

# Introduction

Has Christian Dalit Theology contributed towards practical Dalit liberation? This question concerning what I call the ‘practical efficacy’ of Christian Dalit Theology (or Dalit Theology as it is popularly known) serves as the point of departure for this book. The issue of ‘practical efficacy’ is particularly pertinent for Christian Dalit theology, which professes to be an identity-specific theology of liberation and has as its primary locus the struggles for liberation of the Dalit communities who were formerly notoriously known as the ‘untouchables’.

It needs to be emphasized that since its very inception Christian Dalit theology has been both consistent and candid about its practical dimensions. James Massey, one of the pioneers of Christian Dalit theology says that ‘when Dalit theologians speak of Dalit Theology, they are in fact making an affirmation about the need for a theological expression which will help them in their search for daily bread and their struggle to overcome a situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy and denial of human dignity and identity’.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, another Dalit theologian, M.E. Prabhakar, understands Dalit theology as being, ‘not only a prophetic theology for identification with the oppression of Dalits and their struggles for equality and justice’, but also as ‘a political theology for social action towards the transformation of injustice, undemocratic and oppressive structures’.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the question of ‘practical efficacy’ is an important one for Dalit theology.

However, an answer to this question regarding the ‘practical efficacy’ of Christian Dalit theology seems more inclined towards the negative than the positive direction. Christianity in India in the twenty-first century is confronted with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand we have the growing academic influence of Christian Dalit theology as a form of contextual theology, whereas on the other we have the glaring discrimination of Dalits within Christianity as well as the continued passivity of the Church to engage in issues of Dalit liberation. This incompatibility in my opinion is symptomatic of the practical inefficacy of Dalit theology. Dalit theology does not seem to have significantly influenced the social practice of the Indian Church. As George Oommen reminds us, the Indian Church hasn’t made many significant attempts to engage in struggles for Dalit emancipation, except ‘defending the right to convert and looking after

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<sup>1</sup> James Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> M.E. Prabhakar, ‘The Search for a Dalit Theology’, in James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), 1998) (pp. 201–13), p. 211.

Christian communal minority rights'.<sup>3</sup> The need of the hour is thus for a theology which will have a transformative influence. An international conference on Dalit theology held in Kolkata in January 2008 on the theme 'Dalit Theology in the 21st Century: Discordant Voices Discerning Pathways' recognized the need for Dalit theology to reinvent itself in order to become a theology of life for all. The need for a more practically efficacious theology becomes increasingly clear when we hear reports that, 'there is a real danger that even if caste is annihilated in Hindu society, it might continue to flourish among Indian Christians',<sup>4</sup> and that 'Christian communities in several parts of India show more feelings of caste exclusiveness and hold more tenaciously to undesirable caste customs' when compared to non-Christians.<sup>5</sup> Ironically at this point, what Dalit Marathi poet Baban Londhe says about the 'self-professed messiahs to the Dalits' in his poem *Shroud* seems to be true of Dalit theology as well. Londhe's poem for me seems to talk *of* and *at* Dalit Theology

On a plain so vast our eyes could not reach  
 They would make speeches to their hearts content  
 and shout out novel slogans,  
 blow a breath of hope on our over tired limbs.  
 At times, to our shanty towns they would come,  
 careful not to rumple their ironed clothes  
 crossing over lanes and alleys,  
 jumping across streaming gutters.  
 When they stopped beside our doors  
 we felt inexplicably moved.  
 Viewing our pitiable state they would say  
 'Truly this needs a socio economic cultural change,  
 the whole picture needs to be changed'.  
 Then we would sing their songs  
 in sonorous full-throated tones.  
 Acting innocuous, they would eat  
 the marrow of our bones.  
 Days passed by.  
 Darkness pressed from all sides.

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<sup>3</sup> George Oommen, 'Majoritarian Nationalism and the Identity Politics of Dalits in Post-Independent India', in Joseph George (ed.), *The God of All Grace: Essays in Honour of Origen Vasantha Jathanna* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation (ATC) and the United Theological College (UTC), 2005) (pp. 338–50), pp. 339, 340.

<sup>4</sup> P. Dayanandan, 'Who Needs a Liberation Theology?', in *Dalit International News Letter*, Vol. 10, No. 1, February 2005 (pp. 7–9), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> S.M. Michael, 'Cultural Studies and Theologizing on the Empowerment of Dalits in India', in James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (eds), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and New Delhi: CDSS, 2005) (pp. 71–95), p. 88.

We battled against sunshine and rain  
 and like fools awaiting salvation  
 we have stood our ground  
 and are sunk to the neck in mire.  
 But now they say plans are worked out  
 for our salvation  
 covering our wasted tombs  
 in a new shroud  
 what munificence!<sup>6</sup>

The task of this book is perceived as engaging with the challenge of ensuring that Dalit theology too doesn't remain, to borrow Londhe's language, just another *new shroud*. Therefore, an attempt is made to *bridge the gap* between thought and practice, which is identified by liberationist biblical scholar Norman K. Gottwald as one of the 'yawning chasms separating the several integral aspects of political and social hermeneutics'.<sup>7</sup> The book undertakes a critical investigation of the practical or praxiological dimension of Christian Dalit Theology, which will foreground a subsequent constructive process of discerning pathways through which Dalit theology can reinvent itself as a more practical theology of liberation and act as a catalyst in the process of transformation. Before we proceed to a fuller discussion of Dalit theology it is important to have an overview of the Dalit situation in India.

### **Who are the Dalits? – Dalits and the Indian Caste System**

Once you're used to it  
 You never afterwards  
 feel anything;  
 your blood nevermore  
 congeals  
 nor flows  
 for wet mud has been slapped  
 over all your bones.  
 Once you're used to it  
 even the sorrow  
 that visits you  
 sometimes, in dreams,

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<sup>6</sup> Baban Londhe, 'Shroud'. Cited in Sanjay Paswan (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, Vol. 11 (Delhi: Kalpaz Publishers, 2002), p. 146. (Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat.)

<sup>7</sup> Gottwald, *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (New York: Orbis, 1983).

melts away, embarrassed.  
 Habit isn't used to breaking out  
 in feelings<sup>8</sup>

Understanding Dalits inevitably entails understanding the Indian caste system. This poem by Marathi poet F.M. Shinde poignantly brings out the hegemony of the Indian caste system, which encompasses a complex hierarchical ordering of social groups. In the Indian context, the word 'caste' can denote not only '*varna*' but also another concept called '*jati*'. The European term 'caste' conflates the indigenous concepts of *varna* and *jati*.<sup>9</sup> *Varna*, the term widely used to denote caste, can refer to 'a notional all-India fourfold division of society into estates based on function'.<sup>10</sup> The *vedas* (Hindu scriptures) divided the Hindu society in the post-vedic time into four categories or *varnas*. These *varnas* were associated with privileges as well as well-defined and particular social occupations. The four *varnas* were *Brahmin* (priest and teacher), *Kshatriya* (ruler and warrior), *Vaishya* (trader) and *Shudra* (servant).<sup>11</sup> *Jati*, the other term for caste, refers to 'named endogamous groups which are usually more or less localized or at least have a regional base'. According to Declan Quigley, 'The sense of *Jati* is of those people who are in some fundamental way alike because of their common origins, and fundamentally different from those who do not share these origins'.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of methodological clarity it would suffice to recognize *jati* as referring to common origins or birth; while in the concept of *varna* the basic inherent idea is 'not of birth but of function' – a function deemed necessary to ensure the maintenance of

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<sup>8</sup> F.M. Shinde, 'Habit', in Arjun Dangle (ed.), *No Entry for the New Sun: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992), p. 69. (Translated by Priya Adarkar.)

