

# GOD, ETHNIC-CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND GLOBALIZATION

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## The introductory remarks

The discussion of this paper, I would like to begin by raising a few questions. These questions are: *one*, who are these ethnic communities, whose cultural traditions, we are concerned with here? *Two*, what does globalization mean in relation to a specific context and how it affects the ethnic-cultural traditions in that context? *Three*, what God has to do, with these various ethnic-cultural traditions and the process of globalization? I do not intend to answer these questions literally, but these will be at the back of my mind during the discussion of this paper. Also in the discussion, my specific point of reference will be the Indian context and that also to a very specific context of a particular community namely ‘Dalit’, the community to which I myself belong to. Dalits’ present number in the world is more than 240 millions out of which about 200 millions live in India alone. This factor of number alone makes the case of the Dalits important for us to refer their case. But the other reason, why I chose to refer them, because they represent, one of the most oppressed communities of the world and their case can help us to draw our attention to other oppressed communities of the world. The discussion of this paper for the convenience sake has been divided in the following three parts:

- I. Ethnic-cultural traditions
- II. Globalization in a specific context
- III. God and ‘Another world’

Now before moving to the actual discussion, a word about the name ‘Dalit’ for the sake of those, who may not be familiar with this term. The term ‘dalit’ is derived from the Sanskrit root *dal*, which means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, dented, scattered, crushed and destroyed. Here our Old Testament scholars may be surprised to know that an intriguing connection has also been drawn between the Sanskrit root *dal* and the Hebrew root *dal(l)* whose meaning is to hang down, to be languid, weakened, low and feeble. Because Sanskrit and Hebrew belong to two different linguistic families – the Indo – Germanic and the Semitic – some scholars would describe the linguistic connection between the two roots as mere coincidence. But I must add here, a reading of some of the fifty or so passages in which Hebrew root *dal* appears in the biblical literature can shed fascinating light on the situation of Dalits in India to-day.<sup>1</sup> With these introductory remarks, now I move to the actual discussion of my paper as proposed already.

## I. Ethnic-Cultural Traditions

There are a number of definitions available for the expression ‘ethnic’ as well as for ‘culture’. We are not going to deal here with different definitions of either of the

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‘ethnic’ or with the different understanding of ‘culture’. Concerning the term ‘ethnic’, we only have to say that as stand in general this term “is no longer confined to groups identified by race or descent, now it includes identification by any (or a combination of) cultural markers thus, we have racial, linguistic, religious, caste, tribal ethnicities”.<sup>2</sup> Its in this sense mostly the expression ‘ethnic’ is used in India.

But there is also another group of thinkers, who lay emphasis on the situational (contextual) nature of the ethnic identity group. They also put emphasis on the multidimensional aspects of the ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup> The specific ethnic community, with which we are concerned in the Indian context falls closer to this understanding of an ethnic group namely ‘Dalits’. Because the Dalits to-day draw their a distinct identity not from any of the traditional factor or basis, but from a unique form of discrimination, which they receive at the hands of so called high caste groups of India.<sup>4</sup> May be to understand this point further a brief note on the context of the Dalits need to be added here.

The context of the Dalits has four major historical layers of colonization: Aryans, the Muslims, the British and the dominant powers in independent India.<sup>5</sup> Each of these layers has added to and deepened the problem of the Dalitness. But actually for this problem, the present caste based Indian social order is directly responsible, which has its origin during the time of first colonization of Aryans. The story of this social order had its historical roots in one of the earliest war conflicts, which took place between the first settlers of ancient India and the latecomers. The second group addressed themselves as *Arya* (noble) and to the first group they called as *Dasa* (slave). The detail story of these two hostile groups is found in the ancient written source namely Rigveda (around 1500 B.C.). It is in the Rigveda, we find the first reference to this social order, with which we are concerned here. According to Rigveda, each part of the human society was formed out of the body of the Creator God called *Brahmma*. Therefore it has a divine origin. A verse from a hymn of the Rigveda, which deals with this part of the story of this order reads as: "The *Brahman* (priests) was his mouth, both of his arms were the *Rajanya* (*Kshatriya*, warriors). His thighs became the *Vaishya* (traders), from his feet the *Sudra* (serving caste) was produced". (10.90.12).

The point here to be noted is that this social order described in the Rigveda was only confined to the *Arya*, and not to the first dwellers of India. Also after going through the text of the Rigveda, it becomes very clear that the first dwellers of India were those, today whose one section call themselves ‘Dalits’ and other section as *Adivasi* (Indigenous people). One result of the above conflict described in the Rigveda was that at later stage, the opponents of the Dalits, were able to divide them into number of groups by assigning them the lowest considered jobs. To-day the Dalits are divided into more than 850 sub-groups. The Dalits are not only horizontally divided, but have also got vertically divided by their opponents, based upon the purity or cleanliness of there prescribed (forced) occupations.

