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ROUTLEDGE

Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism

KEITH HEBDEN

DALIT THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN ANARCHISM

A second generation of emerging Dalit theology texts is re-shaping the way we think of Indian theology and liberation theology. This book is a vital part of that conversation. Taking post-colonial criticism to its logical end of criticism of statism, Keith Hebden looks at the way the emergence of India as a nation state shapes political and religious ideas. He takes a critical look at these Gods of the modern age and asks how Christians from marginalised communities might resist the temptation to be co-opted into the statist ideologies and competition for power. He does this by drawing on historical trends, Christian anarchist voices, and the religious experiences of indigenous Indians. Hebden's ability to bring together such different and challenging perspectives opens up radical new thinking in Dalit theology, inviting the Indian Church to resist the Hindu fundamentalists labelling of the Church as foreign by embracing and celebrating the anarchic foreignness of a Dalit Christian future.

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Dedicated to Peter Hebden
1944–2009

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List of Abbreviations

ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (Nationalist Student body)
AICC	All Indian Christian Council
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BNP	British National Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CLS	Christian Literature Society
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CNI	Church of North India
CSI	Church of South India
DSS	Dalit Sangarshan Samithi
FMPB	Friends Missionary Prayer Band
GCSS	Gujuarati Christian Social Services
GUST	Gujarat United School of Theology
GLTC	Gurukul Lutheran Theological College
IP	Irish Presbyterian
IPM	Irish Presbyterian Mission
ISPCK	Indian Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
LMS	London Missionary Society
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NST	Navsarjan Trust
OBC	Other Backward Castes
OM	Operation Mobilisation
POA	Prevention of Atrocities Act
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps)
SC/ST	Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes
SEBC	Socially and Educationally Backward Class
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TNC	Trans-national Corporation
TNE	Trans-national Ecclessia
UCNI	United Church of Northern India
VBS	Vacation Bible School
VHP	Vishva Hindu Parishad
WCC	World Council of Churches

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Foreword

The role of the state in Dalit emancipation is emerging as a contentious topic of debate in the larger Dalit discourse. There are some who argue that it is the responsibility of the state to act in favour of the Dalit communities. Within this framework the Dalit movements creatively engage with the state to fulfil this role. On the other hand, those who approach the state from a more instrumentalist position – viewing it as an arm of the powerful classes – would argue that by its very nature the state acts on behalf of the powerful. They work to expose the instrumentalist nature of the state to coerce it to act in favour of those who are marginalised.

At its basis, however, both positions assume the state as a given. It is exactly here that Keith Hebden offers the fresh insight of Christian Anarchism, inviting Dalit ideology and theology to rethink the role of the state and its theological legitimisation. He calls on Dalit theology to perceive the state itself as a colonial construct and to draw from anarchist ideas, both indigenous as well as from the Christian tradition, as valid resources for Dalit emancipation. In doing so he not only undercuts notions of Indian nationalism that equate Indian with Hindu with Brahmanism, but also offers Dalit theology the possibility of creating new 'paradigms for transforming Indian life'.

Considering a wide spectrum of material that ranges from missionary visions to present day politics, Keith offers an altogether new direction for Dalit theology by opening new perspectives and possibilities. I sincerely believe this work will energise Dalit theology to being not only more self-critical but also in offering new contextually relevant directions.

Rev. Dn. Philip Vinod Peacock,
Associate Professor of Bishop's College, Kolkata

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Preface

This book is the result of a search for a Liberation theology that can be understood both in the majority world context of India and the minority and privileged world context of the author. I began with Dalit theology and soon found myself unable to do that kind of work with any integrity – I am not a Dalit. Christian anarchism is an appropriate response to Dalit theology from those of who are not on the margins but who alienated within the same marginalising system.

If Dalit theology is to be a Liberation theology of, and for, the Dalits, and for India, it must offer something distinctly Dalit. This book cautiously suggests what I have found to be distinct in Dalit theology. Things I have not found in my own or other theologies. The atheistic and anti-state assumptions of anarchism help us to challenge the monotheistic and statist assumptions of even the most radical theologies.

I would like to thank friends I have met through the Christian anarchist conferences and Jesus Radicals forum for helping me discover the rich Christian anarchist tradition. Much of the research for this book was done at Birmingham University with Professor R.S. Sugirtharajah's lightness, humour, and depth of wisdom as guidance; for that I am always grateful. Alongside this were visits to India, especially Gujarat, where I was so wonderfully cared for and so inspired by Bishop Vinod Malaviya and his clergy – most especially Ranchchod and Clara Gamit who opened their home to me and gave me the gift of their enormous sense of mischief. This book could not have happened without them. The section of this book "Dalit Worship as Active Resistance", in Chapter 6, is published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

I would also like to thanks Sathianathan Clarke and the staff or UTC Bangalore, Lancy Lobo, Cedric Prakash, RC Bishop Thomas Macwan, M.C Raj, and the many others who gave so much time to talk to me.

