

# Deciphering the Subaltern Terrain: Exploring Alternative Sources for an Emancipatory Mission

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## Introduction

Why do subaltern<sup>1</sup> communities yearn for equality, dignity and freedom, and their religio-cultural spaces? There could be many reasons. However these reasons normally revolve around the facts that they seek liberation from the humiliation, exclusion and exploitation that they are increasingly subjected to in numerous ways. Those who live in these subaltern terrains are groups of people and communities, who, when put together would run into millions which makes them a significant mass of people.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper some of the terms such as “subalterns” and “poor” tend to play a relatively greater and significant role both in the text and the context. Incidentally, these terms appear frequently and hence are used interchangeably, although they have their distinct use and content value. However, these two terms by and large are closely linked, and yet distinct. **Subalterns:** Antonio Gramsci coined and used this word which means exploited. In recent times, this term is very much accepted and widely used in the social sciences especially in political and economic sciences. The essence and meaning of this term may perhaps be lost since everyone would like to take advantage of it. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, while critiquing political democracy, unravels the disequilibria in social and economic areas. Further, he speaks about Indian democracy which is nothing but a farce as it is premised on social and economic disparities. Without striving for equilibria for a large section of the populace who are deprived of social and economic equality, how can political democracy provide equality? In this sense, those who are deprived of socio-economic and political democracy are known as the subalterns of India. Undoubtedly, Ambedkar’s contribution is noteworthy. However, Gramsci, being a Marxist, went beyond economics and incorporated culture to the subalterns’ category. Instead of concentrating on one aspect as organic intellectuals, we need to look at some of these terms more comprehensively and see the inter-connectedness and linkages within and between one another. Hence, the term subalterns encapsulate socio-economic, politico-cultural and religious dimensions. Nevertheless, different people from different orientations and perspectives tend to pick up only one aspect and apply it as a yardstick to justify their vested interests. By employing a narrow category to examine and analyze, it would then lead to parochial and exclusive interests rather than situating the category in a wider canopy of discourse. At the same time, one should be careful in not diluting the distinctiveness of Dalit as a category under the gamut of subalterns.

For me, the concept of subalterns should take into consideration the interplay between class and caste. The reason being, there are castes within classes and classes within castes. Although we assume caste system as a closed system there is no possibility of upward mobility for the lowest rung to move to the top. It is also claimed that there is no exit within the caste system. Nevertheless, there are possibilities for a middle rung and inter-mediary castes to climb upwards, but for the Dalits it remains a closed system. At the same time, in terms of class which is an economic category, when it comes to the question of prestige, power and status, Dalits do not enjoy some of the privileges that other castes enjoy within the class structure despite their economic progression. Therefore, we need to take seriously the interplay between class and caste, and a more clear-cut analysis and evaluation is needed. Hence, subalterns as a socio-economic category cannot be taken as a straitjacket approach, but ought to be nuanced and problematised. However, when it comes to representation in politics and reservation in the economy, Dalits will have to be doubly careful with the conception of subalterns.

This paper attempts to decipher the experiential terrain of the subalterns with the intention of identifying trajectories for articulating relevant paradigms for mission in the contemporary context. In the first section of this paper, I will map the terrains of the Dalits and the Tribals vis-à-vis the subalterns. In the second section I will enquire about their spaces within the domain of nation-states. The third section will explore the resistive elements of the subaltern terrain, after which a proposal will be attempted for an emancipatory mission from the vantage point of the subaltern in the succeeding section.

## **I. Mapping and De-coding the Terrain of the Subalterns**

Through the centuries in India large numbers of people have experienced and continue to experience social discrimination on account of its peculiar stratified social system vis-à-vis caste. The caste system is pyramidal and hierarchical and functions on discrimination and exclusion based on 'we' and 'you,' 'pure' and 'polluted.' A few case studies and data from India's social milieu may serve as a poignant pointer about how the grammar of social egalitarianism continues to be mutilated and distorted by a cruel quirk of irony because of the caste system. The following are real-life happenings:

