

Dalit Theology

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Dalit theology is the Indian contextual and liberation theology from the perspective of Dalits in India. It addresses the pain and pathos of the Dalit communities in India and rereads the Bible as a liberating resource in the struggle against the oppressive caste system.

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1. The Caste System and the Name "Dalit"

Nicholas B. Dirks  observes in *Castes of Mind* that it is difficult to think of India without thinking of caste.^[1] The caste system and Indian society have indeed been deeply intertwined, and traditionally, social identity in India was shaped by affiliation with a particular caste. According to a Hindu social imagination associated with the Laws of Manu, human beings were understood to have emerged from Brahma's body: *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras*.^[2] Another group was placed lower and outside the caste system; these communities were later referred to by several names, including "outcastes," "exterior castes," "Panchamas" (fifth caste), "Depressed Classes", "Harijans", "Adi Dravidas", and "Paraiyars".^[3] In earlier periods, Dalits were referred to by names imposed by dominant caste communities within a hierarchical social order. These labels expressed exclusion and contempt, reflecting a binary division between "pure" and "impure."^[4] In response to the imposed labels that attributed hereditary impurity, these communities adopted the term "Dalit" as a self-designation.^[5] Mahatma Jotiba Phule  (1827–1890) used the term to describe outcastes and untouchables as oppressed victims of India's caste-based society; Bhimrao R. Ambedkar  (1891–1956), a key Dalit leader and constitutional architect, popularised the term.^[6]

In the 1970s, the Dalit Panther Movement revived the term “Dalit,” making it a symbol of resistance to caste discrimination. It came to represent both enduring oppression and a shared identity shaped by collective experiences of subjugation.^[7] The Sanskrit term “Dalit” derives from the root *dal*, meaning broken, crushed, or oppressed.^[8] A parallel appears in Hebrew, where *dal* means low, weak, poor, or helpless, reflecting the condition of Dalits. For centuries, caste hierarchy confined them to low-status occupations, often resulting in economic hardship and limited access to education.^[9]

Dalits, numbering over 200 million in India, face social, cultural, and political marginalisation, while Dalit Christians experience double discrimination through exclusion and denial of reservation benefits.^[10] John C. B. Webster^{GND} notes that Dalit Christians have long faced poverty, oppression, and discrimination; he highlights that such marginalisation occurs both through state policies on affirmative action and within church structures dominated by upper-caste control.^[11] In this context, the need arose for a theology addressing the concrete situation of Dalit Christians in India. As dominant Indian Christian theology overlooked their experience, so Dalits sought a new theological voice, leading to the emergence of Dalit theology.

2. What is Dalit Theology?

Arvind P. Nirmal^{GND} is one of the key figures to answer the question of what Dalit theology is. According to Nirmal, Dalit theology may be understood in three categories:

Firstly, theology about the Dalits or theological reflection upon the Christian responsibility to the depressed classes. Secondly, the answer may be that it is a theology for the depressed classes or the theology of the message addressed to the depressed classes and to which they seem to be responding. Thirdly, the answer may be that it is a theology from the depressed classes, the theology they would like to expound.^[12]

Dalit theology is a contextual theology in India that addresses caste-based discrimination and oppression across all areas of life, giving voice to those long silenced. It challenges dominant Brahmanical theology and emerges as a theology from below, created by the oppressed for their own liberation.

3. The Need for and the Development of Dalit Theology

M. E. Prabhakar^{GND}, a prominent Dalit theologian, identifies two primary reasons for the need for Dalit theology: Firstly, Dalits represent a unique and long-standing system of oppression in India, where socially fixed groups have remained deprived for generations, and Dalit theology seeks to move beyond generalisations by affirming the lived experiences, histories, and aspirations of the oppressed. Second, it arises because Indian Christian theology has largely failed to engage with the suffering and hopes of Dalits despite their majority by prioritising dominant Brahmanical frameworks, thereby making a distinct Dalit theology necessary.^[13]

Nirmal^{GND} laid a key foundation for Dalit theology through his 1981 lecture, “Towards a Shudra Theology,” at United Theological College, which was later published by Gurukul Lutheran Theological College.^[14] Although this lecture became a formative moment in the emergence of Dalit theology, it should also be seen within a wider context. Around this time, and even earlier, there was a growing awareness of Dalit rights and a wider interest in liberation theologies in different parts of the world, as Nirmal himself also notes.^[15] Peniel R. Rajkumar^{GND}, a contemporary Dalit theologian, places Nirmal’s work within a broader framework, noting that earlier movements had already challenged caste hierarchy and promoted a people-centred theology.^[16] Nirmal’s contribution was nevertheless a “watershed”^[17] in the development of Dalit theology, even though he did not use the term “Dalit” in his original lecture.