<sup>9</sup> Ursula M. Sharma, *Caste* (Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), pp. 5, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Rebati Ballav Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-human Society* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994), pp. 6 ff.

<sup>11</sup> A popular term that was used to denote the first three *varnas* were '*Dvijas*' or the 'twice-born'. The people belonging to the '*Dvijas*' were entitled to wearing the sacred thread and studying the *Vedas*, while the *Shudras* (the people of the fourth *varna*) did not possess any such rights. They were considered as slaves and the only right they had was to serve the three other 'higher' *varnas*. See Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-human Society*, pp. 6 ff.

<sup>12</sup> To try and explain the concept of *jati* a bit further, the words of One cannot choose one's *jati*; it is defined by birth. But one can choose whether one's *jati* refers to a more or less inclusive group: this is going to depend on context. In one context, one's *jati* is one's lineage; in another, it may be all the lineages with whom one can intermarry; in yet another, it may refer to those whose common ethnic or cultural heritage sets them apart from their neighbours. Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (Indian paperback edn), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 4, 5.

social harmony and cosmic stability.<sup>13</sup> In everyday life, particularly in the villages, the operative conception of ‘caste’ is *jati* rather than *varna*.

‘Dalits’ are those communities which have for many centuries occupied a deeply ambiguous place within Indian society. As they are the communities that fall beyond the four-fold *varna* system their position is much inferior to the *Shudras*, who are the lowest caste in the fourfold *varna* system. The Dalits are considered as the *avarnas* (casteless ones). Though the Dalits are accommodated in the local *jati* system in the villages, the Dalits are discriminated against in both the *varna* and the *jati* systems.<sup>14</sup> An oft-quoted passage describes the precarious existence of the Dalits as follows:

More than one-sixth of India’s population, some 160 million people, live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society because of their rank as untouchables or Dalits – literally meaning ‘broken’ people – at the bottom of India’s caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state’s protection. In what has been called ‘hidden apartheid’ entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. National legislations and constitutional protections serve only to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the ‘pollution line’.<sup>15</sup>

### Theories of Caste Discrimination

Several theories have been propounded to understand the origins and practice of discrimination against the Dalits.<sup>16</sup> We will take a look at two of the most important theories.

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<sup>13</sup> Quigley, *Interpretation*, pp. 5 ff.

<sup>14</sup> This is primarily because the Hindu caste system, which has severe inequalities, is also ‘marked by an organic unity among castes made possible through internalization of the in-egalitarian values, embodied in the twin concept of “*Karma*” and “*Dharma*” observed both by upper and lower castes’. This phenomenon was made possible by a ‘peculiar complex system’ called the ‘*Jajmani* system’, which entailed the exchange of goods and services among various castes. But the negative impact of the system was that the Dalits always were placed on the wrong (exploited) side of exchange. They were always subservient to the other caste communities (*jatis*). They are denied access to the vital economic resources and do not have bargaining power. All this makes them the most exploited peripheral group in the Indian society. Tripathy, *Dalits*, pp. 13 ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s ‘Untouchables’* (Human Rights Watch Report) (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp. 1, 2.

<sup>16</sup> For more, see Ghanshyam Shah, Harsh Mander et al. (eds), *Untouchability in Rural India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 23–31.

*Aryan Theory for the Origins of Caste*

Popularly known as the Aryan invasion theory, the Aryan theory is a racial theory. According to the 'standard view' of this theory, the present-day Dalits were the 'black race natives' like the Dasas and Dasyus who were conquered and enslaved by the 'white Sanskrit speaking Aryan invaders around BC 1,500.<sup>17</sup> 'Varna' or 'colour' is an important dividing category in this theory, which is supported through reference to ancient textual evidence like the Rig Veda.<sup>18</sup> According to this theory, the dissident indigenous groups, such as the *dasa/dasyus*, *rakshasa*, *asuras*, which did not submit to the hegemonic Aryan invaders were considered to be a threat to the Aryan way of life. Thus, they were hated constantly and attacked by the Aryans. Upon their eventual subjugation, they were excluded from the main economic activity of the time, assigned 'unskilled, unproductive, lowly and menial jobs', and treated with utter contempt and were segregated as a residual category of people to be employed as and when necessary'.<sup>19</sup> In opposition to this view, which argues for the 'immigrant Aryan position', there is an alternative view which argues for the 'indigenous Aryan position', claiming that the Aryans were identical with the people of the Indus civilization.<sup>20</sup> In spite of the ambivalence surrounding this Aryan debate, both versions of the Aryan theory have been appropriated by various groups to suit their political interests. Drawing attention to the appropriation of the Aryan theory by the Hindu fundamentalist groups like the Hindutva and Dalit reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Romila Thapar shows how appropriation of the theories of Aryan race have not only sought to 'structure knowledge about the past, but perhaps more directly to give legitimacy to the conflicts of the present'.<sup>21</sup> For the Hindu fundamentalist groups like the Hindutva, which argue for an exclusively Hindu nationalistic version of Indianness, it is imperative that the Hindu Aryans be indigenous. This entails the denial of Aryan invasions. However, other anti-Brahmin Dalit movements like the *Adi-dravida*, *Adi-dharm* have adopted variant versions of the racial theory to break their bonds with Hinduism on racial grounds and formulate an autonomous identity as the original inhabitants of the land.<sup>22</sup> Both versions of the theory have legitimated the identity politics of the various communities which invoke them. However, the drawback with this theory is that though it gives us insights into the origins of caste-communities, it does not help us

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *The Aryan Debate* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); also Shah, *Untouchability*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Roweena Robinson, *Christians of India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Prabhati Mukherjee, *Beyond the Four Varnas: The Unouchables in India*, p. 104, cited in Shah, *Untouchability*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Trautmann, *The Aryan Debate*, p. xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Romila Thapar, 'Some Appropriations of the Theory of Race Relating to the Beginnings of Indian History', in Trautmann (ed.), *The Aryan Debate* (pp. 106–28), p. 107

<sup>22</sup> Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 58.

to analyse thoroughly the reasons for the continued practice of ‘untouchability’ and caste-based discrimination against the Dalits.

