



### Review of

**Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock,**  
editors, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices,*  
*Discerning Pathways*

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*Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* fulfills many a requirement in Dalit thought, especially as the Indian theological scenario attempts to make Dalit theology all the more participatory and relevant among the academia, the movements, and the real day-to-day living out. Therefore this publication is timely. The presentations here were first deliberated upon in a symposium held in Kolkata in January 2008. In organizing such a symposium, the ramifications of suitabilities and omissions of Dalit-related

discourses were only too-well known to the organizers of such deliberations. These deliberations came around a time when some scholars either suspected the bearings of a thirty-year old Dalit theology or toiled hard to rejuvenate it. Therefore, this work was highly anticipated to exhibit judicious conduits for the future of Dalit theology. Expectedly, this work throws up some unearthed potential within the discourses of Dalit theology and also presents as new methods that some new-generation Dalit theologians would like to have it. Through this presentation, the book promises a fresh discursive space for methodologies and hermeneutics for Dalit Theology. This is because the introductory and later discussions in Dalit theology had a built-in ability to rake up the well-projected “discordant voices.”

The accent on “discordant voices” was in the air, in theological literature, and (equally important) in Dalit movements. As far as Dalit theological literature in English alone in the last five years is concerned, one could not have escaped the provocative impact of some fine works like *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics* (James Massey and Samson Prabhakar, 2005), eds., *Breaking Theoretical Grounds for Dalit Studies* (James Massey, S. Lourdunathan and I. John Mohan Razu, 2006), *Dalit Tribal Theological Interface* (James Massey and Shimreingam, 2007), *Dalit Empowerment* (Felix Wilfred, 2007), *The Quest of Method in Dalit Theology* (Charles Singaram, 2008), *M.M. Thomas and Dalit Theology* (Adrian Bird, 2008), ““Can we now bypass that Truth?”: Interrogating the Methodology of Dalit Theology (J. Jayakiran Sebastian, 2008), *Re-imagining Dalit Theology: Postmodern Readings* (Y. T. Vinaya Raj, 2008), *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (Eva Maria Hardtmann, 2009), *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems and Possibilities* (Peniel Rufus Rajkumar, 2010).

In the light of a host of Dalit theological thoughts, discussions in the book in review have either opened up or shut down some inevitabilities of Dalit theology for its future course. The title of the book suggests this. It is both re-directive and open-ended: redirective for its earnest receptivity to newer hermeneutical approaches, and open-ended for want of exploring unattended to corridors of finer and crucial Dalit concerns in the ensuing decades of this century. The book has sixteen presentations apart from a detailed Introduction, and is compiled under three broader categories.

The editors Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock have envisaged and tried to implement two clear yet exigent objectives: first, to tread the legacy of earlier Dalit discourses as propounded by A.P. Nirmal, James Massey, V. Devasahayam, M. E. Prabhakar, and others; second, to confirm that the deliberations have not just relocated the “goal posts” but have created “a new playing field altogether” for the new generation Dalit theological discourse. Therefore, the write-ups in this book have looked at their roles as both “contesting” and “configuring” with “creativity, courage and determination” to change the landscape of Dalit theology for a new age. This change in Dalit theological scenario has been tried out to correspond to the changing socio-political landscape, to relate the impacting postmodern and postcolonial viewpoints, and to provoke back some theological trajectories of the traditional doctrines like, “Can a suffering God save?” A point of methodological significance that should be noted here is the appropriation of critical tools and approaches like postmodernism and postcolonialism that is still a taboo in some Dalit theological corridors.

The theme of the first section is *Dalit Theology: Introduction, Interrogation and Imagination*. Sathianathan Clarke commences this section by re-presenting the methodological issues in Dalit theology with greater clarity and incisive comments. He deals with the politics of the appropriation of methodological exclusivity alongside theological inclusivity that strengthens the resistive stance as well as reconstructive possibilities within a same discourse. ‘Anthropology’ and ‘Theological imagination’ hold keys to his interpretation. Even a first time reader of Dalit theology would hardly miss a conceptual development of Dalit theology that has taken place in the last thirty years. Deenabandhu Manchala seeks to present the identity of a context-specific Dalit theology to a global context through comprehensive means. He mentions that a portrayal of contextual theology for a wider mass is possible by forging a link between the nature and mission of the church, by expanding the ambit of mission to a global level, and by reiterating the justice-oriented mission of the church. In the process, he identifies some fundamental misunderstanding of mission by those who have not considered Dalit issues as a pertinent mission-discourse. He sees ecumenical interfaith forums to be one of the potential grounds for endorsing Dalit cause by overcoming mere victimhood by determined resistance.