Sathianathan Clarke ^{GND}, a contextual theologian from India, notes that Nirmal's lecture challenged theological Sanskritization and placed liberation at the centre of theological reflection.^[18] In a context where Dalits were considered "no people" and denied dignity, Nirmal introduced "people" as a central theological category. Clarke contrasts this with classical theology by emphasising that liberation theologies prioritise lived social realities over abstract, systematic coherence.^[19] Nirmal raises crucial questions concerning whose interests theology serves and insists that it must address the realities of Dalit oppression.

Similarly, M. E. Prabhakar identifies oppression and marginalisation as the starting point for theology in India while incorporating gender as a central dimension of theological reflection: "To do theology with Dalits and women means engaging in reflection on their own expressions of faith as shaped by contexts of oppression and marginalisation under caste and patriarchy."^[20] Their faith experience is not only about interpreting God's saving work but also about transforming their lived reality in light of the Gospel's vision.

James Massey ^{GND} does not reject earlier Indian Christian theology but calls for a renewed form attentive to the lived realities of the majority. He views Dalit theology as this emerging response, rooted in the experiences of Dalits and open to participation from all Christians.^[21] Contemporary Dalit theologian Raj Bharat Patta ^{GND} describes Dalit theology as a form of "protest theology,"^[22] while Joshua Samuel ^{GND} interprets divine possession among Dalit communities in South India as an embodied form of resistance to caste oppression.^[23] This perspective shows that Dalit theology not only interprets oppression but also fosters resistance, further deepened by Dalit women theologians who expose the interlocking structures of caste, class, gender, and patriarchy.

4. Dalit Women Theologians and Their Contributions

The work of Dalit women theologians has reshaped Dalit theology by foregrounding the gendered, bodily, and experiential dimensions of caste oppression. Monica Melanchthon ^{GND} rereads biblical texts from a Dalit feminist perspective, grounding interpretation in the lived experiences of marginalised communities, especially Dalit women.^[24] Prasuna Gnana Nelavala ^{GND} highlights the intersecting caste- and gender-based oppressions faced by Dalit women and argues for a distinctive voice within both feminist and Dalit discourse.^[25] Surekha Nelavala ^{GND} identifies as a Dalit feminist biblical reader, critiquing the Dalit movement for marginalising women and arguing that Dalit women are often treated as "essential out-siders"^[26] within the movement. Her hermeneutical approach gives weight to autobiographical reading, experience, and liberation.^[27] In a related move, Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar ^{GND} argues that Dalit feminist reflections consider the everyday experiences of rejection, denial, and alienation that all Dalit bodies face. She redefines the term "feminist" in the Indian context as "a duality that emerges to abandon the inherent evils of caste and gender,"^[28] standing in solidarity and spirit for justice and equality.

5. Concluding remarks

"Yaru pa jati pakuranga?" is often used by dominant castes to claim that caste discrimination no longer exists. However, caste continues to shape Dalit lives in areas such as marriage, residence, labour, and social status. Despite legal reforms, persistent social attitudes and religious practices sustain ongoing exclusion. Dalit theology finds enduring relevance in the lived experience of suffering and refuses to treat oppression as an abstract issue. It instead amplifies silenced voices and challenges the church and society to confront caste-based injustice and pursue justice and dignity. Dalit theology is not merely a contextual or regional theology but speaks beyond the Indian context. Wherever people suffer under systems of domination, such as caste, race, class, gender, or economic exploitation, its insights remain relevant. The term "Dalit" itself, meaning "crushed" or "oppressed," points to this wider significance; it insists that theology must arise from suffering and stand with the oppressed.

