the oppressed. The objective of using any method is to facilitate the oppressed to reflect critically, to decide and to act. Hence, any of these methods or mechanisms could be used according to the context. There is no compulsion or hard-and-fast rule that one particular method is 'the method' for any given situation. Since these are the main mechanisms being used in informal education, Dalit Christians could pick and choose any of them for their reflection, interaction, decision-making and involvement in action, depending on the context. Thus, a method is selected based on the ground situation of the people for whom it is being applied. For example, Reddie often used the method of drama in the UK among Black people. Reddie argues for drama as the best vehicle for assisting Black people to increase their awareness and involvement in action to change fundamentally the attitudes of the churches in Britain. In his words,

giving voice to the voiceless by way of dramatizing theologies is nothing less than a process of critical advocacy. It is a way of assisting marginalised people to learn more about themselves and the world, through the framework of religion. It is a process...of faith that can sustain and empower (Anthony G Reddie, 2006b p 29).

He argues that drama can provide a creative means for the disempowered to think critically and engage in action for transformation.



Similarly, while arguing for a Black theological approach to countering violence against Black people, he introduces 'group exercises' among Black people to identify the oppressors and their dynamics (Anthony G Reddie, 2008 p 151-153). This is exactly what this thesis also proposes. For the UK context, Reddie has chosen drama and group exercises among Black people. For the Indian context, especially for the grass roots Dalit Christians, the method of drama could also be a viable method to conscientise them. However, it could also be linked with discussion groups or workshops. One cannot suddenly go and perform a drama in a village situation in India. For Reddie, it was possible, since churches and church groups already existed in the UK, and therefore he made use of that space or forum to perform drama. But in the Indian context, one cannot just go and set up a drama in a church or in its vicinity all of a sudden. Churches are filled with both Dalit and non-Dalit Christians. In addition, in the village scenario, especially in churches, there are hardly any youth-, women- or elders-groups currently in operation. Therefore it is very difficult in the Indian village context to start using drama. However it could be used in the course of a discussion group or workshop, which is possible. Village people could be asked to assemble for a meeting, as they call it. And in the course of such meetings, drama could be used as a method to share theological insights, ideas, criticism and solutions. Therefore, while agreeing that drama is a viable activity for conscientising Dalit Christians, to begin with, it might be best used in the course of a discussion group or workshop.

Mukti Barton argues for 'workshops' as a vital tool for bringing together women of different faiths to read and reflect on their respective scriptures, as a source of

empowerment to liberate them from oppressions, which include patriarchy, classism and religion-based oppression (Barton, 1999 p 89-91). She says workshops are a place, a tool, where women can meet in large numbers, participate in worship or discussion, read their scriptures, clarify doubts, exchange views and thus empower themselves to challenge oppressive structures. Workshops appear to be a viable and workable method at the grass roots in India as well, as Barton has done in Bangladesh. Barton was able to use this method, which was already being practiced by a local NGO that was active among women. Therefore, it was easy for her to apply it to enable the participants to read scripture and to interact. In the Indian context, there is a positive and a negative aspect to this practice of workshops among the grass roots. If an NGO already works in a particular area, the method of holding workshops may already have been tried there. Otherwise, it would need to be introduced. If Dalit Christians already have the experience of meeting and discussing under the auspices of an NGO, or on their own, it will be easier to pursue an agenda of introducing theological insights among them, using the workshop method. But there may be a practical problem. If Dalit Christians have participated in such meetings and workshops under NGO influence, they will have done it largely with Dalits of other faiths, mostly Hindus. In a mixed group it is difficult to share Christian Dalit theological insights. The other crucial problem is that India faces severe communal problems on the grounds of religious faith, and therefore it is not possible to teach Christian theological insights in a mixed group context, where Christians and Hindus jointly participate. Consequently, Dalit Christians will need to have separate meetings or workshops in which these things could be shared. The activity of workshops

or discussion groups used by Mukti Barton in Bangladesh, however, does seem to be a suitable method for Dalit Christians in India also.