The oppression of the Dalits was not limited only to the extent of their physical suffering. They suffered much more socially, culturally, and religiously, which is primarily responsible to push them into their present state – a state ‘with no identity’, or ‘no people’ or ‘no nation’. This is the reason that the scholars, who have been interested to make them the object of their study, though they are willing to place them ‘at the bottom of Indian society’, yet they confront the problem in treating them as a separate class. They find that although all of them belong to the bottom of the Indian society, yet they do not represent any single ethnic identity; they do not possess a common physical form or cultural identity, they do not speak one language, and even they do not have one religion or worship style and have variety of social life. This makes all the more difficult to consider them as a single group or class. The only commonality that they do have is a unique form of discrimination that they receive at the hands of high caste people, and this forms the basis for their “distinct grouping within India.” Therefore it is this situational factor which give the Dalits a unique ethnic identity.

With regards to the cultural traditions of the Dalits, we have to only add here that during the long history of oppression and different layers of colonization, the Dalits almost have lost everything, what they could have claimed their own. This include their cultural traditions also. It is only recently they have come to know through their reconstructed history that they possibly have a best culture, which included well built cities, a relatively mature culture with a high standard of art and craftsmanship and also a developed system of pictorial writings.<sup>6</sup> But the story of the vanished Dalit rich cultural traditions only tells us, if any ethnic community is not careful, in that case what can happen with its members through any form of colonization. Also this story compels us to look into very seriously to the whole challenge, with which we are faced to-day from a Neo-colonization brought out by the globalization. This point brings us to our next part of the discussion related to the globalization process in a specific context.

## **II. Globalization in a Specific Context**

Globalization in a specific contexts, here, we are referring to the Indian context, where the society for more then last 3500 years is controlled by a minority population of the country, which includes various so called caste groups to which later on some forward communities were also added. Among these the most powerful, enjoying all the human rights were/are Brahmins, because other had various reduced rights according to their caste. For example Brahmins had the right to education as well as to teach others, *Khastryia* had the right to educate, but not teach. The same way third caste *Vaishys* had a very limited need based right to education. The fourth caste Shudra did not have any right to education, but they were still recognised as human being. In the case of Dalits, who were considered as outcastes, they even did not have any human right as their own, because they were non-human for the so called caste people. Therefore it is the minority, which today form 18% (among these only 5% Brahmins) of Indian’s population, who really enjoy the various rights according to their grade. So

India as a country has been controlled by a minority, which also includes control over all the economic and human resources.

The caste based minority of India throughout the history has supported politically the 'rightist' ideology, which always opposed the existence of a secular state. As such, the upholders of a secular state or centrist ideology believe in the middle path means partly state controlled planned economy, social justice for all, nationalism based on secular values and recognition of the composite culture. But the minority that most of the time ruled India believed in one religion based culture or nationalism and a system of free enterprise and market economy. Both social and economic thinking of the later group runs almost parallel to the basic ideas of globalization particularly when we talk about it as privatisation and liberalization of international trade and investment. Because if we look very carefully, we find the meaning of this kind of globalization process matches well with the ideological meaning of both the cultural nationalism and a free enterprise cum market economy of Indian rightist's group. Both the groups, one, at world level and other, at national level are making efforts to create 'a world' based upon either on their mono-economic understanding or their mono-religious basis.

Globalization primarily is understood today as the free movement of goods, services, people and information across national boundaries. This definition of globalization may look simple as well as harmless. But to understand the meaning and to fix a specific perspective particularly from the perspective of Dalits, who are meant to be a specific point of reference for this paper, we need to look into the meaning and implication of globalization more critically. First, we all will agree with the view that: globalization is now a fact, not an option. The communication revolution has turned the world into a global 'village' where everyone knows what is going on and what is available."<sup>7</sup> The supporters of this process claim: "The process of globalization is a central source of change in the world today. It can lead to widely shared inclusive prosperity or highly uneven development from which a significant number of countries and people are excluded. To benefit fully from it, to turn it into an opportunity, India has to adapt its policies."<sup>8</sup> Now what are the policies behind the globalization? *Human Development Report 1997* summarised the answer to this question by pointing out: "A dominant economic theme of the 1990s globalization encapsulates both a description and a prescription. The description is the widening and deepening of international flows of trade, finance and information...The prescription is to liberalize national and global markets in the belief that free flows of trade, finance and information will produce the best outcome for growth and human welfare." This Report at the same place also adds: "The principles of free global markets are nevertheless applied selectively. If this were not so, the global market for unskilled labour would be as free as the market for industrial country exports or capital...Lacking power, poor countries and poor people too often their interests neglected and undermined."<sup>9</sup> Also globalization has its winners and losers. The gainers include output, people with assets, profits, people with high skills, educated, professional, managerial and technical people, capital, creditors, those independent of public services, large firms, the strong, risk takers, global markets, sellers of

technically sophisticated products, global culture, global elite and firms with market access and branding. The losers include: employment, people without assets, wages, people with low skills, uneducated workers, labour, debtors, those dependent on public services, small firms, the weak, human security, local communities, sellers of primary and standard manufactured products, local culture, global poor and firms without market access and no branding.<sup>10</sup> Now in the case of the Dalits of India without any doubt we can say that as stand to-day they are among the losers of globalization.