### *Purity and Pollution Theory*

It is often argued that notions of purity and pollution constitute the foundations of the caste system in India. But how do we understand the interplay of notions of purity and pollution in the psyche of the people? In her phenomenal study *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues that purity is a concept which has been evoked to create a semblance of order in an inherently untidy, disorderly and chaotic reality. She says:

I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.<sup>23</sup>

Douglas posits this opposition between the pure and impure as a universal phenomenon and goes on to explore how people’s perceptions of danger and impurity arise. She contends that humans consider as dangerous all those that defy and threaten cognitive categories as well as those which don’t fit into classificatory divisions, i.e. whatever is anomalous. Therefore, boundary-reinforcement is inextricably interlinked with notions of purity and pollution

Douglas also talks of a ‘unity of experience’ in any given culture where similar attitudes to boundaries prevail at three levels, namely the bodily boundaries, the social boundaries and the cosmological boundaries. Any society which is ‘anxious about what goes in and out of the orifices of the bodily boundary ... will probably also guard the social boundary carefully to protect who goes in and who goes out of their social group. Regarding the cosmological level of beliefs in such a society, one would expect to find a dualism with a distinct boundary separating the good from the evil, the holy from the unclean’.<sup>24</sup> In another schematic study, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 1973, Douglas delineates a ‘concordance between symbolic and social experience’. She talks of symbolic systems as having specific social functions like the symbolics of hierarchy for defining and reproducing social power; the symbolics of danger and taboo for demarcating groups and maintaining social boundaries; and symbolics of contagion for giving

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London/New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> David Rhoads, ‘Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries’, in Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds), *Mark and Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) (pp. 135–61), pp. 152, 153.

social meaning to the chaotic site of material things.<sup>25</sup> She talks of these symbolics as constituting the semiotics of social order. Nevertheless, she calls for critical perceptivity towards the codes of social semiotics:

The elaborated code challenges its users to turn round on themselves and inspect their values ... This would seem to be the only way to use our knowledge to free ourselves from the power of our own cosmology. No one would deliberately choose the elaborated code and the personal system who is aware of the seeds of alienation it contains.<sup>26</sup>

Douglas is critically aware of the dangers of these social codes which seek to forge order. She points out how pollution beliefs can be employed in 'a dialogue of claims and counter claims to status'.<sup>27</sup> It is this translation of notions of purity and pollution into the semiotics of hierarchy, exclusion and power which makes notions of purity and pollution problematic and questionable. This inter-linkage between notions of purity and pollution and hierarchical exclusion has often been argued to be foundational to the Indian caste system. Several scholars have posited notions of purity and pollution as a valid epistemological premise to understand the Indian caste context, especially in reference to the discrimination against the Dalits. At this point It would be pertinent to consider some of their arguments.

Celestin Bougle was the first social scientist to stress the importance of purity and pollution to understand caste in the Indian situation. According to Bougle, the caste system arose 'from the occurrence of spontaneous and collective tendencies' which lay at the sociological heart of caste and accounted for its 'spirit'.<sup>28</sup> They were 'repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization'. But the most critical aspect of these three tendencies was 'repulsion' — the word used to emphasize the importance of 'purity-pollution'. For Bougle, when we speak of caste reigning in a society we mean that 'the different groups of which that society is composed, repel each other rather than attract, that each retires within itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relations with neighbours'. This is what Bougle calls the 'spirit of caste', which is instrumental for the empirical operation of caste. According to Bougle:

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

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 190.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Celestin Bougle, *Essays on the Caste System* (trans. by D.F. Pocock) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 60.

fragments; it brings each of their elementary groups face to face, separated by mutual repulsion.<sup>29</sup>

The function of notions of purity and pollution for Bougle seems to revolve around maintaining cognitive groups in a hierarchy of hereditary occupation using the 'process' of mutual repulsion in day-to-day interaction.

It was the French anthropologist Louis Dumont who developed the purity and pollution ideology into a systemic and coherent thesis. Dumont reduced the three tendencies of caste elucidated by Bougle to a 'single true principle' — the opposition of the pure and the impure in his seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus*.<sup>30</sup> Dumont argues for understanding Hindu caste society in holistic or structural terms. Caste, for Dumont, is little more than the working out of the complementary opposition between the pure and the impure on a substantive level.<sup>31</sup> 'Superiority and superior purity are identical: it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status.'<sup>32</sup> Though Dumont recognizes that there is a great polyvocality and variation in the manner in which the opposition of purity and pollution is expressed in caste relations, he maintains that this ideological opposition predominantly permeates the system. He does not 'claim that the opposition between pure and impure is the "foundation" of society except in the intellectual sense of the term'. Rather, 'it is by implicit reference to this opposition that the society of castes appears consistent and rational to those who live in it'.<sup>33</sup> Dumont's argument seems to be pointing suggestively to the fact that notions of purity and pollution became referential for the behaviour and interaction of the caste groups. We find this clearly expressed by Mary Douglas, who while introducing *Homo Hierarchicus* writes:

(t)he idiom of purity is only too well known to us. It is liable to dominate our transactions with one another whenever other kinds of social distinction, based on authority and wealth are not clear. Purity and impurity are principles of evaluation and separation. The purer must be kept uncontaminated by the less pure.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bougle, *Essays*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (London: Paladdin, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> R.L. Stirrat, 'Caste Conundrums: Views of Caste in a Sinhalese Catholic Fishing Village', in Dennis B. McGilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 9, General Editor Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) (pp. 8–33), p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Douglas, 'Introduction', in *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 16.

In particular, Dumont's work has been seminal in the magnitude of sustained intellectual debate it has evoked. His intention was to organize the myriad complexity of caste manifestations into a systemic set of structural principles. However, Dumont's theory has evoked much criticism, knowledge of which is pertinent for a broader understanding of caste. Dumont's theory about the ideology of caste has been thought to be flawed by critics like Quigley who claim that this argument is soaked through with pre-conceptual notions of Hindu society.<sup>35</sup> According to Berreman, Dumont's view of the caste system is in close conformity, 'to the high caste ideal of what the caste system of Hindu India ought to be like according to those who value it positively: it conforms well to the theory of caste purveyed by learned *Brahminical* tracts'.<sup>36</sup> Berreman also argues that Dumont's theory 'bears little relationship to the experience of caste in the lives of many millions who live it in India, or to the feeble reflections of those lives that have made their way into the ethnographical, biographical and novelistic literature' and insists this to be a travesty, which could become clear upon a frank talk with an untouchable.<sup>37</sup> A few field studies have demonstrated how certain groups do not accept the principle of hierarchy which is delineated by Dumont.<sup>38</sup>

It is important that Dumont's theory of purity and pollution should also be analysed in the light of the several ambivalences and inconsistencies that prevail when it comes to the dynamics of caste operation in India. One of the problems associated with Dumont's thesis is the problem of ascertaining definite rank of an individual caste group on an all-India basis. Dennis B. McGilvary draws our attention to what he calls the 'pragmatic and historically contingent polyvocality' of caste interaction and elaborates this issue further:

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<sup>35</sup> Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Gerald Berreman, 'The Brahminical View of Caste', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol. 5, 1971 (pp. 16–23), p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Gerald Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequalities* (Meerut: Folklore Institute, 1979), p. 162.

