

Eco–Justice as an Emergent Liberative Mission

John Augustine Sharon Kumar Govada^{1*}, K. R. Rajani²

¹Research Scholar, Pastor, Church of South India, Department of Philosophy, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

²Professor, Department of Philosophy, Centre for Religious Studies, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

Abstract: This paper aims at the liberative mission of the church and seeks out the role of the Church in the struggle for liberation. The approach of this presentation is missiological and pastoral in application. The mythology is expository and synthetic. This paper deals particularly with the ‘Liberative Mission of the Church’. In the existential situation of the Dalits, Tribal’s, women, degraded morality and religious pluralism in India, the Church is challenged to a renewed determination to face the issues of social and ecological justice as well as the promotion of a just society. The cry for true liberation is a reality to which the Church cannot cover her ears. In the context of Dalits in India the immediate response to the cry of poverty, inequality, oppression and discrimination, is part of the mission of the church. The mission aims at integral liberation among Dalits and their environment. The Church by her very nature is missionary. In the contemporary world, the mission of the Church has become complex. The mission of the Church is none other than the mission of Jesus himself who sent into the world by the Father, and who sends the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his liberative work. The church is not motivated by an earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only – to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served.

Keywords: Mission, liberative, church, eco – justice, human dignity, discrimination, exploitation, human rights, justice, dalits, religious freedom, caste.

1. Introduction

The researcher believes that the mission of the Church on earth is by its very nature, missionary, since, according to the plan of the Father God, it has its origin in the mission of His Son and the Holy Spirit. This plan flows from ‘fountain – like love’, the love of God the Father. Thus, the Church’s communion with the life of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is the basis of the life of the Church and her mission [1]. The Church is the necessary corollary to the liberative mission of the Son and the Spirit and their activity in the world. Her only purpose is to continue the saving mission of the Son and the Spirit in the world.

1) Justice as a norm for the Church

In the mission of the Church, action towards Justice, human dignity and rights is an integral part of her preaching the Gospel. This section presents their importance and views the different dimensions of integral liberation among Dalits. The general

condition of Dalits, at present, shows that they are victims of oppression and injustice. The researcher believes that, if the Church is called to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, justice demands her to specify the terms and demands of that participation. “Conversely, efforts towards the fulfilment of human needs, the protection of human rights and the realization of structures of genuine mutuality are consequences of faith in the saving power of Christ’s death and resurrection.”[2].

It is to be noted that, the Church’s mission, includes not only the preaching and the celebration of the sacraments, but also an action on behalf of injustice and participation in the transformation of the world, fully appear to us a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. In this manner the church reaches and registers a new, peak awareness of unjust structures, the right to development, and the need for liberation and reform. It shows away for liberation through justice.

In the document of ‘Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference’ it is asserted that the mission is not to be viewed merely as spiritual, but rather as combating injustices and preaching liberation, which constitute essential elements of evangelization. It is part of the Evangelization of the Church to assist the birth of liberation from all kinds of injustices.[3]Pope John Paul said, to do justice is to love God [1Jn2:29]. when justice does not exist among humans, God is ignored hence the Church must be a mirror of justice and must have the thirst for injustice and yearning for humanity.[4] An atmosphere of freedom, trust and mercy must reign in her. She must be a church with human face [5].

The researcher affirms that the promotion of justice is essentially a Christian witness that speaks the language of the oppressed and the exploited in India. Therefore, the promotion of justice to the Dalits is a dimension of the Gospel that leads to the affirmation of concrete, right relationships. Hence, there is no high or low or outcast; no purity or impurity divisions; and no discrimination or exploitation. Equality is the central point of convergence. The demands of justice must be satisfied; first of all, that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity.[6]Bishop. M. Azariah says, “unless there is

*Corresponding author: johngovada@gmail.com

deliberate focus on the most oppressed and worst of victims and vulnerable sections of India Society, all our efforts for justice and development of the least and the lowest sections of people would be totally diffused and become diversionary and ineffective like watering the Sahara Desert”[7].