As Green argues, 'Bibliodrama, expressive arts, charting and brainstorming' could also be used as possible methods (Green, 2009 p 135) among Dalit Christians, with the help of community activists who could play the role of 'people's theologians'. Training is another vital method (Green, 2009 p 142-143) for helping grass roots Dalit Christians, especially the activists, who could play the role of 'people's theologians', as they would carry theological insights to the people with their own experience, accent and examples.

### ***3.4 Informal education method: a prototype***

Since I have been a Dalit rights activist for many years, the range of methods or mechanisms for informal education which are described here are not entirely new to me, nor to Dalit Christian activists at the grass roots level. By-and-large, they are familiar with some, if not all, such methods. India, especially the state of Tamilnadu, is known for the presence of a large number of NGOs or Action Groups who apply these methods for the awakening of the marginalised and discriminated against. Informal or non-formal education has been around for a long time to promote adult literacy. Some NGOs introduced Freire's method of 'problem-oriented education', mainly to address the issue of class-based oppression, and in the case of some Dalit NGOs, to address caste-based oppression. This is how most of the disadvantaged have become familiar with these mechanisms and with the action-reflection struggle process, if not in all villages. They

assemble for meetings, as they call them – not necessarily using the title ‘discussion groups’ or ‘workshops’ or ‘action-reflection processes’ – where they are helped by social or human rights activists to interact and reflect on how to take decisions to promote struggle. Such initiatives use the methods of workshops, discussion groups, street theatre and other cultural performances to conscientise the oppressed. This is a common phenomenon, although it does not happen in every village or Dalit hamlet. Here it is important to note that in the Indian context, rural areas are divided into villages and hamlets – locally known as ‘main village’ where the caste people live and ‘cheri’ or ‘colony’, where Dalits live. Mostly villagers and Dalits meet separately, while in some places they meet jointly but with segregated seating. The point this thesis makes is that many Dalit Christians, if not all, would be familiar with the practice of assembling for such meetings, but mostly together with others, not separately as Christians, unless it is for worship. Therefore meetings, workshops and discussion groups are not an entirely new idea or venture. At the same time there may be places where Dalit Christians will not have had the experience of meeting for discussion or workshops. In such places, this method has to be introduced which is not a difficult task.

It is also the case that Dalit Christian associations, organisations and networks exist in this state and across India. Many of them use such methods to enable Dalit Christians, mostly in urban areas, to interact, decide upon and take action – but with a secular perspective – to address caste within the Church. The factor largely missing is ‘theological orientation’. Of course, the secular groups, organisations or movements are not concerned with sharing theological insights with the affected masses. But Dalit

Christian movements are also hardly giving adequate importance to these issues in order to enable people to reflect, interact and act theologically. This is a glaring and a painful omission. At most, these groups pray at the commencement and closure of such meetings and even this is not a regular practice in all places. This has been confirmed by the interviewees, who are all known Dalit Christian activists in the state of Tamilnadu and who also represent a range of Dalit Christian organisations, networks and movements. Being a Dalit Christian, and having access to a number of Dalit Christian campaigns and movements at state- and national-levels, I also found that hardly any theological discussion took place among their members, either to reflect critically on their oppressed status or to work out strategies for struggle-promotion. Dalit activists and group members, whether Christian or Dalits of other faiths, often reflect on their circumstances from secular perspectives only.

Given this reality, my proposal for introducing transformative informal educational methods to enable Dalit Christians to assemble and become oriented theologically to reflect and act is very possible. My field study experience affirms that Dalit Christians would be very receptive to such methods, orientations and discussions. I have seen this during my interviews. The interviews were more-or-less an interaction between the researcher and the interviewees. The interviewees showed enormous interest in knowing about theology and Dalit Theology, and I found that the themes articulated in Dalit Theology really encouraged the interviewees towards a faith perspective. Therefore, based on my earlier, and also present, field study experience, I propose this methodology of transformative informal education for Dalit Theology to engage with

grass roots. This is how Dalit Theology could play the role of a Practical theology of praxis. This will help Dalit Christians to take on struggles with a renewed orientation, strength and vigour. This method will also help to identify the theological understanding and insights that already exist among the grass roots which will help Dalit Theology to expand its themes and motivational insights.