### **a) Dalit 'Terrain'**

#### ***Case One: Pulling down the wall of shame***

*The wall of separation took shape in 1989 after a caste clash between caste Hindus and the 2000 strong Dalit community. Initially it had the approval of leaders from both sides. The wall denied the Dalits access to common points of entry into the village, effectively cutting them off from the village mainstream. But with time the wall grew longer and higher and matters came to a head when a portion of the wall was electrified to deter night "intrusion" from the Dalit community into the streets where the caste Hindu Pillaimars reside. The report in The Hindu on April 17, 2008, on the electrification of the wall resulted in a public outcry, and prompted the government to disconnect power supply and then to demolish the portion of the wall with the deployment of a 1500-strong police force, as the Pillaimars were firmly against the demolition, that denied Dalits access to areas of common use. Thus in the Uthapuram village of Madurai district in Tamil Nadu, social discrimination was embodied for nearly two decades in a 600-metre wall separating Dalits from caste Hindus, besides the routine forms of discrimination that still exist across the country – serving Dalits in different tumblers in tea shops across the state; in community halls they are not allowed to mingle with those belonging to other castes; the main pathways directly leading to areas of common use are usually out of bounds for Dalits and funeral processions of Dalits have to take circuitous routes to separate burial grounds and churches. Temple festivals remain a source of potential trouble in several villages as Dalits are kept out of chariot-pulling rituals. Economic advancement of the few Dalits who are able to find jobs outside the villages becomes a problematic issue for caste Hindus who see themselves as superior in the social hierarchy. In rural areas, life is thus a constant struggle for Dalits as they come face to face with social discrimination. The portion of the Uthapuram wall that still stands is a grim reminder of the great deal that still needs to be done.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Editorial, "Pulling down the wall of shame," in *The Hindu* (10/05/2008), 12.

### ***Case Two: Dalit mukhiya assaulted for hoisting tricolour***

*Even after 60 years of Independence, Dalits are targeted as was the case at Durgavati in Sasaram, Bihar. Mr. Ram Sinhasan Ram, the mukhiya of Dumari panchayat, was not only assaulted for hoisting the tricolour but chased away from the Panchayat Bhavan, as well as the Panchayat Secretary who had accompanied Mr. Ram. Apprehending more trouble, the duo sought police assistance. Though the sub-inspector, Sarvadeo Singh and SAP (State Auxiliary Police) jawans were dispatched from Durgavati police station, even their presence did not cut much ice with the feudal mindset. All this happened in Sasaram, which was the fiefdom of one of India's tallest Dalit leaders and former Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Babu Jagjivan Ram, who represented the constituency for more than three decades and which is now represented by his daughter, Meira Kumar, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment.*

*In another incident near Sasaram, Lali Devi was prevented from cooking the mid-day meal for the school children at Rohtas and when she dared to still go ahead, the school secretary, Mr. Umashankar Tiwary, a Brahmin, brought his henchmen who dragged the woman out of the kitchen, assaulted her husband publicly and damaged the chullah (hearth) and took away the utensils and threatened them of dire consequences if she dared to enter the school premises again. It was only after the Chief Minister, Mr. Nitish Kumar, took serious note of the incident that an FIR was lodged against Tiwary. But the feudal mindset remains unchanged.<sup>3</sup>*

The above cases show how caste-based distinctions based on descent and occupation and determined by birth, result in serious violations across the full spectrum of civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. Other manifestations of such discrimination commonly include prohibition of inter-caste marriages between socially or occupationally defined groups; physical and spatial segregations of communities; restrictions on access to resources including land, water, and other means of production and livelihood; social prohibitions regarding physical contacts such as sharing of food or utensils; overt and covert restrictions on access to quality education or segregation in educational institutions and professional facilities; restrictions to enter religious sanctuaries and to participate in religious ceremonies.

### ***b) Tribal 'Terrain'***

India's 80 million Tribal populations, the largest in the world, are also India's most exploited and disadvantaged community, where over 20 million Tribals live below the poverty line. They live in the interior and fringes of forests. For example, Tripura's Forest Department has reportedly identified 43,215 Tribal families as being in illegal occupation of 14,000 hectares of forest land in violation of the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. Periodically they face eviction orders that make them uncertain of their future thereby challenging their livelihood habitats which are "reserved" / "protected" in the name of "national parks" or "sanctuaries" for the conservation of wildlife and biodiversity. Under the guise of "conservation" and "development" the governments both at the centre and the states have appropriated land by dubious means for different purposes thereby pushing the Tribals to the margins. This is how the Tribals have been suffering for almost 150 years of history with their homelands shrinking gradually and being reduced to enclaves.

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<sup>3</sup> "Dalit mukhiya assaulted for hoisting tricolour," in *Deccan Herald* (18/08/2007), 7.

In the name of social justice, the government passed the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act in 2006. It recognizes not only their ownership of lands in the forests, but also their livelihood rights that entitle them to cultivate, graze, and to fish on the land allotted to them, collect and dispose minor forest produce, besides the right to manage and protect community forest resources.<sup>4</sup> Apart from all these provisions, what the Tribals need is the “right to live decently.” Criticizing the Act, S.S. Joshi, Secretary, Karnataka Retired Forest Officers Association, said, “The act is a vote-catching gimmick, that perpetuates poverty and backwardness among the Tribals by keeping them inside forests,” and was particularly critical of the inclusion of ‘other traditional forest dwellers’ into the ambit of the Act. “It is a loose term and included to expand the base. This is evidently a ploy by politicians to gift away forest land to their henchmen.”<sup>5</sup>

The rights of the Tribals have always been competing at the margins but it should now be brought to the center. Many a time politicians and policy makers have failed to take a holistic and inclusive view that comprehends Tribal rights and constitutional obligations. By adopting a wholistic view one can hope to set right the historic wrongs and injustices done to Tribals in India by arbitrary forest reservation, as well as promote both conservation and livelihood – by recognizing the symbiotic relation between Tribals and forests and reiterating that they are the prime guardians and inhabitants, on the basis of which their right to livelihood be protected and sustained.<sup>6</sup> It is paradoxical that even after 60 years of independence, India has failed to secure for all its citizens equality, although there is a clear-cut commitment enshrined in the Constitution.