<sup>38</sup> Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective* (London: Athlone Press, 1991). Parry's study of the MahaBrahmins or the funeral priests of Benares provides insights to understand priests as vessels of impurity and defilement, who through rituals and acceptance of ritual gifts carry on themselves the pollution of their patrons. J.P. Parry, 'Ghosts, Greed and the Sin: The Occupational Identity of the Benares Funeral Priests', in *Man* (n.s.), Vol. 15, 1980 (pp. 88–111), and J.P. Parry, 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"', in *Man* (n.s.), Vol. 21, 1986 (pp. 453–73). Raheja also agrees with the idea of potential pollution through gift-acceptance. G.G. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). See also J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, chapter on 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer' (pp. 26–44) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and G.G. Raheja, 'India: Caste, Kingship and Dominance Reconsidered', in *ARA*, Vol. 17, 1988 (pp. 497–522), p. 517 for other discussions.

The constellation of behavioural traits commonly identified with the operation of local caste hierarchies, including asymmetrical inter-caste transactions in food and drink, asymmetrical removal of waste, caste endogamy or hypergamy, differential access to domestic and public space...can be surprisingly versatile and polyvocal markers of social rank. While they unambiguously convey assertions of relative superiority and inferiority – and this is clearly their intent – they do not unambiguously express the dimension or aspect of social rank which is being claimed.<sup>39</sup>

According to anthropologist M.N. Srinivas, though differences exist ‘between the various regions and castes in the strictness and elaborateness of the rules regarding pollution and purity’, ideas of purity and pollution ‘cover a large sector of life. Inter-caste relations are governed at many points by ideas of pollution’.<sup>40</sup> This is precisely because, as Taya Zankin says, that though in short ‘who pollutes, and when it pollutes are all highly variable ... all that can be said is that the *people immediately concerned know the rules* through tradition and custom and they are too familiar with them to be bothered by their inconsistency’.<sup>41</sup>

The other criticism that has been levelled against Dumont is that there is no general acceptance of notions of purity and pollution as having ascriptive social value. Gerald Berreman repeatedly draws attention to the fact that ‘low caste people’ do not accept the unclean and demeaning status assigned to them.<sup>42</sup> According to Ursula Sharma’s summary of Berreman’s argument, people belonging to the ‘low castes’ had their own definitions for the caste situation and did not subscribe to Dumont’s ‘ideological celebration of hierarchy based on principles of purity and pollution’. The diverse notions of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the development of the caste system which prevail among the ‘low castes’ hinge more on reference to superior *power* of the high castes rather than superior *purity*. More often than not, having been left with no other option than to risk being beaten up or face deprivation of their livelihood, the ‘lower castes’ cope with their assigned inferior and unclean status. As coping mechanisms they elaborate their own myths and ideologies in which their own caste is portrayed as being displaced from the high status that it was ‘really’ entitled to. Usually this displacement is interpreted as resulting from the deceit of high castes or by way of quirk of fate or sheer misfortune.<sup>43</sup> Berreman’s main contention was that because the ‘higher castes’ wielded considerable economic power over the ‘low castes’ the latter couldn’t

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<sup>39</sup> McGilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (London: J.K. Publishers, 1962), p. 151. Emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Taya Zankin, *Caste Today* (London: Institute of Race Relations/Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> See Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequalities*.

<sup>43</sup> Ursula M. Sharma, ‘Berreman Revisited; Caste and the Comparative Method’, in Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula M. Sharma (eds), *Contextualising Caste: Post-*

openly resist or express their resentment towards the polluted position ascribed to them.<sup>44</sup> However, he stressed the fact that ascriptive status on the basis of relative purity or pollution did not gain acceptance among the 'lower-castes' and was resented strongly.

Though some 'low castes' do not often accept the impure status assigned to them this is not evidence by itself to prove that they don't believe in notions of purity and pollution at all. In fact, such people who resent being considered 'impure' themselves often resort to claiming superiority over other 'lower-castes', using the ideology of purity and pollution, though not in the same way as the caste communities. Taya Zinkin reports his 'first contact with untouchability within Untouchability' when he was mobbed by Chamars when he persuaded a Dom to draw water from their well.<sup>45</sup> Moffat's ethnographic study in the South Indian village of *Endavur* contains echoings along similar lines.<sup>46</sup> Moffat points out to an interesting 'sub-system' among the Dalits, which seems to be a reciprocation of the hierarchical ranking found in the caste system. According to Moffat, 'at the deeper level of Indian village culture so conceptualized, Untouchables and higher-caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs'.<sup>47</sup> Moffat's interpretation is that Dalits and other 'low castes' have recreated the functions and relations from which they themselves have been excluded in the macro-caste system. Berreman's studies in *Sirkanda* village in Uttar Pradesh contains reports of blacksmiths resenting being treated as 'untouchables' on par with the others because unlike the others they refrain from eating the flesh of buffaloes and cattle.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Unnithan-Kumar's study in Rajasthan among the *Girasia* tribe also reports how the *Girasia* claim superior status over the 'tribal' Bhils, citing one of the reasons for the latter's impure status as involving eating the flesh of the domestic buffalo.<sup>49</sup> Moffat's study in South India also contains such reports where pork- and beef-eating groups claimed superior status over frog-eating groups.<sup>50</sup> Sharma also points out that citing of impure occupations like tanning and scavenging to justify the low status of certain castes is very much a probability. These evidences suggest that 'lower caste' people do use the notions of purity and pollution to differentiate themselves from the other 'lower castes'. However, it needs to be emphasized

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*Dumontian Approaches* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/Sociological Review, 1994) (pp. 73–91), pp. 73 ff.

<sup>44</sup> Gerald Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 224 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Zinkin, *Caste Today*, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> M. Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 290 ff.

<sup>47</sup> Moffat, *An Untouchable Community*, p. 291.

<sup>48</sup> Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, p. 221.

<sup>49</sup> M. Unnithan-Kumar, *Identity, Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997), p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Moffat, *An Untouchable Community*, p. 130.

that possible similarities in the manner in which both 'upper castes' and the 'lower castes' employ notions of purity and pollution to discriminate others does not necessarily imply the same thing always. On the basis of the analysis of the above-mentioned factors I conclude that the operation of notions of purity and pollution among the 'lower-castes' is premised in the context of a dialectic tension between 'resistance to' and strategic 'utilization of' these notions in a fascinating interplay of claims and counterclaims to status. This purity and pollution ideology is employed by caste groups when they claim superior status over other parallel groups and vehemently resisted when used to emphasize their own inferiority on the perpendicular level. However, the point that is important is that notions of purity and pollution are an important idiom employed in caste interactions especially in negotiating status.