Such efforts could lead to the formation of a faith-based mass movement, beginning in the state of Tamilnadu, and later that could be expanded to other states as well. Currently, Dalit Christian movements exist at local-, state- and national-level but lack the potential of a faith-based movement. As discussed, they hardly reflect theologically, and subscribe to secular perspectives like any other mass movement. Once these transformative informal education methods are used in such movements, it might result in developing more genuinely faith-based movements. Such formation need not end with organising struggles against caste oppression, but could grow gradually to address other crucial issues like corruption, nepotism, class-based discrimination, power-mongering and victimisation, which exist in the Church and church-based institutions. There is a growing need for such a faith-based movement in India among Christians. Once Dalit Christians promote and become involved in such movements, it may motivate non-Dalit Christians also to support such movements to challenge the other vices in the church. These movements need not confine their challenges to the church, but could extend them to challenge all oppressive, divisive, authoritarian, undemocratic and exploitative forces in society at large. Transformative informal education could play the role of a really effective tool for both Dalit and non-Dalit

Christians, to raise their voices against all oppression and victimisation, in the Church and the wider society.

### ***3.5 Training of trainers - a primary requisite for informal education***

As discussed, transformative informal education with a range of methods is a vehicle for developing Dalit Theology as a Practical theology among the grass roots. But the important questions or concerns are how this method would be introduced among the grass roots, who would facilitate sharing and discussing the theological themes and insights articulated by Dalit theologians and also, who would find out the theological understandings that are already extant among the grass roots? There would need to be some persons, well-versed in or familiarised with Dalit theological insights as articulated by Dalit theologians, who would have the capability, time and energy to share and interact with grass roots Dalit Christians. This is a vital requirement. Presently, church workers, viz., the pastors or priests, are unable to do this for various reasons described above. Most theological seminaries and colleges do not seem **to** have this agenda, of taking theology to the grass roots, although they discuss this with their students. Dalit theologians also have little or no time or space to undertake this responsibility. In short, all these actors would hardly have time or space to play the role adequately of introducing the informal education method. In such a situation, there is a need for a separate group to be involved in the task of taking theological insights into communities, but such persons should be equipped and capacitated with theological, especially Dalit theological, orientations.

Here the question of 'training of the trainers' becomes apparent. In the words of Freire, for transforming an educational system, the training of a new group of teachers and the retraining of old ones who are prepared to understand the new method and commit to carry it forward are essential (Freire, 1978 p 15). Thus, there is a need for selecting and training people who could play the role of educators for the grass roots. Many Dalit Christian youths are already familiar with such methods of education and are already largely available. The only deficiency is that they are not theologically oriented, though they are Christian. Currently, as discussed, they spearhead their struggles with secular perspectives. Therefore, these youths could easily be identified and selected for a theological orientation. I was able to select such grass roots activists for interviews during the field-study. They showed enormous interest in knowing and understanding Dalit Theology, and started interacting with me. Therefore it is easy to find such committed youths from the grass roots. As Freire argues, the educators or political leaders should be from people who know the situation and language of the people, and who also know the oppressive structures against which they motivate and mobilise people (Freire, 1993 (1970) p 96). This description cries out for the identification and selection of Dalit Christian youths from the grass roots to be trained as educators. The theological seminaries and colleges, and Dalit theologians, could be approached to organise special programmes to orient Dalit Christian youths, who could play the role of facilitators for informal education. A relevant curriculum could be developed. It would be comparatively easy to capacitate Dalit Christian youths who are already educated, aware, committed and involved in struggles, with theological insights. Once capacitated theologically they will easily carry these perspectives to their grass roots communities.



As Green argues, these youths would play the role of 'people's theologians with a local accent' (Green, 2009 p 149).