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- ¹ Cf. Dirks, Nicholas B., *Castes of Minds. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton 2002, 3.
- ² In the varna system, Brahmins, the priestly class, are associated with the head and responsible for learning, teaching, and ritual. Kshatriyas, linked to the arms, govern and protect, while Vaishyas, associated with the thighs, engage in trade and agriculture. Shudras, identified with the feet, are assigned service roles within the hierarchy. See Grafe, Hugald, *History of Christianity in Tamil Nadu from 1800 to 1975*, Bangalore 1990, 14.
- ³ Cf. Manickam, Sundararaj, *The Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India. The Impact of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries on the Tichy-Tanjore-Diocese with special reference to the Harijan Communities of the Mass Movement Area 1820–1947*, Wiesbaden 1977, 28.
- ⁴ Cf. Devasahayam, Vedanayagam, *Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness*, in: Nirmal, Arvind P. (Ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Chennai 2007, 1–22, 1.
- ⁵ Cf. Raj, Antony, *The Dalit Christian Reality in Tamil Nadu*, in: *Jeevadhara* 22/128 (1992), 95–111, 96.
- ⁶ Cf. Zelliott, Eleanor, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, New Delhi 1992, 271; Massey, James, *Roots. A Concise History of Dalits*, Bangalore 1991, 6.
- ⁷ Cf. *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, in: Joshi, Barbara R. (Ed.), *Untouchable. Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, Delhi 1986, 141–147.
- ⁸ Cf. Massey, James, *Christian Dalits. A Historical Perspective*, in: *Journal of Dharma* 16 (1991), 44–60, 44.
- ⁹ Cf. Haseena, V. A., *The History of Dalit Culture and Their Deplorable Situation in India*, in: *Historical Research Letter* 23 (2015), 1–4.
- ¹⁰ The Indian Constitution abolished untouchability in 1950 and recognized former “untouchable” communities as Scheduled Castes with access to reservation benefits. However, Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam generally lose this status, resulting in continued discrimination without constitutional safeguards.
- ¹¹ Cf. Webster, John C. B., *Art. Dalit Theology*, in: *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception* 6 (2013), 11–15, 12.
- ¹² Nirmal, Arvind P., *Towards a Christian Dalit Theology*, in: Nirmal, Arvind P./Devasahayam, V. (Eds.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras 1989, 53–70, 58.
- ¹³ Cf. Prabhakar, M. E., *Introduction*, in: Prabhakar, M. E. (Ed.), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Delhi 1989, 1–8, 3.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Nirmal, Arvind P., *A Dialogue with Dalit Literature*, in: Prabhakar, M. E. (Ed.), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Delhi 1989, 64–82.

- ¹⁵ Cf. Nirmal, Dialogue, 64.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Rajkumar, Peniel R., Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation. Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities, Surrey 2010, 39–43.
- ¹⁷ Rajkumar, Theology, 39.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Clarke, Sathianathan, Dalits and Christianity. Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India, Delhi 1999, 45.
- ¹⁹ Cf. (also for the following argument) Nirmal, Arvind P., Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective, in: Nirmal, Arvind P./Devasahayam, V. (Eds.), A Reader in Dalit Theology, Madras 1990, 139–144, 140.
- ²⁰ Prabhakar, M. E., Caste-Class, Patriarchy and Doing Dalit Theology, in: Devasahayam, V. (Ed.), Frontiers of Dalit Theology, Madras 1997, 79–91, 88. Prabhakar quotes K. C. Abraham, cf. endnote 3.
- ²¹ Cf. Massey, James, Ingredients of Dalit Theology, in: Nirmal, Arvind P. / Devasahayam, V. (eds.), A Reader in Dalit Theology, Madras 1990, 145–150, 147.
- ²² Patta, Raj Bharat, Reclaiming Liberation. Dalit Theology and the Spirit of Dalit History Month, 17.04.2025 (online article, <https://wcrcl.eu/dalit-theology-month-liberation-justice-faith/>), accessed on 14.07.2026.
- ²³ Cf. Samuel, Joshua, Untouchable Bodies, Resistance, and Liberation. A Comparative Theology of Divine Possessions, Leiden 2020, 175–204.
- ²⁴ Cf. Melanchthon, Monica J., Indian Dalit Women and the Bible. Hermeneutical and Methodological Reflections, in: King, Ursula/Beattie, Tina (Eds.), Gender, Religion and Diversity. Cross-Cultural Perspectives, London/New York 2005, 212–224.
- ²⁵ Cf. Nelavala, Prasuna Gnana, Caste Branding, Bleeding Body, Building Dalit Womanhood. Touchability of Jesus, in: Clarke, Sathianathan et al. (Eds.), Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century. Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways, New Delhi 2010, 266–276, 274.
- ²⁶ Nelavala, Surekha, Smart Syrophoenician Woman. A Dalit Feminist Reading of Mark 7:24–31, in: The Expository Times 118/2 (2006), 64–69, 65.
- ²⁷ Cf. Nelavala, Surekha, “My Story” in Intersection with Gal. 3:26–28. An Indian-Dalit Feminist Interpretation, in: Kim, Uriah Y./Yang, Seung Ai (Eds.), T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics, London/New York 2019, 395–406.
- ²⁸ Anderson-Rajkumar, Evangeline, Turning Bodies Inside Out. Contours of Womanist Theology, in: Clarke, Sathianathan et al. (Eds.), Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century. Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways, New Delhi 2010, 199–215, 203.

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KEYWORDS

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