Throughout the course of this journey I have had the support of Sophie my wife, family and friends, and most especially my father without whom I would never have had the chance to fall in love with India and who shared so generously in many of my enthusiasms; this book is dedicated to his memory.

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Introduction

Indian Christian theology has a rich, varied and ancient history dating back to the Apostle Thomas, according to legend. Many Hindus have thought, acted and written in response to Christianity as presented to them and offered insights into both faiths. Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Nehemiah Goreh and Sri Ramakrishna are among the earliest Hindu reformers who delve into Christian doctrine from a Vedic perspective. In the early twentieth century Sadhu Sundar Singh, famously characterised by the Anglican priest Charles Andrews, drew out a challenging praxiology of faith from the Christian message. From the second half of the nineteenth century onward the Christian Bhakti movement has sought to create an understanding of worship and salvation that draws on both the orthodox Christian tradition and the Vedic tradition. However, through most of the history of the interface between these two faiths the focus has been on dialogue between the conservative elements of both. Thus the theology that has evolved tends to be individualistic, esoteric and most of all obsessed with metaphysics. Very rarely has conventional Indian theology dared to enter the realm of political discourse. Manilal C. Parekh, as we shall discover, is an unusual and extreme example. However, the advent of a liberation theology claims to have changed the emphasis and taken Indian theology in a new direction. By challenging the *status quo* it has created many controversies of its own. However, it is yet to be sufficiently self-critical or self-aware to audit how far it has moved from its conservative roots.

The context of the emergence of Indian liberation theology, or Dalit theology, is the postcolonial restiveness in the wider political arena fuelled by a growing awareness of the themes of liberation theologies by Indian theologians looking for sources elsewhere in the postcolonial Church, most notably in Latin America. However, the contention of this book is that liberation theology is not postcolonial enough, but is heading in the right direction. To be postcolonial is to resist the supremacy of the colonisers and recover the pre-colonial culture from their influence. Yet the greatest influence of the colonisers – the formation of the liberal democratic nation state – is rarely mentioned or challenged. The formation of the state has implications for the doing of Dalit theology, herein lays the problem. Yet Dalit theology is having a slow but steady impact on the way Dalits view, not uncritically, the nation state. In finding the resources to make this challenge real Dalits could find themselves turning to their other oppressor, another invention of the statistic colonisers – the Vedic reformers.

Dalit theologian Peniel Rajkumar has called on other Dalit theologians to radically change their approach to the discipline.[1] He brings together four important criticisms of Dalit theology as reasons for the current malaise in the Churches' responses to the Dalit situation. First, he argues, there is a 'lacuna between theology and action',[2] Dalit theology does not lead to praxis but to more theology; there is no paradigm offered for Christian Dalit action and no sense of Dalits being agents of change within the Church or even the recognition that they are the majority of Indian Christians. Second, Dalit Christology and Soteriology, popularly expressed by the Exodus motif in liberation theologies, has proved inadequate for Dalit theology. Christ in Dalit theology is either victim or victor – passive servant or violent revolutionary. The motif is colonialists because the emancipated slaves go to violently conquer the Canaanites, it romanticises servanthood and puts too much emphasis on pathos rather than protest.[3] The Exodus motif also supports the unhelpful 'polemic binarism'[4] that is Rajkumar's third criticism. He writes of a 'failure to recognise the paramount importance of engaging both Dalits and "non-Dalits"'[5] in the need for liberation. Fourth, Dalit theology has failed to communicate clearly with the Church or fully enabled a 'performative and embodied hermeneutics to take place'.[6] In other words, the Dalit Christians are still not active in the interpretation of the Christian stories that matter to them.

This book will attempt to deal with these criticisms of Dalit theology in many ways but the main emphasis will be on the third criticism that Rajkumar makes: that of the polemic binarism found in Dalit theology as it sets up Dalits against non-Dalits and Dalit sources against Hindu or other sources. This book will seek to see beyond these boundaries to see the overall set-up of Indian culture politics as oppressively constructed by colonial interference before, during and after the British administration's control. Anarchism both recognises that there are oppressors and oppressed but also recognises that it is the systemic oppression that must be overthrown if both classes of society are to be free. Rajkumar, in his insightful use of gospel narratives have shown that there are stories in the Jesus tradition that back this up.[7] This book will attempt to further bring together Christian tradition and a political outlook that goes beyond the social conservatism of much liberation theology.