Dalit Christian youths who possess skills and potential for writing skits, plays, poems and songs could be identified and could also be oriented theologically to use their skills and gifts to develop activities and material to share with ordinary Dalits. Biblical narratives could be interpreted with Dalit perspectives and introduced during interactions, using popular arts also. I have seen many such methods being used by various organisations and movements to orient the oppressed and motivate them to rise against their oppressors.

Besides theorising over the methodology by which Dalit Theology could be communicated to grass roots Dalit Christians, I feel it appropriate to share some of the possible methods and strategies which have proved to be effective in different circumstances in interacting with and motivating the oppressed. A few are quoted here. Documentary films with a Dalit theological orientation could be produced. The local Dalits could be encouraged to act in such documentaries to share the ideas and themes of Dalit Theology in their vernacular and accent. These could then be screened before Dalit Christians. In the village churches, before, during or after the worship or mass, a skit could be performed to orient Dalits and non-Dalits as well to reflect theologically in order to address caste, class and patriarchy. Audio cassettes could be produced with folk songs bearing theological inputs and seeing God and Christ as liberators and protectors. Stage plays could be organised and performed in villages and Dalit areas,

interpreting Biblical narratives with Dalit theological orientations to help local Dalits and Dalit Christians to look at God and Christ as their fellow sufferers. Christmas and Easter seasons and occasions could be used for organising special cultural festivals where theologically oriented performances could be presented. There already exists a practice of holding 'all-night cultural festivals' by Dalits, and this could be used for carrying forward Dalit theological inputs. Special retreats, fasting prayers and cluster-level conferences could be organised for Dalit Christians where Dalits of other faiths could also be invited; in such gatherings theological insights could be formulated and shared to attract and motivate them. Liturgies and worship materials could be prepared with Dalit theological perspectives to energise and shape the liberative faith of Dalit Christians. Such events could use all these informal and popular methods to reorient the ordinary grass roots Dalit Christians. Drawings and paintings are another area which could be used to communicate these aspects. A mobile caravan carrying drawing and painting exhibitions could be organised to pass through villages. Songs and skits could be performed at the same time as organising such exhibitions. Posters, pictures and placards, describing God and Christ differently, could be prepared and exhibited in people's gathering places and in Churches. Dalit drums could be used in all these performances to mobilise people and also to express the fact that Dalits are geared up theologically to oppose casteism inside and outside the Church. It would be a kind of a declaration or pronouncement. All these aspects form part of informal education. Capacitation training for Dalit youths as trainers, and the local-level meetings and workshops are the vital aspects in this type of education. Workshops are the places where theological insights, themes and inputs are explained, discussed, clarified and

shaped. Later this will be carried forward and reflected on in other forms of educational aspects and modes, as explained above, to help the progress of the struggle.

On the one hand, these trainers and methods could help in sharing the themes and insights of Dalit Theology among grass roots and on the other, they could equally help in identifying the existing insights among the grass roots that could help Dalit Theology to expand its themes, insights and potentials to emerge as a practical motivational force.

#### **4. The way forward**

Once Dalit Theology, through this method of informal education, engages with Dalit Christians it will be helpful both to Dalits and non-Dalits within Christianity. On the one hand, the strong faith that the eternal God whom they worship is with them in their struggle, as the God of the oppressed, will energise Dalit Christians to become involved in the struggle more intensively. On the other hand, the non-Dalit Christians within the Church will also be theologically challenged once the struggle of Dalit Christians is theologically based. The very fact that Dalits challenge them theologically will force them also to reflect theologically, and find that caste practice is against the will of God and a sin. It will weaken the position of non-Dalits to understand that Dalits have the support, will and power of God in their struggles. In this way, a theologically-based struggle will help both Dalits and non-Dalits at the same time. Therefore, informal education could be a viable method for creating Dalit Theology as a Practical theology. As Freire argues,