Sometimes notions of purity and pollution can also be discerned in what is claimed to be social convention. Based on her fieldwork in *Aruloor* in Tamil Nadu, K. Kapadia argues that sometimes interest in notions of purity and pollution is more to stake claim to social status than anything fundamental. She argues that 'upper caste' people in *Aruloor* conformed to purity regulations in the interests of maintaining collective caste status whereas there was a great deal of personal cynicism towards the strictures demanded by the rules of purity and pollution. Kapadia interprets this cynicism as being best reflected (though secretly) in their meat eating and indulging in affairs with 'low caste women'. The upper caste men of *Aruloor* claimed ritual purity in public though their actual behaviour conflicted with the conventional social behaviour prescribed for them. Kapadia also points to the cynical attitude of the *Pallars* ('low caste' group) of *Aruloor* towards 'upper caste' claims to ritual superiority. They firmly rejected the ritual impurity imposed on them by the 'upper castes'. Moreover, the *Pallars* treated other 'low castes' like barbers and washermen as being ritually inferior to them. Kapadia argues, that this 'is not evidence of any fundamental interest in ritual purity. On the contrary, this has much to do with making a claim to social status. The *Pallars* are merely treating their service castes in exactly the same way as other castes treat theirs. They are following conventional social behavior'.<sup>51</sup>

Certain processes of achieving upward social mobility, like the process of 'sanskritization' conceptualized by Srinivas, also borrow heavily from the distinctions between the pure and impure. Through the process of sanskritization, a 'lower caste' 'was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the *Brahmins*'.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, we see that the idiom of purity and pollution is not only used by the 'lower castes' to assert superior status over other 'lower

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<sup>51</sup> K. Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 117, 118.

<sup>52</sup> M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1952), p. 32.

castes'; rather it is also used in renegotiating one's social status and to achieve upward social mobility by adhering to practices and rituals considered superior or relatively pure.<sup>53</sup> Thus, we can state with conviction that notions of purity and pollution and assertion of superiority are intrinsically interlinked to a large extent in India's caste interaction and operation.

*Weakening of Notions of Purity and Pollution in the Contemporary Context*

Though it is predominantly presumed that the caste system is based on notions of purity and pollution we need to take note that notions of purity and pollution have an enigmatic presence in the changing Indian society today. As early as 1962 Srinivas pointed to the weakening of ideas of purity and pollution which effected changes in the caste system when even villages 'experienced a certain amount of liberalization'. For Srinivas, 'this process has, however, been accompanied by the greater activity of caste in administration and politics. Adult franchise and Panchayat Raj have provided new opportunities for castes. In the course of exploitation of new opportunities, the caste system has undergone a certain amount of change'.<sup>54</sup> In relation to this argument about the transitory nature of caste we can raise the issue of the pertinence of thinking about caste in terms of notions of purity and pollution. Ursula Sharma is right when she points out that while the force of some ritual prohibition based on notions of purity and pollution has now weakened other restrictions have proved very difficult to be maintained 'in the crowded urban context where the caste of the person who sits in the next seat in train or bus or who serves in the tea shop may be impossible to ascertain'.<sup>55</sup> However, Sharma goes on to make it clear that 'in spite of the decline in practice of ritual restrictions, the vocabulary of ritual purity and pollution still provides one language for talking about caste'.<sup>56</sup> This language could be used as an important idiom of social interaction not to justify the entire caste system but at least for discussing the relative status of specific local castes.<sup>57</sup>

It needs to be emphasized that with regard to any discussion about the changing nature of caste we should be cautious about statements which 'border on fiction' when it comes to accenting the changes that are under way in Indian society, like the following statement by M.V. Nadkarni:

Ritual hierarchy and pollution have completely vanished from urban areas. Even in the rural areas they have considerably weakened. The Jajmani system, which allotted duties and also gave some security and was the main factor behind the

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<sup>53</sup> However, it needs to be mentioned that there is no evidence of the sanskritization process being effective in changing the status of the Dalit communities.

<sup>54</sup> Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Sharma, *Caste* (Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), pp. 36–7.

<sup>56</sup> Sharma, *Caste*, pp. 36–7.

<sup>57</sup> Sharma, *Caste*, pp. 36–7.

continuation of the caste system all these centuries in spite of the progressive teaching by many Hindu saints and philosophers has now broken down.<sup>58</sup>

Responding to this, Jesuit theologian Felix Wilfred rightly reminds us of the dangers of such statements which hide the ‘actual situation of oppression, deprivation, disempowerment and violence the Dalits continue to suffer’. Representing the Dalit situation in the manner in which Nadkarni does, ‘is not so innocent’ according to Wilfred, but ‘has serious consequences’ as such a portrayal can actually lull a large section of the so-called middle and upper castes into complacency. Further, such a picture also ‘blinds them to the actual struggles and conflicts the Dalits are going through to secure their dignity and respectability against many odds’.<sup>59</sup>

### Dalits and Notions of Purity and Pollution

If we move from a general conceptualization of caste-relations between the various ‘caste-communities’ to the specific context of Dalit discrimination, one cannot denounce the fact that ‘ideas of purity, whether occupational or ceremonial, which are found to be a factor in the genesis of caste, are the very soul of the idea and practice of untouchability’.<sup>60</sup> In spite of the increasing ‘class-ification’ of caste, notions of purity and pollution operate ubiquitously in the discrimination of the Dalit communities, assuming various operative hues.

The Dalit communities are considered capable of polluting everything within the range of 74 feet. Their shadow is believed to pollute wellwater, so they are denied access to the village wells. They had to cover their mouth with a little pot when speaking with ‘caste people’.<sup>61</sup> To avoid physical contagion, usually the Dalits live in segregated areas outside the main villages. In Tamil Nadu their living areas are called ‘*para cheris*’. This siting of the *para cheris* away from the main village (*oor*) accentuates the social exclusion of the Dalit communities rather than their social identity with the village.<sup>62</sup> Fah-hian, writing about the *Candalas* (a Dalit *jati* of North India), states, ‘they live segregated from the rest of the society,

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<sup>58</sup> M.V. Nadkarni, ‘Ethics and Relevance of Conversions: A Critical Assessment of Religious and Social Dimension in a Gandhian Perspective’, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 18 2003, p. 231. Cited in Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 2007), p. 13

<sup>59</sup> Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> G.S. Ghurye, *Caste, Class and Occupation* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1961), p. 214.

<sup>61</sup> James Elisha, ‘Liberative Motifs in the Dalit Religion’, in *BTF*, Vol. 34, No. 2, December, 2002 (pp. 78–88), pp. 78 ff.