Peniel Rufus Rajkumar anchors his discourse on *Dalithos* that considers purpose, re-mythologizing activity, and concept of God as the logic of the inevitable guises in the activities of dissent and appropriation in Dalit realm. An ethological methodology, he says, propels the category 'Dalit' to redesign Dalit theology. He mentions how significant it is for Dalits to set the agenda in an inter-relational context. Philip Peacock's article takes advantage of the super-mythic nature of the theories of Dalit origins to see how the trajectories of each myth have in them elements of both the origin and the end. For him it is the "resourcefulness" of such myths that provide multiple ways of handling Dalit issues from multiple dimensions. Y. T. Vinayaraj attempts to redeem Dalit theology from its "modernist trappings" to open it up to a plethora of possibilities for a new subjectivity through postmodern hermeneutics. This agential significance creates a community continually in its own right and to be free from any static constructed identity. Lalruatkima's presence in this collection is in the earnest dialogical tradition of liberation theologies in India. Such interdisciplinary stances open up significant possibilities between Tribal formations and Dalit theology at definitional realm that are at times intentionally confined to time and space, and nonetheless unlock formational possibilities pushing each other's boundaries to enrich each other. Such border crossings are imperative.

The second section is entitled *Foraging Dalit Worlds, Freeing Theological Symbols, Forging Dalit World Visions*. The section is highly innovative in the methods adopted to re-do Dalit theology with the bases available well within Dalit world. This section includes works by Jayachitra who appropriates contrapuntal way as a strategic way to place Dalit liberative symbols like Jesus and Ambedkar. While a contrapuntal reading of Jesus and Ambedkar works as a broader canvas of the article, a similar reading is also done for early Christians and present Dalits. By doing so, she challenges Dalit theology to overlap Dalit movements to craft conversations at scriptural and movements realms. Joseph Prabhakar Dayam retrieves the theological imagination in the discussions of Divine Feminine among Dalit communities. He specifically discerns the power and *Koriaka* ("desire") of Gontheamma of the Malas in Andhra Pradesh to challenge our male-dominant christologies and to re-formulate Christian theology into theo/alogies for an inclusive vision of Dalit community. Another fresh method of stirring and enriching Dalit

Christology is proposed by Anderson H. M. Jeremiah. Anderson draws inspiration from John Dominic Crossan's proposition of Historical Jesus of the Greco-Roman history. He explains that Dalits' claim to ownership of their lands resonates Jesus' own time of class-ridden society that had a bearing on land ownership claims of the "nobodies." Therefore, Jesus, the Theo-Ethicist (*Irai-araneriyalar Yesu*), Jesus, the Transcender (*Kadanth Nilaiyalar Yesu*), and Jesus, the Radical Resister (*Murpoku Ethirpalar Yesu*) throw up significant surprises that enhance Dalit Christology. Geevarghese Mor Coorilos directs Dalit god-talk at once to be strongly rooted in the scriptures and in people's movements. He sees the "Logos" paradigm from the gospel of John as being entangled in metanarratives that needs a relook. Similarly, Dalit theology too, he mentions, has its future by "pitching its tent" among the homeless and the Rights-deprived just as the embodied Logos "pitched its tent among people." This could provoke the "philosophical imagination, sociological imagination and poetic imagination" of Dalit theology in the contexts of Nandigram, Plachimada, Moolampally and Narmada struggles. Sathianathan Clarke and Philip Peacock jointly pen the last article in this section on Religious Conversion in the light of the recent attacks on Christian in Kandhamal. The authors, while evaluating the dynamics of survival of the Kandhamal Christians highlight three significant aspects, especially in their act of conversion to christianity: the conversion of Dalits to Christianity has this aspect of the experience of "God-as-Christ" who forges liberative relationship with individuals and communities.

