



Review

Unsung Melodies from Margins

by Antony John Baptist (Delhi: ISPCK 2014, ISBN: 9788184653786, 248 pages)

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In the modern India of 2016, questions about caste – whether as a moral issue, or indeed a political tactic – are far from settled. The narrative put forward by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and its supporters, suggests that the ‘Dalit’ designation is but a colonial construct, barely a hundred years old, and devised for the political gain of a certain subset of the population. Designed to sustain disunity in the populace at a time of growing discontent with British rule, this position suggests it shows favouritism based on historical ill-treatment, but is no longer relevant. Another significant narrative put forward by those generally at variance with this Hindu nationalist position, suggests that the term Dalit (lit. ‘divided’), while indeed less than a century old, sprang forth during a self-awakening of a long subjugated people, marking the beginning of a movement toward full inclusion into the social, economic, and political fold of civilised society.

As an American observer, these debates often resonate with unsettled questions back in the United States. Critics of Affirmative Action quotas, for example, argue that in today’s America blacks are treated just as equally and fairly as whites, and that no group should be privileged above another. Indeed, a ‘clean slate’ should be given to all citizens. On the other hand, those advocating for Affirmative Action policies insist that America is still largely a class, race, and gender based society, and African-Americans are disproportionately affected by discrimination. Such policies, advocates suggest, remain critical to ensuring equitable access to opportunities.

Debates surrounding caste, most agree, have been ongoing for at least a century. But why is it such a pressing topic today? Some suggest that caste-based discrimination still plagues India. Contemporary studies on caste are indeed numerous, and study centres such as the *Dalit Resource Centre* at *Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute* in Jhusi, Allahabad, have

significant and growing collections dedicated not only to histories of discrimination, but to scholarship on contemporary issues and debates such as Dalit rights, politics, gender, and of course religion.

It is within this last rubric that Dr A. J. Baptist contributes his book *Unsung Melodies from Margins*, drawing from a diversity of anthropological, sociological, theological, and biblical studies sources. He pleads the case for the inclusion of marginalised voices in the public sphere, inspired by Biblical teachings.

Much time throughout this important book is given to telling the history of injustices endured by Dalits. One such chapter looks at the 2013 riots, and specifically the burning of three Dalit villages due to an incidence of *pratiloma*. Here, the marriage of a high-caste woman to a low-caste man sparked anger that led to significant caste-based violence (p. 45). Here, Baptist contrasts Gandhi's solutions with those of Ambedkar, especially relating to their varying views of the Hindu *shastras*, and of inter-caste marriage as a way of breaking down casteism.

Through part of the book, Baptist seeks to create or espouse what he calls a 'Dalit feminist Biblical scholarship', looking at portions of the Bible as promoting a form of Liberation Theology. For this writing, Baptist describes a feminist as 'one who seeks justice and equality for all people and who is especially concerned for the fate of women – all women – in the midst of "all people"' (p. 22). In this section, he especially looks to the story of Hagar in the book of Genesis. He considers how Dalit women specifically, and the marginalised in India generally, can look to this as an example of validation for their rights and value. Baptist aims to show that, according to a reading of the Scriptures mindful of its patriarchal bias, the narrative greatly changes to a position of advocacy. To this end, Baptist looks to 'advocacy theology', which he says 'calls to create a just society free from any kind of oppression...to (further) the kingdom of God where there is gender justices and equality, where there is no oppression of any kind' (p. 28).

Indeed, more than half of the book looks at theology and Biblical scholarship, and how reading the Bible with the lens of feminism instead of the traditional lens of patriarchy actually shows much favour towards women, combating the subjugation of the day. Baptist points out multiple stories where feminist interpretation is very different from the traditional interpretations, such as stories where women trust God, while men fail to understand; speak of female disciples of Jesus and their contribution to his ministry; the fact that passages that are sometimes used to exclude women from ministry today are actually advocating for *more* inclusiveness than the prevailing social norms of the day. The implications for Dalit women today would be significant, he says, as he attempts to 'explain how the Bible can be read and interpreted from the point of view of the marginalised, the subalterns. Thus how can it bring out potentials of the Bible for social transformation' (sic) (99).

Most of the book is written with this focus, and Baptist makes a compelling case for a 'Dalit Feminist Christian Theology'. Unfortunately, the focus seems to fizzle out as the book then proceeds. For example, chapters 11-14 are studies on various aspects of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, looking at different interpretations of his life and teachings. This section appears just after a chapter about 'Subaltern Hermeneutics', in which Baptist writes about

interpreting texts from the viewpoint of the marginalised, as opposed to that of the dominant powers. Upon reading this, I expected a bridge would be made to interpretations about Paul, showing that the same texts may be variously interpreted, but more than that, show how the subaltern narrative would read this story. No such bridge was made, however, and in trying to link them together, I think perhaps that Baptist is trying to draw out how people reading the same story can arrive at different conclusions, though these linkages were never explicitly made.

We do find that a bit of narrative about the Bible affecting social change is prevalent even in this otherwise unrelated section. Indeed, towards the end of the book, Baptist concludes a section asserting that ‘building up the Kingdom of God refers to an attack on all the oppressive and inhuman structures in the society’ (p. 195). This active attack on all oppression never returns to Dalit women, though. Instead, it proceeds to a chapter about ‘eco-justice’, suggesting that the ‘God (of the Bible) is on the side of the wronged...Biblical God of justice is God of the poor and He takes sides with the poor, the afflicted, and the marginalized’ (p. 203). Finally, he states that is the responsibility of the Christian Church to take up these issues and be the voice for the planet and ‘creation’ - which also has been attacked and wronged by dominant forces.

Though the main theme of the book gets somewhat buried by the end, this book may be of interest to scholars of contemporary Christianity in India, Dalit Christianity and theology, feminist theology, and perhaps missiology. More generally, however, this book will appeal to scholars of Ambedkar and Dalit conversion politics, to Indologists, human rights advocates, and certainly scholars studying contemporary forms of agency amongst Dalits. All-in-all, it is a work for those concerned with unabated caste-based discrimination in India; a problem that continues to afflict a significant portion of the Indian population - even today! 🙏