this pedagogy is praxis. The sharing and shaping of Dalit theological perspectives among grass roots Dalit Christians needs to stimulate action-reflection to change the caste status quo. The ultimate aim and objective of this informal education method is to enable Dalit theological inputs to conscientise Dalits, to challenge caste and transform Church and society with a theological perspective. That is the uniqueness of this education method. On the one hand it will conscientise the Dalit Christians with theological inputs and on the other it will motivate them to intensify their struggle against caste. In the course of such interaction, Dalit Christians will also be able to identify any further theological insights that exist already among them in a different form, not necessarily in the way that Dalit theologians themselves articulate their ideas. Thus, this method is viable and helpful for Dalit Theology to engage with grass roots Dalit Christians. If this happens, Dalit Theology would become a true Practical theology among grass roots Dalit Christians and serve as praxis to change the caste scenario, which is against both God and humanity.

## **Conclusion**

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. 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

liberation reflected the caste affected situation of Dalits and articulated its significance and themes to energise and orient Dalits theologically to become involved in struggles for transforming caste practice inside and outside church, to lead to a caste-free life.

However, as a Christian Dalit rights activist for three decades and also having studied Dalit Theology, I noticed that Dalit Theology with all its contextual reflections and liberational articulations mostly remains in the domain of elites both in academia and in ecclesia and it has not adequately engaged with the grass roots Dalit Christians who are in constant struggle against caste. I am, however, convinced that if the liberational themes and motivational insights of Dalit Theology are shared with the struggling Dalit Christian activists, such theological orientations would largely help them to reflect theologically and to intensify their struggles. Therefore, I wanted to undertake a study to test my hypothesis and intuition that Dalit Theology has not adequately reached out to grass roots with the following questions: a) what are the liberational themes of Dalit Theology? b) How significant is Dalit Theology as a source of motivation for the struggling Dalit Christian activists? c) In what ways can Dalit Theology be challenged to reformulate its ideas and insights as a result of developing as a participative praxis?

This led me to undertake a field study among struggling grass roots Dalit Christian activists in the state of Tamilnadu. The outcome has proved that although Dalit Theology has potential themes to inspire the struggling people, it has failed to engage adequately with the grass roots. However, the struggling Dalits have a strong but simple faith that God is their protector, who listens to their prayers and helps them in their life

and struggle for their salvation and freedom. The interviewed activists, during the course of their interaction with me, have expressed that view, after having understood something of the themes of Dalit Theology, that if such themes are shared with them they would be further motivated theologically to intensify their struggles. They felt the need of Dalit Theology for inspiring them theologically.

Thus, this 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. Third, during such an engagement, the insights that already exist among the struggling people could be identified, which would help Dalit Theology to enlarge its ideas, potential and scope as a Practical theology of liberation.

This being the outcome of the research, the next important concern is with how Dalit Theology could be carried to the grass roots. This brings in the question of method. For this, I have suggested a method of 'transformative pedagogy'. Through transformative informal education and its various informal methods, Dalit Theology could largely engage with the grass roots. Thus, in this sense, this study is broadly methodological. Here, I wish to make it clear that the aim of this study is neither to critique Dalit Theology destructively nor to create another spectrum or discipline but to enlarge it as a Practical theology of liberation. But, I am confident that the empowerment

of grass roots Dalit Christian activists with the themes of Dalit Theology would be a lasting legacy of this research.

However, I would like to emphasise that I am fully aware that this is not the only viable method to enlarge Dalit Theology as a Practical theology of praxis, nor do I argue that it would bring the whole gamut of desirable change in terms of annihilating caste and transforming caste practices. I am, though, of the strong belief that this method would play a substantial role in facilitating exchange between the reflections of Dalit theologians and the existing theological insights among grass roots Dalit Christians, which would help Dalit Theology to achieve its purpose of enlarging and spearheading transformation.