## II. The Terrains of the Subalterns within Nation-Space

*...Contemporary social theory has begun to reconsider both space and nation in ways which attempt to transcend (or at least to side step) the traditional dichotomy between the material and mental. Moreover, questions of power, domination, cultural difference, class and gender have been highlighted in both contexts. The way is thus cleared for exploring the spatial aspects of the nation – the imagined community as a nation-space – and the ways in which social groupings with hegemonic ambitions attempt to reshape and appropriate it.<sup>7</sup>*

The above-mentioned cases make it clear that India as a nation has not “matured” nor is it “civilized” enough to treat everyone as equals. Some of the cosmetic efforts to improve the social life of Dalits and Tribals are not going to make any significant changes in national life. In the present Indian context the private and public spaces of the subalterns have shrunk and are at stake. The sites of the subalterns reflect their relegation as non-entities and nation-less. In such a complex and aggressive backdrop, the following observations are pertinent:

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<sup>4</sup> Jayalakshmi K., “The Wrong Prescription for a Right Cause” in *Deccan Herald* (10/06/2008), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Pankaj Sekhsaria, “Displacing tribals,” in *Deccan Herald* (18/07/2008), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Satish Deshpande, “Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation-Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India,” in Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (eds.), *Community, Gender and Violence*, Subaltern Studies XI (Delhi: Permanent Block, 2000), 168.

*... contemporary social theory reminds us that nations inhabit a space that is simultaneously abstract (imagined, mental) and concrete (physical, geographical). These ... can be linked because of their common existence in (and only in) the social realm. But it is only when this potential linkage is realized through active social practices and processes that the nation-space can take shape. Nations are emergent phenomena: they become visible only when an ideological terrain and an identifiable territory can be cross-mapped on to each other to produce a sense of nation-ness shared by large numbers.*<sup>8</sup>

However,

*... recent theory also insists that both space and nation are implicated in power relations. The production of a sense of nation-ness clearly involves ideological and material contests... with suitable inflections; the idea of the nation can thus be used as a weapon in a broader social struggle for hegemony. Similarly, social space is not merely an arena in which power relations 'happen,' but also one of the means with which power is sought to be exercised. This is what gives meaning to the notion of spatial strategies.*<sup>9</sup>

In India, there are over 250 million Dalits and 80 million Tribals who live without any spatial locations of their own. Their terrain exhibits isolation, neglect, misery, discrimination, and difference. The other dominant identities have clearly delineated their spaces. The spaces of the subalterns have been steadily eroded over the years by the dominant caste categories which have appropriated the private and social spaces of the subalterns thereby making them as fragmented and dispensed groupings as well as communities. These are the terrains or the sites of struggles that do not matter however unequal it may be between the dominant and the dominated.

### **III. Resistive Strategies and Wholistic Religio-cultural Spaces of the Subalterns**

In spite of the lack of representational space both in the construction of national identity as well as economic and social discrimination we need to recognize that there have been a number of sites of struggles in recent times which also clearly portray the assertion of subaltern identities and their rightful existence in their spaces. We need to take note that the subaltern terrain of both the Tribals and Dalits portrays uneasiness, defiance, resilience and resistance. The classic example is the case that happened in North East India.

#### ***Women Rage against 'Rape' in Northeast India***

*IMPHAL (Manipur) - After torching government buildings and parading naked to protest the suspected custodial rape and killing of a woman by federal soldiers, women in Manipur vow to intensify their fight against frequent atrocities in the restive northeast Indian state. An indefinite curfew is in force in Manipur, bordering Myanmar, to quell the uprising, with troops bursting teargas shells, water cannons and firing rubber bullets to disperse hundreds of women trying to break prohibitory orders. At least 100 women were injured in police attacks since violence broke out, with some having to undergo surgeries to remove pellets embedded in their bodies. The action*

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-170.