<sup>62</sup> Andre Beteille, *Castes: Old and New, Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. 36.

and when they enter a city, they must sound an alarm by striking a piece of wood to warn everyone of their presence and enable the citizens to avoid running into them'.<sup>63</sup> The Dharmasutras make it clear that direct or indirect contact with the Dalits can cause pollution. Pollution would occur if the Dalits are touched, conversed with or even looked upon. Rites of purification become mandatory after such pollution. The *Jatakas* (ancient Indian fables) contain tales of the daughters of a *Brahmin* and a *Vjsya* washing their eyes after having looked at a *Candala*; and a starved *Brahmin* who dies from embarrassment after having eaten food left by a *Candala*.<sup>64</sup> Not only were the Dalits deemed polluting but the people who came into 'contact' with them were considered to be polluting as well. One account has it that a female slave belonging to a *Sudhra jati* worked in a family of a *Prabhu* (upper-caste *jati*). The woman was found to have committed adultery with a Dalit (*Antyaj jati*) and thus was regarded as having become polluted. But as she had been working in the *Prabhu* household smearing the floor with cow dung, washing utensils, cutting vegetables and cooking their food she had transmitted her own 'acquired' impurity to the household through her indirect contact (*samsarg*). As a result of this, the whole *Prabhu* household had to undergo a purification ceremony. Further, the house land had to be dug up and purified by letting a cow walk on it, the earthenware and utensils were to be purified by fire and the wooden floor and door had to be destroyed because they could not be purified through fire. The other type of contact was the *spars* or *sparsaspars*, which meant direct physical contact with the Dalits. Another tale goes that a barber who belonged to a *Shudra* caste (*Nhavi Jati*) unknowingly cut the hair of a Dalit. This bodily contact rendered the barber impure, leading to his excommunication, which was annulled only after an 'appropriate' purification ceremony.<sup>65</sup>

It is interesting to note that most of the terms used to denote the Dalits are fecund with implications of marginalization and oppression. In most of the 'popular' terms used to denote the Dalits the concept of a 'boundary' is very much inherent. They are clearly demarcated from the caste-groups. Some of these terms are '*Varna-sankara*' (meaning people who are 'outside the caste system'); '*Avarnas*' (casteless people); '*Panchamas*' (fifth caste); '*Candalas*' (the worst people of the earth, during the Gupta period); 'Depressed Classes' in the British colonial days; 'Exterior Castes' by the census superintendent of Assam.<sup>66</sup> One should not ignore the most notorious term used for the Dalits – 'Untouchables'. This term

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<sup>63</sup> S. Beal, *The Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-yum* (trans. 2nd edn) (London, 1964), p. 55. Quoted by Gen'ichi Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination in Ancient India and Its transition to the Medieval Period', in Hiroyki Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999) (paperback edn) (pp. 3–19), p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', pp. 12 ff.

<sup>65</sup> Hiroyki Kotani, 'Ati Sudra Castes in the Medieval Deccan', in Kotani (ed.), *Caste System* (pp. 55–75), pp. 55 ff.

<sup>66</sup> V. Devasahayam, 'Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 1–22), p. 1.

vituperatively condenses the notion of purity and pollution which governed the social interaction and inter-relationships between the various caste groupings and Dalits in India. The Indian constitution recognizes the Dalits as the 'Scheduled Castes'. The Marathi word 'Dalit', which is derived from Sanskrit, is now the most common term identifying the Scheduled Castes as a whole. The word is defined as 'ground' or 'broken' or reduced to pieces generally.<sup>67</sup> In its Sanskritic usage the term 'Dal' means 'broken' and 'down-trodden'. These words really bring out 'the effects of oppression' which the Dalits have undergone over the years and are much in conformity with the Dalit life situation.<sup>68</sup> The one reason why this term has achieved dignified coinage is that it has been widely accepted by the Dalits. The word also maintains the dialectic tension between Dalit historicity as well as their own aspirations for emancipation, which is fuelled by their historical consciousness. Hence this term is considered as being affirmative in their striving towards dignity and equality.

On the basis of notions of purity and pollution the origins of Dalits are identified as being 'debased' and 'disruptive', thus justifying their exclusion from the contours of society. An examination of the theories of origin of some of the Dalit *jatis* would definitely help us to theorize the Dalits under the notions of purity and pollution. As examples we will take into consideration two *jatis* – the *Candalas* found in North India and the *Paraiyars* found in South India. The Hindu law codes (meaning the *Dharmasutras* and their later systematizations the *Manu-smrithi*) postulate that the *Candala* was the progeny of the most condemned *Pratiloma* (hypogamous) marriage, having a *Sudra* father and a *Brahmina* mother.<sup>69</sup> Allegedly this theory however is the 'product of the *varna* conception of the orthodox *Brahminas*'.<sup>70</sup> The same theory operates regarding the origins of the *Paraiyars*; that they are the communities who were born as a result of sexual transgression of social boundaries fabricated by caste and thus ostracized. They are considered the progeny of hypogamous marriages where a 'lower caste' male married a 'higher caste' female.<sup>71</sup> But why are the progeny of people belonging to the four-fold *varnas* ostracized? The 'dividual-particle' theory postulated by McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden helps us with possible

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<sup>67</sup> In the words of A.P. Nirmal, who pioneered Dalit Theology in India, the Dalits are 1) the broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split; 2) the opened, the expanded; 3) the bisected; 4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered; 5) the downtrodden, the crushed, the destroyed; and 6) the manifested, the displayed. 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 214–30), p. 214.

<sup>68</sup> Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards*, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> John C.B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2002) (2nd edn), pp. 11, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', pp. 10, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Abbe J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (trans. by Henry K. Beauchamp) (3rd edn) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), pp. 38 ff.

answers.<sup>72</sup> The Hindu view of caste has as its basis the belief that human beings are born with a corresponding coded substance which is made up of particles capable of detachment and attachment to different human beings. Members of different castes constitute different coded particles the intermingling of which is considered to be unnatural, disruptive and disorderly for the Hindu social order. Considering the dividuation-potential of the encoded-particles, physical interaction between human beings needs external social control to maintain auspiciousness and order.<sup>73</sup> This is the function of the caste ordering. When intermingling of these particles takes place, for example through sexual relations, it is considered unnatural and disruptive. There is a serious breach and rupture of the symmetrical social order. Thus, how else can order be restored than through the ejection of the 'products of this disharmonious and disruptive conjoining' (the Dalits) from within the contours of the society. Hence we have the Dalit communities who are relegated to a place outside 'society' and contact with whom is cautioned to be potentially 'dangerous'. This can be comparatively analysed with Douglas' arguments about maintaining cognitive categories. Aberrations of cognitive categories can be regarded as anomalies, which pose a threat to society and so need to be avoided.