2. Affirming Human Dignity and Human Rights

Justice implies an obligation to apply the Gospel to the structures, systems and institutions of society, which are the framework in which all human relationships take place. Then, efforts towards the fulfillment of human needs, the respect for human dignity, the protection of human rights and the realization of structures of genuine mutuality, are consequences of faith towards the Kingdom of God.[8] Human dignity is inalienable, universal and common to all. A commitment to the dignity and rights of all mankind, is a constitutive part of the witness of the Gospel [9]. The social teachings of the Church have provided a solid basis for human rights. The Church has constantly inspired and appealed for the protection of human rights [10]. While stating the role of the Church in the Third World, John Paul says that, “the intrinsic connection between authentic development and respect for human rights once again reveals the moral character of development since the rights are based on the transcendent vocation of the human being” [11].

The researcher strongly affirms that, the role of the Church is not only to condemn unjust and inhuman practices in Christian life, but also to search for remedies together with the Dalits, in both the church and in society at large. The practice of discrimination in Church is violence against human rights and dignity, and it is in turn violence against the person of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The Jesus’ message of the Kingdom of God, and his liberative practices portray the importance of the dignity of mankind. His relationship with the outcasts, poor, and marginalized challenges the Church today to understand the Dalits’ problem in its proper perspective. Jesus’ message and “the cross and resurrection of Jesus, Son of Man, empowers us to demand and defend human dignity without fear.”[12]

1) *Eco -Justice and Dimensions of Integral Liberation*

The researcher firmly believes that the human beings find themselves tied down with many obstacles and in bondage, and they have to be liberated. Eco -Justice from Liberation perspective can be seen in many dimensions such as social, economic, ecological, political and spiritual. The researcher makes an effort to discuss some dimensions of integral liberation among Dalits which also results in ecological justice.

2) *Socio – Economic Dimensions*

The Church experiences tension in this aspect of Eco -Justice Mission. She cannot allow her mission to be reduced to a mere temporal project. The call of the Church, particularly now is to be committed to those who are poor not only in material goods but also in the sense of being marginalized and alienated in any way.[13] Dalits need land and jobs and education, the Mandal Commission Report suggestions in Church institutions would be great step.[14] Helping Dalits to achieve economic equality is a great eco – justice challenge to the Church today. Here, caution can be made not in view of paternalism but economic deprivation of all oppressed should be seen in the light of

human dignity and rights.[15] Social equality will not be possible if economic disparity among the various groups is not reduced and the Dalits particularly do not acquire a minimum status in life, so that they can relate to others with self – confidence and dignity. This does not mean that one has to exclude Dalits of other Religions and the other oppressed. Excluding others would be to practice religious bias. Excluding others would be to practice religious communalism in the place of Dalits. Eco -Justice and liberation in India cannot be thought of without dealing with the issues of untouchability and the caste system; these divide people. Any economic and political transformation should include social and cultural transformation and vice versa.[16] The economic, political and social dimensions link together in any society. But in any society which is permeated with the caste system, there is a complex problem. It is a myth that economic and political liberation would automatically lead to social liberation [17].

The Church, as an agent of unity and communion, is to respond to the situation of socio – economic- discrimination, bondage and untouchability. The Church cannot promote communion, peace and harmony among the various castes without the commitment to social justice and true liberation. [18] In this context of socio – economic development or relief work, Rayan points out the effect of this work should be seen in the whole framework of social change. He says, It [Church] has to commit itself clearly and openly to work for structural changes lest relief becomes some sort of collaboration with and lubricant for the dominant system of injustice and oppression. And since a just social order is constitutive of its faith goal, the Church will be wary of undertaking development work unless it actually contributes to social change marked by the values and orientations acceptable to faith, and by the human ideals of fairness, equality and freedom [19].

3) *Political Dimension*

The discrimination in the constitution against Dalit Christians is already explained. The Churches have done much in this aspect; still the Governments are not taking appropriate steps to remedy this injustice. Continuing the dialogue with Government is an urgent task. Probably more creative ways are needed to force the Government to change the Constitution in this regard. Discrimination shown against Dalit Christians because believers in Christianity, is a serious issue in view of the religious freedom of the people.[20] Azariah suggests: The time has now come for the Dalits to demand a radically new constitution which would recognize them as being equal to the rest of the classes and sections of our caste – ridden society, rather than remain at the bottom of the social ladder as scheduled castes and tribes, thus maintaining the divisions within the supreme document of our Constitution [21]. The researcher believes that, the integral liberation of Dalits is also linked to their liberation in the political dimension. Dalit Christians are powerless in the political sphere. The participation of Dalits in every aspect of politics would pave the way for effective liberation. In this respect, the Church can inspire and motivate Dalits and non-Dalits for true liberation of all, and create a just society. The Church’s involvement in the social and political orders is justified on the basis of the social