*followed with violent protests by women in Manipur after the bullet-riddled body of 32-year-old Thangjam Manorama was found on July 10, 2005.*

*Witnesses say Manorama was picked up by soldiers of the paramilitary Assam Rifles from her home on alleged charges of links with separatist rebels. Hours later, her dead body was reportedly found four kilometers away from her home in the state capital Imphal, with multiple bullet wounds, besides torture signs. Several women's groups called a 48-hour general strike the day after Manorama's body was found, bringing normal life in the state to a grinding halt for two days until July 12, 2005. Following which, hundreds of women had stormed the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal, with at least 40 parading naked and holding placards that read: "Indian Army rape us" and "Indian Army take our flesh."*

*Authorities imposed an indefinite curfew fearing more protests. But women in hundreds started defying the curfew from Friday night by taking to the streets, prompting the police to resort to force to keep the protestors at bay. However, protestors torched at least half-a-dozen government buildings, making authorities cut short a curfew relaxation. "We want to punish the soldiers involved in the brutal killing of Manorama and so we are demanding handing over the errant soldiers to us," says Memchaoubi Devi, president of the women's rights group Porei Lemarol Meira Phaibi Apunba Manipur. She adds, "It is better to protest naked than allow the soldiers to kill and rape our women."*

*"This protest is not going to die down until and unless the guilty soldiers are punished. Even if someone is involved in militancy, he or she should be brought to the court of law and not just killed or raped," lashes out Leirik Devi, president of the Kangla Mei, another powerful women rights group. She vows, "We are prepared to shed blood but cannot allow the soldiers to outrage the modesty of our daughters. This protest will intensify." Bowing to mounting pressure, the Assam Rifles Saturday removed an unspecified number of soldiers from duty against whom there was a court of inquiry ordered to probe the alleged custodial death.*

Out of a number of struggles and protests, the statewide protest by Dalits over the desecration of prominent Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar's statue in 1997 in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar at Ghatkopar, Mumbai, has been interpreted by many in different ways. Similarly, the desecration of B.R. Ambedkar's statue in 2006 at Kanpur in UP ignited the anger of the Dalits leading to killings, burning train bogies, stone pelting at government offices, and curfew order. Both these incidences evoked responses, protests, and anger in some states of India. According to Gopal Guru,

*The Dalit protests were neither the grand design of political manipulators nor a mindless act. On the contrary, it was informed by an authentic thought and purpose. It was authentic because it was not a planned but spontaneous action and, therefore was not led by a political leader both from within and outside the community. It was actually a collective assertion by the Dalit youth who protested the suppression of their cultural aspirations and material marginalisation...<sup>10</sup>*

For Dalits, Ambedkar is more than a matter of emotion. These protests edify a deeper expression directed against the larger structures and processes that produce and reproduce hostile conditions and a sense of insecurity among the Dalits. Further a growing sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Gopal Guru, "Why are the Dalits angry?" in *The Hindu* (29/07/1997), 8.

insecurity vis-à-vis job opportunities and the constant threat of violence meted out to the Dalits have led to Dalit outbursts. For Dalits, Ambedkar is more than just the Father of the Constitution; he is in fact the Father of the most politically powerful ideal of our times: Social Justice. Hence, Ambedkarism is seen as a genuine vehicle of social mobility. By invoking Ambedkar, his followers are seen to be asserting a more basic desire for a more 'inclusive' society, a demand that is fundamental to any social or economic change in contemporary India. Whenever Ambedkar's statue or their icon is desecrated or humiliated we see spontaneous uprisings by the Dalits who feel alienated from a socio-economic system that still benefits only a limited few.

However, in the contemporary discourse, the most significant is the emergence of Dalit identity. This clearly shows that there is a pan-Indian basis to the "ideological" consolidation of Dalit identity. Interestingly, this consolidation has not been restricted to symbolic representation but deals with the material bases of their oppression in society. The consolidation is gradually achieved by de-mythologizing and mobilizing the Dalit masses as against the dominant symbols and material bases that enslaved them for centuries. The essential aspects of these mobilizations and uprisings are against the oppressive feudal land ownership pattern and the social reality that continues to function as supportive systems of discrimination.

The very basis of the existence of Dalits and Tribals revolves around distinct belief systems that take care of individual and communitarian needs. They include the way in which they produce crops, rear livestock, sustain the fields, and the eco-systems that posit their world views. Their celebrations, festivities, joys and sorrows are intertwined with religio-cultural moorings. Their ethos is governed by caring, sharing, mutual existence, live and let-live, accountability, interdependence, and co-habitation. The subaltern view of culture is nothing but their understanding of the world in which they live wherein their time-space frame revolves around comprehensively by taking into consideration their total way of life that spans a wide range of aspects from spiritual to physical. Their cultural capital and processes are rooted in shaping their consciousness, augmenting and sharpening their identity, creative, critical and imaginative faculties. Therefore, it should be seen in totality and not in isolation. The cultural capital of the Dalits and the Tribals is shaped by religious ideas and materiality of the world. The symbols, meaning systems, values, and normative principles interpret their way of life and experience. Their struggles should not be construed as just economic or political or socio-cultural or religious but intertwined with all the segments of their existence. It is in this sense their understanding, perception, and articulation, should be seen as a whole and not in parts.