'Pollution and maintenance of social distance are specific forms of segregation and inequality bred within the Indian caste system.'<sup>74</sup> The permanently polluted status of the Dalits is said to arise from the work they perform, which involves contact with sources of impurity such as death and human excreta. Their occupations such as skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather and making shoes; playing in musical bands; butchery of animals; fishing; removal of human waste (excreta); attendance at cremation grounds; washing clothes; coconut harvesting and the brewing of toddy are considered the principal grounds of permanent pollution.<sup>75</sup> This is in conformity with Douglas' theory that the scale of purity and pollution was conversely proportional to one's proximity to potential sources of impurity like death, bodily refuse, leather and fermented produce. The above-mentioned points referring to the origins and professions of Dalits should logically make us question whether the Dalits are rendered impure because of their occupation (or) because of their origins? Are their menial occupations like scavenging, handling corpses and carcasses, drum beating in funeral processions and tending cremation grounds enforced on them as a form of punishment because of their disruptive origins? (or) Are they branded as being impure and polluting because they perform

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<sup>72</sup> For more on this theory, see McKim Marriot and Ronald B. Inden, 'Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems', in Kenneth David (ed.), *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia* (Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, Chicago: Aldine Publishers, 1977) (pp. 227–38), pp. 232, 233.

<sup>73</sup> Dipankar Gupta, *Social Stratification* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> Tripathy, *Dalits*, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7.

these works? Final answers to these questions continue to be elusive. One can make partial sense of it only by understanding the history of the evolution of socio-political hierarchy based on caste, which Gen'ichi Yamazaki explains as follows:

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

The *Kshatriyas* ... saw the advantages of incorporating the ideas propounded by the *Brahminas* into their policies, thus contributing the political ingredient to the development of untouchability. That is to say, the existence of untouchables functioned to displace the dissatisfaction of the direct producers, *vaisyas* and *sudras*, within the *varna*-based society, thus ensuring a stable social order.<sup>76</sup>

What emerges is that the Dalits are reckoned to be in a state of permanent pollution, which is 'feared' to be contagious, and thus are denied access to many areas of social and religious life.<sup>77</sup> Andre Beteille sums up the results of the cumulative inequalities in the economic, religious and political systems which ultimately degraded the nature of Dalit existence (though he uses the term 'Harijans'):

To complete the social degradation of the Harijans, real and symbolic disabilities were also imposed on them by the locally dominant castes and the political authority (king or chief) of the region. Thus Harijans were supposed to supply free labour (*begar*) whenever the officials wanted them to do so and they were not allowed to wear the clothes or jewellery worn by the high castes. They had to live in huts with thatched roofs, and show proper deference in manners and speech to the upper castes.<sup>78</sup>

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

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<sup>76</sup> Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> Beteille, *Castes*, p. 92.

<sup>78</sup> Beteille, *Castes*, p. 92.

*Casteism and Christianity*

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

The inter-relationships between and among these four segments confessing the one Lord, one baptism and one faith seem to be incapable of achieving or witnessing to one fellowship as members of the same Body of Christ. This incapacity for fellowship clearly arises from the attitude to caste held by the different segments. Each segment seems to be affirming and holding on to the same old attitudes of caste that they had carried or brought into the Church, changing not even an iota from their former attitudes. The same unconscious structure of beliefs regarding caste that continue to dominate the different segments of the population outside the Church in society at large are continued also inside the Church.<sup>79</sup>

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

Though Catholics of the lower caste and tribes form 60 percent of Church membership they have no place in decision-making. Scheduled caste converts are treated as lower caste not only by high caste Hindus but by high caste Christians too. In rural areas they cannot own or rent houses, however well-placed they may be. Separate places are marked out for them in parish churches and burial grounds. Inter-caste marriages are frowned upon and caste tags are still appended to the Christian names of high caste people. Casteism is rampant among the clergy and the religious. Though Dalit Christians make 65 percent of the 10 million Christians in the South, less than 4 percent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests.<sup>80</sup>

The Protestant churches fare no better than the Catholic churches apart from the fact that some predominantly Dalit dioceses have got Dalit Bishops. The other

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<sup>79</sup> Masilamani Azariah, 'The Church's Healing Ministry of the Dalits', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 316–23), p. 319.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), p. 82.

ways in which casteism continues among the Indian churches are through – the non-acceptance of a Dalit priest by a caste congregation; reluctance of ‘upper caste’ priests to pay pastoral visits to Dalit homes; use of a separate chalice during the ‘sharing’ of the Eucharist; preference to caste communities to partake in the Eucharist ahead of the Dalits in order to avoid pollution; denial of access through the main door for the Dalits; maintaining a separate entrance for the Dalits in churches where Dalits and the Caste communities worship together; separate seating and separate burial grounds. These, along with the strong discouragement of inter-caste marriages, help us to recognise how notions of purity and pollution are strongly entrenched in the ‘caste-Christian’ psyche.<sup>81</sup> In Tamil Nadu only upper-caste Christians have their feet washed by priests on Holy Thursday. During the parish festival the decorated car is not permitted to pass through the streets of Dalit Christians.<sup>82</sup> Researches in places where both the ‘upper-castes’ and Dalits are predominantly Christian have shown that notions of purity and pollution play an influential role in determining social-discrimination and social relations between these two groups of Christians.<sup>83</sup>

One reason for the prevailing casteism in the Indian Churches is that in spite of being born as Christians, many ‘professing’ Christians seldom renounce their affiliation to their *jatis*. George Soares-Prabhu deplores the infiltration of caste-discrimination into the celebration of the Eucharist and condemns it as ‘sacrilege’. He also attacks the breaking up of participants in the Eucharistic celebration into caste-groups, and the practice of treating ‘fellow members of the one Eucharistic community’ (the true ‘body of Christ’) as outcasts by consigning them to special parts of the church or to separate places in a communion queue, and accuses such attempts of seeking to parody the Eucharist.<sup>84</sup> Thus we can conclude that notions of purity and pollution are strongly held even among Christians. This is symptomized by the fact that ‘caste even in its most virulent form of “untouchability” is rife in the Christian communities’.<sup>85</sup> ‘There can be no clearer indication of the massive failure of Christian teaching in India (and specifically of the immense and costly system of education it has built up) than the fact that large sections of the Indian

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<sup>81</sup> Edward Matthias, ‘Identity Dilemmas Confronting the Dalits’, in *VJTR*, Vol. 64, 2000 (pp. 131–8), p. 133.

<sup>82</sup> Lancy Lobo, ‘Dalit Religious Movements and Dalit Identity’, in Walter Fernandes (ed.), *The Emerging Dalit Identities: The Reassertion of the Subalterns* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1996) (pp. 166–83), p. 174.

<sup>83</sup> See S. Japhet, ‘Christian Dalits: A Sociological Study on the Problem of Gaining a New Identity’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXIV, September 1987 (pp. 59–87), George Koilparampil, *Caste in the Catholic Community in Kerala* (Kochin: CISRS, 1982), pp. 154–68.