Chapter 1 allows us to explore what tools are available to generate a useful postcolonial discourse in the contemporary Indian context. An understanding of

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1 Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilites* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

2 Ibid., p. 60.

3 Ibid., pp. 62–5.

4 Ibid., p. 64.

5 Ibid., p. 69.

6 Ibid., p. 71.

7 Ibid., pp. 145–67.

Christian anarchism is outlined because this tradition helps us to understand the liberationist hermeneutic circle as a hermeneutic of resistance. The hermeneutic of resistance is the key tool to reading colonial and postcolonial developments in theology, literature, Missiology and political ideology. This is because postcolonial theology, which is what Indian theology must be, has to challenge the continued importance placed on the boundaries and administration of the colony. This chapter asks why the state, or colony, has come to be admired so much even by anti-western critics and assumed to be authentically Indian when it took so much enthusiasm and violence to create. Leo Tolstoy and Walter Wink offer useful models for understanding India's sociotheological context having ways of challenging colonial state-making in the West.

Chapter 2 uses the hermeneutic of resistance to define the political parameters of sociotheological discourse. We name some of the defining powers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in relation to Indian theology. Namely, we identify Mother India as the god of states; the Missionary God as the ideological position of an imposed Christendom theology on the indigenous Church; and the Vedic God as the ideological movement claiming to be the only authentically Indian tradition but which is in fact based on western foundations of modernism, statism and coercive violence.

Chapter 3 analyses Christian responses to the colonial and postcolonial climate of fear and fundamentalism and asks to what extent the Church is equipped to deal with increasing tension, violence and competing truth claims. Here we take a closer look at the violence that has troubled Gujarat state, north India, over the past decade. We ask how it has emerged from a religious and political context and in what way Christian theology has responded to its horrors. Indian theology has responded by revisiting what it means to be Indian and Christian. We look at the growth of global Pentecostalism and its impact on mainstream Churches in India as well as the theological implications of the challenges the Church is facing.

Chapter 4 reveals that Missiology during protestant missions of the 1930s was not universally conservative and statist. Some missionaries, listening carefully to high caste reformers like Gandhi and paying sincere attention to the context of Dalits, offer us a precursor to Dalit theology that echoes universal themes of liberation theology long before the term was coined, but in a distinctively Indian way. We also look at Roman Catholic mission by returning to present day Gujarat and showing how this tradition of nonviolent resistance is rooted in a radical theology in solidarity with the marginalised. A hermeneutic of resistance finds resonance with Indian Missiology when it engages with the politics of state and oppression.

Chapter 5 breaks exciting new ground in uncovering and challenging assumptions about two of the most important figures in modern Indian history, particularly in the national narrative of Dalit political and religious discourse. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi are often seen as diametrically opposed ideologues by their fans and detractors. Neither figure is as he would first appear, according to this carefully nuanced study of their relationship and their understandings of the compact between religion and state.

Dalits movements that reject the contribution made by Gandhi to Indian theology miss out on much that resonates with their own worldviews. Dalit movements that uncritically accept Ambedkar's role as one of a 'Moses-like' figure redeeming his enslaved people do so only by ignoring weaknesses in his position.

Chapter 6 shows how the modern Dalit movement, from the 1960s to the present day, along with the foreign influence of Latin American liberation theology, has shaped Indian theology and ecclesiology in important yet limited ways.

In Chapter 7 we see that Indian theology has responded to but not always engaged with the Dalit movement's symbology or literature. While certain theologians stand out as having contributed greatly to this conversation, especially A.M. Arulraja and Sathianathan Clarke, there are gaps in this emerging theology that suggest missing themes but also a hidden narrative that needs to be explored: a hermeneutic of resistance that leads to a celebration of the motif of 'foreignness'.

Chapter 8 develops this motif of subversive foreignness with special reference to Jesus and his political theology of resistance. This chapter, as well as being a conclusion is an invitation to Dalit theologians to explore the implications of setting down the defensive and reactionary apologetics of conservative Christian patriotism and respond to the times with a defiant rejection of patriotism. Instead, they may embrace both a mystic refusal to be cowed and a concrete position of solidarity with those on the margins of state. Subversive foreignness leads to a new understanding of Mother India more in keeping with both Dalit religion and Christian anarchist theology that sees her liberated from being defined by her consort and the uniformity of statism. In taking this position Dalit theology could be radically reinterpreting a lot that has been assumed 'Indian' and creating new paradigms for transforming Indian life.