I am also aware that this study does not adequately deal with the questions and issues relating to Dalit Christian women, who are quadruply oppressed by caste, class, gender and religion. Dalit women are 'Dalits among Dalits' and they experience separate and acute oppressions (Manorama, 2006 P 3-5). They are not only oppressed by non-Dalits of Christian and other faiths, both men and women, but also by Dalit men (Evangeline Anderson Rajkumar, 2010a P 199-214). In addition to the deprivation of their rights and privileges by the differential treatment of the Government since they are Christians, they are further neglected and ignored by the Church and Church-based institutions in terms of not adequately extending their rights and privileges earmarked for minorities. Men usurp the lion's share, snatching up the space and opportunities of Dalit women in all spheres (Nelavala, 2010 p 266-270) & (Fatima, 2002 p 3-4). Since



this study is largely on the question of a methodology for enlarging Dalit Theology as a Practical theology of liberation, I am not able to concentrate on enumerating and elaborating the issues, pains and deprivations of Dalit women. However, whatever is discussed here with reference to Dalits generally, very much includes Dalit women as well. I hope that this research will encourage Dalit Christian women, especially from the grass roots, to pick up the thread and to undertake specific studies on the issues of Dalit women.

I would also like to admit and state that the topic of this research is 'Towards a practical Dalit Theology' and therefore it is a journey or a process for making Dalit Theology a more functioning Practical theology. As a result, my findings may not necessarily be fully comprehensive, nor is my recommendation the only viable method to enlarge Dalit Theology as a Practical theology or to address the issue of caste oppression. Therefore, I feel that if this research enthuses and encourages future researchers, both men and women, to venture into furthering this attempt, it would represent its greatest success. After all, caste has to be challenged and society needs to be transformed for all to live in equality, justice and peace, which is the will of God. This research is a small attempt towards that goal by enlarging Dalit Theology as a Practical theology.

## Glossary

Adi	[Sanskrit] First, original
<i>Advaidha</i>	[Sanskrit] A philosophy originating in <b>Hindu</b> thought, of non-dualism. God and world are not two identities; God and Universe are one. Compare: <b>Dvaidha</b>
Arcot Lutheran	See also <b>Lutheran</b> . Arcot Lutheran refer to Christians who belong to congregations within the Lutheran tradition and originating in the region of Arcot, in Tamil Nadu
Aryan	[Sanskrit] Underlying meaning: Noble Understood/expanded meaning: The term used to describe a group of people, speaking an <b>Indo-European</b> language, probably from northern Europe, who entered northern India c. 1000 B.C. The Aryans are commonly thought to have brought new developments, including <b>Sanskrit</b> (and Indo-European language) and the early texts of Hinduism ( <b>Vedas</b> ). In western culture, and in particular, in theories of racial hierarchy and linguistic ethnicity common in the nineteenth century, the Aryan race came to be regarded as a civilising and advanced ancient people associated with European descent, white/pale skin colour, social sophistication and biological superiority. <b>Brahmins</b> claim descent from the Aryan invaders of India
<i>Arunthathiar</i>	[Tamil] An outcaste. A sub-group within the larger Dalit identity. <i>Arunthathiars</i> often face discrimination within Dalit communities from other groups, because they are perceived as having low status even in comparison to other Dalits.
Avatar	[Sanskrit] According to Hinduism, God/divinity may incarnate in the form of avatars. Hindu scripture contains multiple accounts of divine incarnations which have existed on earth to destroy evil
<i>Bakthi</i>	[Sanskrit] A devotional way of life. A form of worship of a Divine being
<i>Bakthi marga</i>	[Sanskrit] A devotional path to understand God
<i>Bhangi</i>	[Hindi] A sweeper or cleaner