Increasingly the emergent world order controlled and manipulated by the dominant classes and castes who are up and against the subalterns are trying to annex and superimpose their worldview over the subaltern worldview by using diverse methods to appropriate the worldview of the subalterns. The cultural moorings and the religious beliefs that have sustained the Dalits and the Tribals for centuries now face threats and in the process are likely to be subsumed, leading to extinction. In a situation where vast sections of people are deprived of material conditions and negated the possibility of emancipation both of the self and corporate, then the mythological worldview that impedes their progress and development should be confronted. In this way we see a succinct use of power by the dominant employing religion and culture. The caste system is a classic example, which is

legitimized and reinforced by the all-pervading religion and culture. This is how social control takes place. Nevertheless, the Dalits and the Tribals resist subjugation by a homogenized mode of pan-Indian culture that relegates their humanity and dignity leading to subservience and domination. A series of attacks on minorities especially the Christians in some parts of India is a clear-cut reminder and indicator to Dalits and Tribals that the dominant castes who fall within the extreme brand of Brahminic Hindu mould shall not allow them to change their religion and will go all out employing coercive and intimidatory methods and tactics to force them to return and get re-converted to Brahminic Hindu fold.

In a given situation the approach of Dalits and Tribals towards culture has always been revolving around counter-culture that deconstructs and demythologizes the dominant theories, histories, and traditions. Despite the onslaughts on Dalits and Tribals, the subaltern culture is endowed with high values which amplify a broad vision of the world, society, nature, time, and worldview. It is more horizontal, dialogical, and bottom up; not vertical, hierarchical, and top down. Increasingly the cultural capital is being appropriated and usurped by the dominant worldview in subtle ways through their philosophic and ideological frameworks. It is apparent that all religions claim to be grounded on equality, fraternity and common humanity. In the ultimate analysis, whether one is a Christian or an atheist or subscribes to other faiths, the crux of the matter is that the subalterns are those who are struggling for humanizing the dehumanized people/communities. Dalits and Tribals search for meaning for their existence that entails all facets, material as well as spiritual. They derive meaning through culture and religion in their existential experience that covers multiple trajectories. Over the centuries the dominant castes did employ different mechanisms to subjugate and destroy the Dalits and the Tribals. Strong defiance and resistance by the Dalits and Tribals through counter-cultural expressions and symbols that unmasked the oppressive myths, symbolic systems, and rituals of the dominant gave them the spirit of resistance and resilience. The counter-culture of the Dalits and the Tribals fundamentally means countering the dominant worldview, symbolic representations, value systems and ethical orientations, with life-affirming worldview, symbolic representations, and value systems.

For instance the counter-cultural move takes on the way history has been written and choreographed by the upper castes. The protagonists of history belong to the higher castes, and the Dalits have no place in the arena of history. Their exclusion from history is but a reflection of the social exclusion and marginalization Dalits experience in real life. The dominant historical myths and narratives are written by the twice-born castes. They speak of the triumphalism of the mythological gods, goddesses, etc., their rulers – kings and queens belonging to the dominant caste categories, by totally side-lining and negating the contributions of the subjugated people. In these circumstances, the Dalits, Tribals, and the indigenous people counter the dominant histories, oral traditions, and local narratives, by reconstructing their histories from the underside. For instance, Dalit cultural distinctiveness reveals that,

*These various productive and creative works have resulted in the accumulation of knowledge and skills which have been transmitted from generation to generation. The technology and the dexterity these works reveal are an integral part of their culture. It is this culture contributing immensely to the sustenance of the society that has been, ironically, despised*

*and negated. The counter-culture of Dalits then rightly contrasts this matrix of Dalit culture with Brahminical and upper caste culture, alienated from physical productive labour.<sup>11</sup>*

As rightly said in the above quotation, the dominant culture very cleverly manipulates and subverts the indigenous knowledge systems in productive activities based on varnashramadharma. Based on one's descent occupation is determined. In the name of scientific temper, rationality, and invention, the knowledge system and the contributions of the subalterns in the production of leather and leather-related products, rearing cattle, sheep and other animals, agriculture and other related areas, are being sidelined, which brings to question the logic, idea, basis and application of the dominant worldview. Although the terrains of subalterns posit poverty, squalid conditions, socio-economic divides, their determination to struggle against oppressive forces has never waned. In the last 3-4 decades their identity affirmation and assertion in the socio-economic, politico-cultural, and religious arenas, show their resilience and goal towards an emancipatory vision.