*Dalit Hermeneutics: New Christian Vedas, Old Gospel, Different Voices* is the overarching theme of the third section. In the quest to enhance the human face of Dalit theology, the contributors Evangeline Anderson Rajkumar, Roja Singh, Monica Melanchthon, Surekha Nelavala and Prasuna Gnana Nelavala have brought in powerful biographical and autobiographical theologies. These theological renderings help us keep in creative tension 'experience' as a crucial mode of theologizing. Evangeline Rajkumar dwells on womanist theological consciousness to enrich the gender dimension is Dalit discourse. Evangeline furthers this consciousness through body-discourse that challenges the culturally embedded patriarchal manifestations. Dichotomies like body/mind and its assumed extension feminine/masculine are

deconstructed. The batteredness of women's bodies is likened to the "cross of Jesus Christ lifted up at Golgotha" giving the broken bodies of women a Christological significance. However, the resurrection turns the body "inside out" towards a new ecclesiology. Roja Singh's article has a Christian Dalit woman writer Bama as the protagonist. Roja Singh presents Bama's works as breaking new paths in Dalit consciousness through her works like *Karukku* and *Sangati*. Bama's loud anger is but a breaking of uneasy silence of Dalit women who are dismembered from their own cultural canvas especially by ecclesiastical orders. Bama's writings attempt to "Re-member" Dalit women. Monica Melancthon innovatively re-reads the unnamed maid-servant in the Book of Judith from the lenses of Badri Narayan's narratives to infuse rich meaning to the text. This method of rereading gives agential significance to marginalized women like the maid-servant, thus streaming their myths (super-truths) into the mainline historiography. Surekha Nelavala re-reads Lukan narrative (7: 36-50) about the "sinful woman" from Dalit feminist perspective alongside the tagged and stigmatized lives of Dalit women like Sujatha, a Dalit woman. In this article, Jesus's role in Lukan narrative is articulative of empowering roles that theologies should uphold. Prasuna Nelavala takes a relook at the Markan passage (5: 21-43) where Jesus interacts with a woman with a flow of blood. Jesus' healing model of "touchability" stands as a powerful contrast to the "untouchability" discourse rooted in the class-gender discourse.

A note-worthy concern here on Dalit hermeneutics is that the section has been greatly enriched by and confined only to women's issues. This has taken much of the sparkle off the volume. In this work as a whole, one cannot but notice a subtle back and forth movement of 'Experience' as one of the core formative factors for doing Dalit theology in India towards identifying oneself with the struggles of Dalit communities. Through this there are both clear and veiled redefining of 'organic' of Dalit hermeneutical discourse and hence navigating Dalit theology from an almost dead-end of the identity-specific discourse. This is symbolic of the realization of intergenerational efforts to make Dalit theology context-specific at various realms. Many of the contributors have wondered how long could Dalit theology build its discourses purely on its victimized-history. Rather, they see intelligent negotiative tactics coming from many actors within such histories that would give Dalit theology a phoenix-like resurgence.

Therefore, the new discursive tools as employed by the contributors have helped them to weave their theologies around these factors. The editors have surely invited “Dalit and Dalit-identified” scholars in this novel endeavor.

The composition of the contributors is predominantly protestant Christian theologians who are well-known scholars, teachers and leaders. They have been part of a few movements too and have created global attention for Dalit concerns. However, a volume like this would only be near-complete with direct contributions and voices representing interfaith and grass-root Dalit movements in India. That would authenticate a more balanced Dalit theological praxis, and that remains the greatest challenge in the coming decades. Without these concerns consciously taken up, Dalit theology risks relevance. Moreover, while this book’s sense of “subalternity consciousness” has shed ‘androcentric’ tag emphatically, anthropocentricity is still construed to be the domain of Dalit theology, with an exception of Coorilos’ thoughts where eco-liberative concerns come to the fore as significantly as human-liberative concerns. Needless to say, Dalit theology is still an adult domain by not considering caste politics entrenched in child-rights discourses in India. In that sense, this work has consciously or otherwise has greater liberation as its motif, and reflexively opened up yet-unaddressed avenues in Dalit theology in India for a broader “heterologic” base for Dalit theology. Yet, this work treats its readers with a refreshing language and style steeped in “fluidity, ambivalence and plurivocity.” In fact, they attracted my attention to this work!