It is interesting to note that all the human development reports, which offered the analysis of the impacts of globalization agreed that it is not only the interests of the poor countries and the poor in general are neglected, but also the benefits of this process mainly have gone to the more dynamic and powerful countries of the North and South. These reports also agree with the fact that it is true liberalization, privatization and tighter intellectual property rights are shaping the path for the new technologies, determine how they are used, but then all this is controlled by the powerful Corporations and in the process: “Poor people and poor countries risk being pushed to the margin in this proprietary regime controlling the world’s knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> Besides this, the global gap between haves and have-nots, between know and know-nots is widening, because of the following reasons: (a) as in private research agendas money talks louder than need, (b) tightened intellectual property rights keep developing countries out of the knowledge sector; (c) patent laws do not recognise traditional knowledge and systems of ownership and (d) the rush and push commercial interests protect profits, not people, despite the risks in the new technologies.<sup>12</sup> All this actually means that the right to knowledge or education is limited to a small minority as part of the strategy. Here we must also add that when we talk about the education in relation to globalization, it means universal quality basic education both at the secondary as well as of higher level of education. Also there is a definite need of commitment to the social reforms on the government, without which globalization will not succeed either in transforming the local society or economy in any situation. Here in the case of India, we lack both the quality education, which presently is available to a very small percentage (between 3% to 5%)<sup>13</sup> and our successive governments also never had/has a real commitment to any social reforms. So the communities like Dalits are always excluded from any benefits of any form of development including what is being claimed to be the benefits of globalization.

Since we are restricting our discussion here to a specific Dalit perspective of globalization, it is pertinent that we focus also our attention to the history of globalization. Though the history of the present form of globalization goes back to the colonialist era of 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, yet its real history began after the second world war. To begin the main purpose to establish this process was to formulate some global rules for trade to manage the global economy. For this purpose to co-ordinate three world institutions were founded: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organisation (WTO). With these, within the given time by the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the present form of the globalization came into existence, which went

beyond the territories of nation-states by the process of economic exchanges, political homogenisation, technological advances and cultural influences. Presently globalization in the form of human power is, in truth without any control, because it does not recognize any boundaries such as political or national and even the boundaries of the natural world. However for Dalits, the history of their colonization cum globalization goes back to more than 3500 years. As pointed earlier in the case of India both the promoters as well as beneficiaries of globalization are the traditional groups belonging to the so called upper castes and the same way victims of this process are those, who were also the victims of caste based Indian social order. Dalits have been the most victimized group among these groups.

The Dalits besides becoming victims of the globalization along with the poor in general, also are becoming losers on two other special accounts. *First*, the Constitution of India while recognising the need to improve the conditions of the Dalits has offered them reservations of jobs in the public sector (articles 16, 320, 353). Even the article 46 of the Indian Constitution offers a special provision to promote the education and economic interests of the Dalits and it also offers them a protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. But with the coming of globalization, these rights are also being taken away through the process of privatisation. Because while accepting the recommendation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) since early nineties, India has opened its market and consequently started privatising all the public sector units gradually. Under the previous rightist group ruled government, this process increased its speed, and with this the privileges enjoyed by the Dalits under the Constitution especially with regard to the jobs in the public sector, got affected directly. The upholder of the Caste system already have declared them outside the purview of human society, but now as the large majority of the Dalits do not have the possibility of getting quality basic education, which could have made them the beneficiaries of the globalization, therefore they automatically lose the right to become the citizens of the new world order, which is being proposed to be established by the promoters of the World Economic Forum (WEF). It is in this context, the World Social Forum (WSF) becomes relevant for them. Because the WSF's declaration in 2001 and adoption of the same in 2004 that "Another World is Possible" has given them and other oppressed communities of the world, the much needed hope for the recovery of their rights in future.<sup>14</sup> This point brings to us to the discussion of the next section of this paper on God and 'Another World'.