and institutional character of sin itself. Since the Church is called to combat sin in every kind, the Church has responsibility in all areas where sin appears. The political dimension in the liberation paradigm aims to integrate the principle of social justice and human dignity into economic and cultural life of the people. Homo hierarchicus will not become homo democraticus without profound socio – political and also religious changes.[22] Mere Dalit consciousness, without the action – oriented Dalit political consciousness, will not take Dalits far in this struggle. Azariah proposes one single party for the Dalit masses as an “All India National Party of Dalits” [23]. Gutierrez says, the general conquest of true freedom leads to the creation of a free human being and a qualitative society with socio – economic and political dimensions. These spheres require continuous research of participatory liberation approach with Dalits.[24] However, this is not all. To stop here will again end in limited, temporal, and ideological realms. Christian liberation must go beyond this; otherwise, a social philosophy will be substituted for the integral theology of liberation and holistic mission of the Church.

4) *Eco – justice ways for Effective Liberation*

The researcher firmly believes that, liberation from the discrimination and exploitation which Dalits suffer can have many ways or steps, which emerges from concrete situations. These ways do not lead to destructive fanaticism. On the contrary, they make it possible for the Dalits to enter the liberation process as responsible ‘subjects’[25] faith in Jesus and the power of love motivate all Christians to true liberation. The following are the three important ways to participate in liberation among Dalits: (i) Promoting Dalit Solidarity; (ii) Emphasizing Education; and (iii) Developing Dalit Consciousness.

5) *Promoting Dalit Solidarity*

Today, Dalit solidarity is called for, to solve the common problems of Dalits, “to work together for complete liberation and to live in dignity” [26]. This is a perfectly genuine urge in the democratic polity of millions of people who struggle today in the country [27]. Presently promoting Dalit solidarity is seen as one of the keys to the process of Liberation that results in Eco -Justice.

Concerning solidarity among Dalits themselves, a statement of the Dalit solidarity program spells out a need of:

Cooperation instead of conquering other people, creating unity among ourselves instead of divide and rule, organizing ourselves in order to antagonize the manipulative actions of the oppressor, and finally we Dalits have to create a cultural synthesis, which would help in organizing our people [28]. Dalit solidarity presumes and demands that Dalits unite across divisions of caste and subcaste, religion, region and language, to establish a “Community of interests.” This call for joint responsibility of both Dalit and non – Dalit intellectuals and the masses to work for liberation of Dalits in India.[29] The Dalit solidarity programme has a four-points task projection for the next triennium:

1. Strengthen and networking of various Dalit Solidarity programmes at the regional levels.
2. Internationalizing the Dalit issue – creating public and

global opinion through co – operative and exchange programmes. [30]

3. Training leaders among the Dalits to reach the largest number of people with a view to liberate them.
4. Educating the Dalits – formal and non – formal education - to create awareness and expertise.

The researcher believes that promoting Dalit Solidarity should not be a sectarian movement. Instead, communion with all castes is intended. In this sense, the Church promotes Dalit solidarity, and also joins them to inspire harmonious living. Non – Dalits and Dalits, in their solidarity with one another, make an effective path for the growth of community. In this true solidarity, relationships are strengthened, justice is lived, human dignity is respected and responsibility is demanded - all to comply with the true holistic Eco – Justice Mission of the Church in India.

6) *Emphasizing Education:*

The researcher strongly believes that, an authentic liberation of the society is not imposed from above. It presupposes the strings of the problems, and the participation of the oppressed people themselves in the process of their emancipation, and this is not possible without their coming to an awareness of the situation of injustice in which they live. But to make people aware of injustice and to awaken them to liberative action, education plays a great role. Two forms of education among Dalits are: Consciousness education and Developmental education. The former aims at unfolding the undiluted humanity of Dalits in spite of their poverty. [31] The later seeks to create an urgency among the Dalits to improve their material conditions. The two are interrelated. Education leads to self – reliance (atma- nirbhara) which is considered for some to be the climax of all reformed Dalit ideology and it includes self – respect and self – assurance which are helpful for total liberation [32]. Education does not mean only formal learning, but also non formal education to know the forces which keep them in their social, material and religious slavery [33].