#### **IV. Towards an Emancipatory Theology of Mission: Exploring the Ethical Loci**

We have so far analysed the resistive aspirations of the subalterns in their yearning for equality and justice. We now embark on a constructive task of constructing a theology of missions which is emancipatory in nature. This theology will be guided by certain ethical loci. Before embarking to the whole gamut on 'mission', I would like to bring in the criticisms against Christian missions raised by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution and the liberator of Dalits as a valuable source which can help us shape an emancipatory theology of missions. In one of his encounters with Bishop Pickett, Ambedkar observed that:

*When I read the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and certain passages of St. Paul's Epistles I feel that I and my people must all be Christians, for then I find a perfect antidote to the poison Hinduism has injected into our souls and a dynamic strong enough to lift us out of our present degraded position, but when I look at the Church produced by Christian missions in the districts around Bombay I have quite a different feeling. Many members of my own caste have become Christians and most of them do not command Christianity to the remainder of us. Some have gone to boarding schools and have enjoyed high privilege. We think of them as finished products of your missionary effort and what sort of people are they? Selfish and self-centered. They don't care a snap of their fingers what becomes of their former caste associates so long as they and their families, or they and the little group who have become Christians, get ahead. Indeed, their chief concern with reference to their old caste associates is to hide the fact that they were ever in the same community. I don't want to add to the number of such Christians.<sup>12</sup>*

This criticism certainly contains a lot of truth even now. By drawing inferences from the history of Christianity in the Roman Empire, he emphasized the point that "the people to

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 2007), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Arvind P. Nirmal, V. Devasahayam (eds.), *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Centenary Tribute* (Madras: Department of Dalit Theology, UELCI, 1991), 84-85.

whom Christianity made a natural appeal were the poorer classes and it is among them that Christianity first spread without the help of law or other extraneous advantage". According to him the early Christian Missionary began by reversing the natural order of things.<sup>13</sup> Based on these, Dr. Ambedkar rightly explicates that,

*...it is clear that the Brahmin and the higher classes could never be receptive to the Christian doctrine. It preaches brotherhood of man and when applied leads to equality of man. Now the interests of the Brahmin and the higher classes is to maintain the system of Chaturvarna - which is a system based upon inequality and which in the scale gives them a higher rank, greater opportunity to dominate and exploit others. How can they be expected to accept Christianity? It means a surrender of their power and prestige. To have pursued them has been vain effort and, if the pursuit had been continued I am sure there would have been no Christians in India at all. The number of Christians we see in India today is due to the fact that some Christian Missionaries saw the futility of this. If they had not and realized this error and started to win over the lower classes, there would have been no Christians in India at all. Even today hundreds and thousands of high caste Hindus take advantage of Christian schools, Christian colleges and Christian hospitals. How many of these who reap the benefits become Christian? Every one of them takes the benefit and runs away and does not even stop to consider what must be the merits of a religion which renders so much service to humanity.<sup>14</sup>*

Though Dr. Ambedkar was also appreciative and sympathetic towards Christian missions and ministries in India he asked pertinent and hard questions regarding Indian Christians and Indian brand of Christianity. The questions he had raised are even now relevant and authentic. For example,

*What has Christianity achieved in the way of changing the mentality of the converts? Has the Untouchable convert risen to the status of the touchable? Have the touchable and Untouchable converts discarded caste? Have they ceased to worship their old pagan gods and to adhere to their old pagan superstitions?<sup>15</sup>*

Further a quotation of Ambedkar from the Simon Commission report states, "We remain today what we were before we become Christians – untouchables – degraded by laws of social position obtaining in the land, rejected by caste Christians, despised by caste Hindus and excluded by our own Hindu depressed class brethren."<sup>16</sup> He observed that Christian community continued to maintain segregation and discrimination against the Dalit Christians by refusing to inter-marry and to inter-dine and thus practicing social and religious rituals. Ambedkar draws clear flak that Christianity in India has not been able to stamp out Hindu discriminatory practices, which are incompatible and antithetical to Christian belief and Christian way of life. He was very critical of the missionaries on their attitudes to caste by overlooking caste differences and soft-peddling with the caste system. He makes a scathing critique as to "what good is Christianity for a Hindu if it does not do away with his caste and remarked that they misunderstood their mission and thought that

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

making a person Christian was the same as making him a follower of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> This is how he looked at our mission. He observed that Indian Christianity did not have dynamism and vibrancy and was thus incapable of dismantling untouchability and caste practices. In tune to this he said that “Conversion has not brought about any change in the social status of the untouchable convert. To the general mass of the Hindus the untouchable remains an untouchable even though he becomes Christian.”<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly these are indeed prophetic words more relevant to the current socio-economic, political and religious spheres of India. As against such a scenario, there is a need to evolve a dynamic and pragmatic understanding and definition of mission that would unfold a new spirituality for struggle and emancipation from the underside.