<i>Brahma Samaj</i>	[Sanskrit] A nineteenth-century theistic movement within Hinduism, founded by Ram Mohan Roy
Brahman	[Sanskrit] The Absolute, the Supreme being
Brahmin	[Sanskrit] The highest of the four <b>varnas</b> of Hindu society. The priestly and superior class in the caste ladder
Brahmanism	[Sanskrit] Hinduism as interpreted and followed by Brahmins
Buddhism	Major world religion. Introduced in India by Lord Buddha c. AD 4 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> century. Now practiced as a minority religion in India but widely practiced elsewhere
<i>Chandogya Upanishad</i>	[Sanskrit] One of the primary (important) <i>Upanishads</i> . One of the major Hindu scriptures
<i>Chandalas</i>	[Sanskrit] Untouchables. A traditional term for the people classified as being outside the Hindu caste system. While the term <b>Dalit</b> has been chosen by the members of the marginalised community to denote their oppressed status, this term recalls their marginalised existence as people who performed ritually impure tasks (according to Brahmanical Hinduism), such as the disposal of corpses
<i>Chaturvana</i>	[Sanskrit] A fourfold caste system in Hinduism, determining hereditary social status and occupation. See also: <b>varna</b>
Chitpavan	A region in western Maharashtra mostly dominated by Brahmins
CSI	Church of South India: an umbrella group comprising most protestant congregations in south India, with the important exception of <b>Lutherans</b>
Dalit	[Hindi] Underlying meaning: The broken people, the outcaste Understood/expanded meaning: The self-designated group name used by those considered to be outside the Hindu caste or <i>varna</i> system (see also <b>untouchable</b> ). People traditionally considered 'unseeable/untouchable' by Hinduism. Often used by people within this group to denote pride in their membership of this social group, and therefore, opposition to the caste system, in which it is a

despised category.

*Dasas/Daysus*

[Sanskrit] A population group referred to in early Hindu scripture and mythological texts has having been in India when the Aryan invaders arrived. According to these texts they were enslaved by the Aryans. *Dasas* have since been associated with Dalits and/or **Dravidian**-speakers, who are seen as the descendants of this group, still suffering the enslavement of their ancestors at the hands of the Aryan/Brahmin oppressors

*Devadasi/Jogini*

[Sanskrit] Women forced into prostitution in some Hindu temples.

*Dharma*

[Sanskrit] Underlying meaning: Natural law or order  
Understood/expanded meaning: A duty (usually a profession or occupation, but also related to social status) related to the caste in which a person is born

*Dhobi*

[Hindi] Washerman

*Diakonia*

[Greek] Service, ministry, particularly related to Christian ecclesiastical administration

*Dravidian*

A language family, including the modern south Indian languages Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. It is not related to the Indo-European language family, which dominates northern India. Dravidians are often seen in theories of the Aryan invasion as being descendents of the original inhabitants of India displaced by the Aryans

*Dvaidha*

[Sanskrit] A philosophy of dualism, originating in Hindu thought. God and Universe are not one but two different identities. Compare: **Advaidha**

*Gnana marga*

[Sanskrit] A philosophy originating in Hinduism. A path to understanding God via wisdom

*Indo-European*

A language family including Sanskrit and its descendent languages in north India. The major linguistic division in the modern nation of India is between Indo-European languages in the north and the Dravidian-speaking states in the south

*Hinduism/Hindu*

The majority religion in India. A very varied and set of beliefs and practices oriented around ancient scriptures

	(the <i>Vedas</i> ) and based on the principle of rebirth, with the aim of gaining enlightenment and thereby escaping from the cycle of rebirth. For the purposes of this study, an important feature of this spiritual aim is the connection to <b><i>dharmā</i></b> , by which a person may gain either enlightenment or more positive rebirth (see <b><i>karmā</i></b> ) by adhering to their hereditary occupation and social status. This principle underpins the rigid caste system
Islam/Islamic	A major world religion based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (d. A.D. 632), and part of the Abrahamaic tradition shared by Judaism and Christianity. A minority religion in India
<i>Jati</i>	[Hindi] Underlying meaning: Tribe/group/clan Understood/expanded meaning: Usually synonymous with caste or sub-caste
<i>Jivanmukta</i>	[Sanskrit] One who has attained the position of having been liberated from the cycle of rebirth through enlightenment in Hindu and Buddhist thought
<i>Karma</i>	[Sanskrit] The actions and repercussions of the actions undertaken by a person in their previous incarnations within Hindu thought. <i>Karma</i> is perceived as being connected to a person's conformity with <b><i>dharmā</i></b>
<i>Kerygma</i>	[Greek] Preaching
<i>Koinonia</i>	[Greek] Communion, participating, especially in a Christian ecclesiastical capacity
<i>Kshatriya</i>	[Sanskrit] Ruling or warrior class, second in the caste hierarchy of Hinduism
Lutheran	Lutheran Christianity describes churches which regard themselves as living within the tradition of the Protestant reformation thinker, Martin Luther. In south India, Lutheran communities are significant for not regarding themselves as part of the umbrella Protestant group, the <b>Church of South India</b>
Manu	A Hindu scholar (c. AD 8 <sup>th</sup> century) who interpreted God's words according to the <i>Vedas</i> and fixed rules, duties, customs as a code for each caste group