The Church has showed great interest in the formal education of Dalit Christians, but perhaps more stress has to be placed on education until it becomes accessible for all the Dalits. There are always tensions in the pastoral application of the policy for education for Dalits in Christian Institutions. The Church needs to dialogue with Dalit and non – Dalit leaders to avoid tension in this respect. A participatory process of decision making is called for, to educate the Dalit Christians and all oppressed. Contextual need has to be examined and not just paternalistic consideration given to any jatis. Addressing the problem of Dalits and discrimination against them in the schools is another great challenge. Protection and support of Dalit children in order to exercise their rights will be important in efforts to create an environment conducive to learning with dignity. More discussion and sharing are needed among the teachers and the students to maintain an effective effort in this area [34].

7) *Conscientization*

Conscientization is a process of “awareness building”, a method of awakening the conscience and the opening up of the innate potentialities and possibilities in individuals and groups of people. It is a process of true education, i.e., to draw out the

personality of persons and groups. Freire has developed a new theory of education as the practice of freedom which intends raising the critical consciousness of the oppressed people [35]. Conscientization is the process whereby one learns to perceive social, political, economic, cultural and religious contradictions and begins to take action against the oppressive elements in one's environment through critical involvement, total identification, and committed action in favor of the out castes, the victimized and the voiceless [36] conscientization aims to realize the liberation of the oppressed and culminates in the liberation of the oppressors themselves by unleashing the power that is in the oppressed masses to change their situation and to convert the oppressors themselves by a process of love. [37] For Christians, concretization involves experience, analysis and reflection in light of faith and concerns the equality and fellowship of the community in which one is living [38]. Education also should be a deeper faith formation that promotes a social conscience which has a vision of engagement in integral liberation. The formation of social conscience recognizes sinful structures, attitudes and values that need to be changed [39].

At present, among Dalit Christians as well as all Dalits in India, an awakening for liberation has begun in a powerful way. The emerging consciousness among the oppressed has begun to lead them to protest against all the forces that kept them in bondage. The 'antyodaya', the rising of the least, represents the overcoming of fatalistic views about their situation. The feeling of helplessness is being replaced by a feeling of growing self-confidence. [40] The researcher views that, the total liberation in eco-justice comes from below and for this, 'antyodaya' is of prime importance. The researcher views that the belief in 'vidhi' and 'karma' are also reasons for the continuing situation of oppression of the Dalits. Through purity pollution divisions, and the practice of untouchability, a low self-image is evident. There is definitely a wound in the soul which must first be healed; this psychic wound has affected the very soul or psyche of the people. Thus, 'their wounded psyche' has to be addressed [41].

In this eco-justice context the Dalits, through a process of conscientization, become aware of their vocation to be partners in shaping the history to its fulfilment [42] this pedagogy has two distinct stages: (i) The oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation; and (ii) When the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all humans in the process of permanent liberation. [43] Formal and non-formal education, concentration on conscientization and organization of the voiceless masses are important. These help Dalits and all the oppressed to acquire the power to decide upon their own future [44]. Conscientization also will have to be part of eco-justice in its social project. It can become effective when some programs are actualized that put together Dalits and non-Dalits.

8) *Empowering Dalits*

True education also empowers people. Education motivates and energizes; it is the dynamic stimulus for empowering the oppressed and exploited. Dorr, in his book, option for the poor,

says that those who work for the poor and marginalized, must go on struggling with the poor and for the poor, to improve their conditions. In Dorr's words. It [the Church] must be in effective solidarity with those who are powerless and voiceless and must seek to empower them and give them back their voices. Catholic social teachings recognizes that the poor and the powerless are 'God's favorites'... they can no longer be seen as just the ones who are to be helped by others. They are called by God to be key agents, under God, in bringing justice and liberation to the world [45].

Jesus' emphasis, in his teaching and his life, and the revolutionary empowerment of the poor in the Magnificat, show that the poor can realize their power and energy. [46] Precisely, the Magnificat reflects the empowerment of the poor and the less privileged of society to take their destiny in their own hands and so to struggle to reverse their fortunes for the better. [47] The universalism of the gospel can only be proclaimed and asserted authentically through the empowerment of the poor and not through the paternalizing of the preponderant forces of society. To that extent, the Church needs to be a solidarity network of the oppressed [48].