### **III. God and 'Another World'**

In our introduction of this paper, we did raise three questions and in our discussion of the last two sections of the paper, we have discussed our first two questions: who are these ethnic communities, whose cultural traditions we are concerned with? Second, what does globalization mean in relation to a specific context and how it affects the ethnic-cultural traditions in that context? In our discussion on ethnic-cultural traditions, the main conclusion to which we arrived was that if any ethnic community is not careful in that case what can happens to such a community through any form of

colonization. The case of the Dalits of India was referred in details, who to-day have lost everything including all their cultural traditions. That story also revealed to us the nature of one of the most important challenge, with which we are faced today from the Neo-colonization through the process of globalization. Also from the discussion of section two on 'globalization in a specific context', we learned the Dalits of India have a number of historical layers of their colonization, which have deepened the problem of their dalitness. Because to-day with the coming of globalization in the Indian context they have started losing a small ray of hope, which they have seen in the post independent period of India. But thanks to some efforts of the various Dalit communities along with other oppressed communities of the world, who have created a possibility of hope for the change. This point became very clear in the month of January 2004 in Mumbai, when everyday during the Fourth WSF more than 100,000 members of various oppressed communities came, out of which nearly 60% were Dalits. Partly it was the central theme of WSF - 'Another World is Possible', which brought them there. But what was the role of God in this whole affairs of WSF? Will God be interested in the possibility of 'Another World'? Here an observation made by Prof. Dr. T.K. John on Mumbai WSF 2004 may be worth noting, which reads as:

It is significant theologically too that the World Social Forum ...is the second major contribution of the Latin American Christian community to the wide world community. The first was Liberation Theology...Both...are born of the experience and perception of the situation of poverty and dehumanisation on the one hand, and that of oppression and injustice on the other and these had given birth to radical examination of the social situation. The human consciousness had been growing like a flaming torch exposing the sophisticated barbarities being committed against the deprived of the world. The same torch has been shedding light on the plight of the victims as well as on the callous midway walkers too. In other words, the Spirit of God is exposing the deviancy in human collective behaviour. The author of creation is gathering His people towards the unique task of restoring sanity to the disoriented world the appeal is to rectitude of behaviour that benefits the human nature and a call to restore the social order.<sup>15</sup>

The message of this observation is very clear, which has two important points with regards to the role of the Spirit of God. *One*, she is exposing the deviancy in human collective behaviour, which is created by the process of globalization and *two* the Spirit of God once again as she did in the first act of creation is gathering God's people that they may work in "restoring sanity to the disoriented world".

It is true what Prof. T.K. John has observed about the work of the Spirit of God, which means God is working among us. But we need to note that God is not only working among us, He is also working in a very special way along with the oppressed of the world, who are excluded from the defined society by the dominants. This has been His design of working throughout the human society. This very clearly we find from His recorded acts in the Bible. Two examples, one of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) and the other of the experience of the first group of believers at the

day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13), very clearly show that God not only has created the diversities which included the various ethnic-cultural traditions, but He also continues to uphold and honour these.

God 's direct interventions in the human history have been again the very clear proof of His interest in such situation with which to-day we are concerned in this World Forum on Theology and Liberation. We will refer here two examples of God's interventions to make our this point clear. *First*, when an ethnic group namely Israel, faced with a threat to their very human identity from the hands of the imperialist powers, the Pharaohs of Egypt, the God after seeing Israel's sufferings and oppression intervened and "came down to deliver them from the Egyptian" (Exodus 3:7,8). God through His action became a part of their struggle. God's this action shows God taking sides of the oppressed against the oppressors. This act of God was not so much a religious action, it actually was a political act with economic and social dimensions.

The second major intervention of God in human history was His becoming human being in Jesus Christ (John 1:14-18). In the act of incarnation, God did not become just as any human being, but as one who gave up His other-worldly identity completely for the sake of human beings and became poorest of the poor (Isaiah 7:14, Luke 2:7) – in a real sense according to the Indian context, a Dalit. Again the purpose and mission of this intervention has been spelled out in Luke 4:18,19. Here we very clearly see Him on the side of the poor, captives, blinds and the oppressed. The final agenda is declared in verse 19 with the proclamation of "the years of the Lord's favour", which meant, the time has come when the God will save his people. This announcement I believe was the beginning of God's reign on this earth. God's incarnation in Jesus Christ was for the restoration of the original plan, which was inaugurated by Jesus on the day of the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth and through his this action on that day, the foundation for 'Another Possible World' was laid down. But the completion of the construction of that world is still awaited. Because God is waiting for His people to complete that job, which He began through Jesus Christ in Nazareth almost 2000 years ago.

### **Concluding remarks**

Because of the constraint of the time, I do not intend to extend the discussion of this paper further, instead of that I would like to conclude the discussion here by lifting up, an observation, which I made at the end of my reflection on Mumbai WSF 2004, in which I said:

WSF movement definitely can help in establishing global solidarity of the oppressed and of the poor of the world including the Dalits of India. Because this global solidarity of the oppressed communities of the world is only a possible way to enter into an alternative process, which will enable them to establish a new world, where all will live with equal and full human dignity.<sup>16</sup>

The God in this endeavour is with the WSF movement, because He is indeed for 'Another Possible World'.

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