<i>Manusmriti</i>	[Sanskrit] A Hindu code written by <b>Manu</b> c. AD 700
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
<i>Pallar</i>	[Tamil] An outcaste. A sub-group within the larger Dalit identity
<i>Paraya(r)</i>	[Tamil] An outcaste. A sub-group within the larger Dalit identity
Pentecostal Church	A collective term for a range of Christian congregations and organisations, which have developed in the two centuries, and which regard themselves as a renewal movement within Christianity. Baptism and personal spiritual revelation are prominent in many Pentecostal communities. It is one of the strong denominations of Christianity in south India
RC	Roman Catholic: major world religion (Christian denomination), founded on scripture, tradition and the authority of the bishop of Rome (Pope). One of the major Christian denominations in south India
<i>Rig Veda</i>	[Sanskrit] First among the four <i>Vedas</i>
Saivite	[Sanskrit] A follower of Shiva. A Hindu who believes Lord Shiva to be the Supreme Being, and who adheres to practices within a Saivite tradition. Compare: <b>Vaishnavite</b>
<i>Sanyasi</i>	[Sanskrit] A renouncer of a worldly life, dedicated to a divine life. An ascetic
<i>Sat-chit-ananda</i>	[Sanskrit] The Truth- Consciousness-Bliss according to Hinduism
<i>Satyagrah</i>	[Sanskrit] Insistence upon the realisation of truth by non-violence
Scheduled Caste (SC)	Constitutional term for the Dalits of Hindu, <b>Sikh</b> and Buddhist faiths. Dalits of Christian or <b>Islamic</b> faiths are not SCs
<i>Shudra</i>	[Sanskrit] The serving class. Fourth in the caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Classed as untouchable according to Vedic tradition but not outcaste, and therefore in a less subjugated position than Dalits

<i>Sikhism/Sikh</i>	Major world religion based on the teachings of Guru Nanak (fl. AD 15 <sup>th</sup> century) and subsequent Gurus. A minority religion in India, but the majority religion in some regions (notably, the Punjab)
<i>Upanishad</i>	[Sanskrit] Philosophical text. The early source of Hindu religion, alongside the Vedas
<i>Vaishnavite</i>	[Sanskrit] A follower of Vishnu, who believes that Vishnu is the Supreme being. One who worships Rama and Krishna, the Avatars of Vishnu and practices Hinduism within this tradition. Compare: <b>Saivite</b>
<i>Vaishya</i>	[Sanskrit] Trader/Business class. Third in the caste hierarchy of Hinduism
<i>Varna</i>	[Sanskrit] Underlying meaning: Colour Understood/expanded meaning: A broad category in which Jatis/castes were classified, involving a fourfold division of Brahmins (priests), <i>Kshatriyas</i> (warriors), <i>Vaishyas</i> (traders) and <i>Shudras</i> (servants)
<i>Varnashrama</i>	[Sanskrit] A social order based on colour divisions. See <b>varna</b>
Veda (pl. Vedas)	[Sanskrit] The oldest scriptures of Hinduism, preserved in Sanskrit
Vedism/Vedic	[Sanskrit] Pertaining to or being arranged according to the <i>Vedas</i>

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