<sup>84</sup> George M Soares-Prabhu, ‘The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today’, in George Soares-Prabhu (posthumous), *The Dharma of Jesus* (ed. by Francis Xavier D’sa) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), (pp. 117–32), p. 128.

<sup>85</sup> Soares-Prabhu, ‘The Table Fellowship of Jesus’, pp. 127, 128.

church can still assume condescending caste attitudes, without even being conscious of the fact that they are guilty of serious sin.<sup>86</sup>

### The Outline of this Book

In the light of the prevailing caste-based discrimination against the Dalit communities, the concern regarding the practical feasibility of Dalit Theology will dictate the aim and content of this book. Therefore, I will primarily analyse the theological reasons for the gap between Dalit theology and the social practice of the Indian Church. The first chapter, *Answering Some Questions: The Why, What and How of Dalit Theology*, will furnish a basic overview of the *origins, objectives and approaches* of Dalit theology. After identifying the reasons leading to the emergence of Dalit theology and the objectives of Dalit theology we will move on to delineate the framework of praxis envisaged by Dalit theology. This chapter will further interrogate the link between the theological content of Dalit theology and its praxiological framework with the view that such an enquiry can usefully foreground any critical analysis of the practical efficacy of Dalit theology.

The second chapter, *Questioning Some Answers*, critically analyses Dalit theology in the light of the central problem of this book, which is the failure of Dalit theology to influence the praxis of the church, with the intention of identifying possible reasons for this lacunae between theology and practice. Having identified the theological reasons for the practical inefficacy of Dalit theology, the task of chapter three, *The Way Forward*, is to propose and explore alternative theological paradigms for Dalit theology with the intention of enhancing the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. Taking into consideration the critique of Dalit theology which emerged in the previous chapter, this chapter explores the synoptic healing stories as a viable alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. The hypothesis put forward is that the synoptic healing stories can not only provide a Christian ethical basis to critique notions of purity and pollution, but also can enable a critical methodological and theological revision of Dalit theology with a focus on praxis. The next section of the book tests the suitability of the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology on the following grounds – their potential to offer an ethical framework which can influence Christian attitudes towards notions of purity and pollution, and their ability to critically enhance the praxis-potential and practical efficacy of Dalit theology. In line with this, chapter four, *A Christian Ethical Framework of Action*, identifies certain ethical features from the synoptic healing stories which can be used as a foundation for the Indian Church's praxis in the context of casteism. The following features are identified; touch/defiance of uncleanness, compassion, faith, conflict/confrontation. Certain principles of practice applicable to the Dalit situation are identified through an analysis of the interplay of these features in select stories. When deriving

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<sup>86</sup> Soares-Prabhu, 'The Table Fellowship of Jesus', p. 128.

principles for action from the synoptic healing stories, corresponding examples from Dalit secular politics, which have significantly influenced the struggle for Dalit liberation and contributed to social transformation, are drawn in order to endorse the practicability of these principles. In chapters five to seven the book narrows its focus to three specific issues which arose in the critical evaluation of Dalit theology namely – the problem of efficacious Christology, the question of Dalit agency and resistance, and the issue of praxiological partnerships. Therefore, each of these chapters interprets one healing story each in relation to one of these three specific issues. Chapter five, *Re-visiting Dalit Christology*, deals with the story of the healing of the leper found in Mark 1:40–45. We read the passage in the light of the marginalization of the Dalits on grounds of impurity. The story is briefly interpreted in the light of the motif of boundary transcendence in order to demonstrate the interplay of the different ethical principle delineated earlier. Specific attention is paid to the need for a transition in Dalit Christology. In critical interaction with the christological trajectories which emerge in the story implications for a liberative Dalit Christology are drawn. Chapter six, *Rethinking Agency, Re-signifying Resistance*, deals with an exorcism located in the country of the Gadarenes in Matthew (8:28–34) and in the country of the Gerasenes in both Mark (5:1–20) and Luke (8:26–39). Attention is paid to the Markan version of the story. This story is chosen for its ability to address the issue of Dalit agency and resistance. In the light of the polyvocal nature of Dalit resistance, the insights gained from a political reading of the text are employed for a praxis-oriented critique of the modes of resistance advocated by Dalit theology. Insights for a praxis of resistance are drawn on the basis of an allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ exorcising actions. The role of the Dalits as subjects and agents in the liberation process is discussed in this chapter. Chapter seven, *Re-configuring Dalit Praxis: Re-imagining the Other*, discusses in detail the story of the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman found in both Matthew and Mark in relation to the praxis of partnership envisaged by Dalit theology. This chapter focuses on evolving integrationist and inclusive models of praxis for Dalit theology in order to enhance the praxis potential of Dalit theology. The focus is on the politics of ‘othering’ both within and outside Dalit theology. The chapter works out a rationale for moving beyond othering towards an other-centred praxis which can help evolving pragmatic and holistic partnership which can lead to concrete and corporate engagement in the task of Dalit liberation.

As the Dalit struggle is not a monolithic struggle but has a multi-dimensionality and dynamism, it is recognized that re-reading the bible for social justice in such a dynamic context requires what Musa Dube calls a ‘nomadic reader, who will have to use and develop different methods and new theories of reading’.<sup>87</sup> In such a context the interpreter ‘is constantly forced to delve into completely new reading

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<sup>87</sup> Musa W. Dube, ‘Rereading the Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Social Justice’, in Emmanuel Katongole (ed.), *African Theology Today* (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2002) (pp. 57–68), p. 66.

strategies' and engage in a continuous re-reading of biblical texts to deal with new challenges.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, in conformity with the purpose of what is identified as 'people's hermeneutics', our purpose in the hermeneutical appropriation of the healing stories in this book has been to 'gain enlightenment on their (Dalits') existential problems and to empower themselves to solve them through transformative action in order to enhance life'.<sup>89</sup> The Bible is viewed as 'a lens through which one might read the story of today and lend it a new perspective'.<sup>90</sup> It is envisaged to glean the meaning of the biblical narrative for the present through a circular dialectic 'between the biblical word on liberation and our process of liberation'.<sup>91</sup>

Chapter eight concludes the book by offering a summary of the findings of the previous chapters and an assessment of the problems and possibilities of using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. In the light of the findings of the previous chapters it is concluded that as the synoptic healing stories have the ability to both espouse issues which are integral to the question of praxis, and to articulate ethical paradigms which make the Indian Christian involvement in practical action possible, we can argue that the synoptic healing stories can function as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology; and can enhance its praxis-potential significantly.

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<sup>88</sup> Dube, 'Rereading', p. 65.

<sup>89</sup> Anthoniraj Thumma, *Wisdom of the Weak: Foundation of People's Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 163. Addition mine.

<sup>90</sup> Christopher Rowland, 'Epilogue: the Future of Liberation Theology', in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) (pp. 248–51), p. 250.

<sup>91</sup> Jose Severino Croatto, *Exodus Hermeneutics of Freedom* (New York: Orbis, 1978), p. 3.