### *Theological-Ethical Framework for Emancipating Mission*

The framework that is prescribed here is grounded on theological and ethical convictions. The God in Jesus whom we affirm and who manifests the divine and human forms is righteous. The righteous God cannot tolerate unrighteous deeds. Further, the *Missio Dei* ought to correlate with *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* echoes the human worth of every individual, group, community, society and nations within and between. If this moral principle is fractured and fragmented, then the *Missio Dei* per se becomes redundant, because in the process, the very essence of *imago Dei* is lost.

God embraces each one of us and the whole of creation with unquenchable, intimate and inconceivable overflowing and ever-flowing love. Humanity is invited into the overflowing and ever-flowing love by expressing their solidarity with God who seeks creation’s liberation from all forms of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion; redeeming them from the undermining of their lives; and breathing into them His emancipating, life-transforming and self-emptying love. This God has a special kind of caring for all and is present with the most vulnerable and excluded.

Jesus of Nazareth embodied this God whose righteousness is visible and known in his activity, in history and beyond for all of us which is ongoing, flourishing, and sustaining for the present and future generations. As such we are called to get involved in the emancipating mission guided by a theological and moral vision of a world in which no one is oppressed, excluded or exploited so that the vision of common humanity is realized ‘here and now.’ This vision entails a radical challenge to current socio-economic disequilibria and barriers. We are called to justice seeking emancipation of the subalterns in a world of structured and organized injustices. The life with God and *missio Dei* must offer the moral spiritual power to heed this vision so that *imago Dei* could be realized both at the micro-macro levels.

### *Moral Arguments for Emancipating Mission*

Emancipation is a multi-faceted concept. Emancipation includes both individual and structural dimensions. Ambedkar “... saw freedom, equality and fraternity as essential conditions for a good life and argued that they should be understood and pursued as one

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

entity. Only on such a foundation a comprehensive regime of rights could be built. While different moral and religious pursuits might be reasonable, the premises of liberty and equality suggest that they are unavoidable. Once social agents are conceived as free and equal, a plurality of moral and religious pursuits and identities inevitably beget themselves.”<sup>19</sup> The praxis of emancipation can have salvific dimension in Christian terms when it is carried out with faith in Christ. Emancipation per se organically integrates two elements into one: historical and structural, personal and corporate, imminent and transcendent, where the present and the future meet in organic unity. Emancipation entails a life-giving process that leads to fuller humanization, and it is indeed the culmination of the authentic expression of *imago Dei*.

As against this backdrop, a maze of literature on mission encompassing wide-ranging issues is being approached from varied perspectives in India. However for me, reading a text as comprehensive as David J. Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* is absorbing and challenging. The survey he makes on the past, present, and future of mission posits connectivity, which is something integral to the life and witness of the Christian community. Often many tend to integrate *missio Ecclesia* with *missio Dei*. But my engagement and proposal could perhaps be the integration of *missio Dei* with *imago Dei*. The fusion of these two could effectively respond to the following questions: What is God doing in subaltern terrains that divides and fragments the ‘human family’? In a particular volatile complex context how can mission in India be articulated in a more pro-active and affirmative way? Mission in India totally requires a radical departure from that of the conventional modes. Can *missio Dei* and *imago Dei* be linked? Can these two play a dialectical role?

Whenever I visit the subaltern terrains, I have always been challenged and disturbed by the open-ended statement, ‘How Long!’ It lingers on because some of the narratives, visuals and incidences are so indelible, they have created a sense of anger and deep pain. We keep hearing, reading and watching the horrifying and humiliating experiences of the subalterns throughout India. But what has been the response? What is God doing in a situation where the Dalits and Tribals are humiliated and forsaken in their day-to-day existence? In what way can the incarnational event be understood in a climate of pathos and hope? How can that event become an affirmative action kindling the hopes and aspirations of the subalterns?

An answer to the emergent scenario has far ranging implications on subaltern Christians who define their life as to the meaning of their existence, their identities and their mission. Understanding the general contours of mission history in India is crucial for discussing what ought to be the mission(s) for the present and future. Looking back, the Indian Church has always been an inward looking one for too long, totally forgetting itself that it is the world it is called to help and redeem. Its involvement in India is more in line with ‘charity’ and ‘doling out.’ The participation and involvement of the Dalits and Tribals in the life and witness of the church has been minimal. The Indian Church has always considered the subalterns as ‘objects of mission’ as well as ‘objects of charity.’ Then the conception and understanding of mission becomes sectarian, partial, obsessed with orthodoxy rather than ortho-praxis. Bosch aptly points out in the concluding pages of his book by making

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<sup>19</sup> Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39-40.

a scathing criticism about the history of Christian mission: "We may have been fairly good at orthodoxy, at 'faith,' but we have been poor in respect of ortho-praxis...." The sorry state of affairs of the Indian Church currently bears ample witness and evidence that concurs with Bosch's statement. Even now the Indian Church per se is still involved in ecclesial functions such as 'evangelism,' church expansion and nurturing its flock in the areas that fall within the 'spiritual domain.' But, what is required for India today is something else.