A future and better social order urgently demand the empowerment of the poor. To empower means to give them more power to make decisions by themselves, and to improve their own conditions with all the resources available. This means not merely helping the poor and less privileged, in a once - and - for - all manner, but it implies giving them power and energy to resist exploitation and oppression. The Church, by committing herself to empower Dalits and other poor people, helps them to explore and articulate the meaning of the Gospel in their daily social life and struggles [49]. In the process of empowering Dalits, as a part of eco-justice, two aspects are important: (i) The key agents in bringing about such change must be the Dalits and all oppressed, the marginalized themselves; hence, a commitment to work 'from below' for and with those groups, actively supporting and empowering them. (ii) The Dalits and all the oppressed groups are recognized and listened to; hence, a commitment to be more participative. They will then have the practical experience of being empowered by participating in decision making. [50] Equality and fellowship demand that Dalit Christians participate in the decision-making process in pastoral planning to create a harmonic community of justice, peace and joy.

9) *Developing Dalit Consciousness*

Education makes the person aware of oneself and the realities around one. Awareness is both macrocosmic (through Conscientization) and microcosmic (through mediation). These two dimensions are basic to Dalit theology and Dalit liberation [51]. In the contextual problem of the oppression of the Dalits, developing Dalit consciousness is another aspect in eco-justice for liberative efforts of Dalits. Dalit consciousness points to "the power created by their weakness and struggle which will liberate both [the Dalits as well as their oppressors]." [52] Dalit consciousness consists in becoming aware that their humanity is constituted by their Dalitness. [53] It means that Dalits are no more to be ashamed of being Dalit, and that they have to be proud of their history and culture.

Getting rid of their inferiority complex and slave mentality is an integral part of the new Dalit consciousness. Dalits have power – ‘Dalit Power’.[54] – and Dalit is dignified. [Dalit Power is a familiar term borrowed from the Black Panthers of USA by the Dalit Panthers, and popularized during the 70’s], the focus on Dalitness affirms that their Dalit Power is not only for self – definition but for carrying out social change.[55] Dalit power is a clear critique of and a force for fundamental change of systems and patterns in society which oppress or give rise to the oppression of Dalits.[56]

Dalits have now discovered that, unless dalitism becomes the dominant note of their identity, no movement or ideology can liberate them. The emphasis on dalitism helps Dalits who belong to different language groups, ideologies and religions, to come together and to forget their differences. The process has already started in history and there are attempts, though feeble, at the all – India level [57]. Dalit solidarity, education, conscientization, empowerment and Dalit consciousness will sow the seeds of self-transformation and self-liberation, so both the individual and the community can achieve the triple goals of (i) Self – Realization, (ii) Self – Respect, (iii) Self – Reliance. these are called “the 3R’s of Dalit Liberation”[58] pastoral action programmes, in the diocese or parish, should be geared towards these 3R’s towards liberative mission of eco – justice. The researcher believes that a great challenge to the Church is to motivate, inspire, initiate and find ways and means to go ahead with pathos, Dalit consciousness, and the thirst for building a just society, entering in to this pathos by others and the liberative ways of the Church in realizing the kingdom is an on – going process of eco – justice.

3. Conclusion

The researcher concludes that Dalit conspicuousness makes Dalits aware of the deprivation of their legitimate freedom and awakens in them the capacity to achieve this freedom. It reveals to them the truth of their existence and their vocation to a new Destiny of freedom, fearlessness and dignity. Dalit consciousness motivates them to translate the meaning of love in socio – cultural realities. The role of the Church is to realize this ideal of freedom in society. The researcher identifies that for a proper eco – justice, factors of self – doubt in Dalits should be replaced by self - confidence; low self – image by better self – image; and non – person by “we are somebody” the praxis of the process of building Dalit identity should begin by creating Dalit consciousness, and these two aspects should lead to reconstruct their history. Religious history of Dalit community reveals a deep yearning for liberation from, and resentment against orthodox caste predominant Brahminical Hinduism. The researcher senses that there is a greater need today to listen and learn from the experience of the Dalit, for the rise of Dalit identity and consciousness which will perhaps be the most significant development within the religious and social life of the Indian subcontinent in the next decades. The way that pathos will work itself into society is not easy to predict.

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