Mission in India currently, however, is still promising and challenging, provided the church commits itself to a more wholistic, integral, liberating form of evangelization that transforms the lives of the Dalits and Tribals from bondage to freedom, from periphery to the centre, from sub-human to human and from 'we, the other' to 'we, the people.' The mission of the church should be directed towards political liberation and social emancipation. The gospel mandate of *missio Ecclesia* and *missio Dei* is grounded on liberating the Dalits and Tribals, which is missiological. What God is doing is humanizing the de-humanized Dalits and Tribals. Therefore, God is involved in the saving and liberating act of Dalits and Tribals.

Thus, mission is always related to completing specific tasks in a particular context and it is to be taken in a historical and dynamic sense. In this sense as Lucian Legrand succinctly points out:

- i. Mission is first and foremost the God who cares. God's love and redemptive force must extend to the entire world and to every creature.
- ii. Mission is not the act of a prospector staking out a claim. Mission is exercised in function of a people, creating this people, and developing through community.
- iii. At the heart of this people is the Word of God, the explosive joy of the good news of Jesus that gathers it in, judges it and guides it.
- iv. The Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and in the people he gathers – mission is as concrete as the life of a people.
- v. Mission will ever be the vessel of hope in the ultimate redemptive work of God on behalf of all peoples.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Ethical Principle of Social Justice: A Pre-requisite for Emancipating Mission*

Ambedkar acted on social reality from the vantage point of morality and ethics. For him morality is not a set of fixed canons or prefabricated rules and conditions, but it is open to a rational inquiry which is subject to rationale scrutiny and evaluation. "The foundations of morality lie in justice and justice in turn involves upholding the liberty and equality of the human person and extending to him the bond of the community. The person is the bearer of a body of rights i.e., claims socially warranted."<sup>21</sup>

On these lines, the Rawlsian notion of justice, which he means as fairness, would help us.

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<sup>20</sup> Sean P. Keally, CSSP in his Seminar Paper, 'Reflections on Mission at the Close of the Second Millennium'.

<sup>21</sup> Valerian Rodrigues, 18.

*For Rawls, fairness for a group of persons involves rules and guiding principles of social organizations that treat equally every individual's interests, concerns and liberties, a Rawls... conception of justice... is the most likely outcome of a co-operative exercise of arriving at principles of self-governance by individuals gathered in the 'original position,' an imagined state of primordial equality...*

*Rawls then proceeds to the identification of particular principles of justice. The first principle enshrines the priority of liberty and prescribed maximal liberty for each person subject to similar liberty for all. The second principle deals with equity and efficiency in the distribution of opportunities. It includes... alternative social arrangements be judged... that make to the holding of 'primary goods'... including self-respect by the worst-off in society...<sup>22</sup>*

For Ambedkar and Rawls, justice is one of the most important ethical categories for ascertaining and evaluating a human person in totality. In India the Dalits and Tribals constitute the major category in the Indian Church. Unfairness currently characterizes the system. This poses a challenge for Christian mission. For Christian mission, the challenge in the current process is to side with the subalterns. To assume neutrality usually reinforces the existing inequalities and supports the powerful. What I am proposing now, which is an emancipating perspective, is thus necessary. It is imperative that all other narratives of resistance be brought into the centre. As a Christian, what is important to me is to seriously probe and evolve a mission perspective for India.

### ***To Conclude***

In a context where economic and social disequilibria prevail and predominate as the order of the day, mission as liberation can become one of missional foci to all of us. Therefore our engagement as Christians ought to be pragmatic leading to emancipation and liberation of Dalits and Tribals. The challenge that is before us is the need to affirm our faith by fulfilling the liberating mission, linking and realizing social justice and liberation by identifying with the Dalits and Tribals in India and elsewhere in their struggles leading towards their emancipation from their shackles of the present crisis.

The struggles for Dalits and Tribals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are to recover their spaces both in the public and private domains. Their cultural spaces and pragmatic spirituality have always been their vehicles for emancipation. Therefore, concerted efforts and creative actions are needed to organize and mobilize the rich oral traditions and narratives that the subalterns possess because these subversive terrains of the ostracized categories are volatile and potent, impregnated with anger, determination, resilience, and hope. The future of India depends on how we as a nation address and take into account the struggles, experiences, identity affirmation and vision of the future of Dalits and Tribals. Their terrains must be the centres of our enquiry and action. Until then, our talk of equality, fairness, human dignity, social and distributive justice, would remain hollow. Emancipatory mission in the Indian context should involve translating the ideals of justice, dignity and equality into concrete practical realities. Until this is completely realized, mission in India would be merely cosmetic, partisan and segmentary.

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<sup>22</sup> Pillapre Balakrishnan, 'Globalization, Growth and Justice', in *EPW* (July 26, 2001), 3170.

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