
Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935 - © E.Weber - e-mail: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de

No. 02 (1997)

THE DALITS Historical, Methodological and Ideological Perspectives*

By
Edmund Weber

The Dalits have become part of the public consciousness and public debate in India. The process of losing their traditional identity as nobodies has started. They are not only a subject of debate but have become an active part of the politics as well. It is not possible to ignore them any more. - Even in Germany some people are aware of the Dalits now. Seminars are held on Dalit issues and papers and studies are also being conducted - at least on a limited scale in some places. So it seems to be an important item to be discussed. In this paper I wish to make some comments on the Dalit concepts of James Massey [1]. These concepts are taken from his publication about the Dalits with special reference to the Dalit Christians and religion as a source of bondage [2]. There is no need to define these concepts as their meaning will become clear as I make comments on them. Most persons interested in Dalits issue are also aware of these concepts in one way or other. - According to Massey, there is no specific Dalit historiography on the basis of which we can make any proven statement about that subject till now. But what we can do and what we must do is to create ideas and locate facts and information to construct a possible history of the Dalits. All human beings have a history and the Dalits also must have a history. The refusal even for speculating about a history of Dalits has been an instrument of this oppression. Therefore it's very natural that till now every sign and symptom of the Dalit history has been systematically ignored and suppressed. Conceding them an own history would mean the ruling classes had to recognise their human nature and to grant them human rights and privileges - to admit that they are full members of society. This the ruling classes were and are not willing to do. - Massey's contention is that the ancestors of the Dalits were the Harappan people. This idea, though it cannot be proven and so far lacks historical evidence, demonstrates the intention and the will to understand the Dalits as normal human beings. I think from our philosophy of history and understanding of the practical role of history in human life and psyche of a people, we have to develop such a historiography of the Dalits. If we do not do this we are acting like the writer of the Manusmriti. No doubt, the traditional Indology and modern politics were and are not very much interested in the Dalits. Their history naturally has been ignored. - In our society I did not learn - as a student of history - anything about the history of the masses. History has

always been written from the point of view and about the lives of the emperors, kings, bishops, generals etc. The members of the ruling classes or the prominent individuals in the bourgeois age have been the subject of history. All these people belonged to the higher order or varnas, by birth or by success. - But later the German historiography learnt a little bit about the importance of the study of the mass movements. This wing of our historiography we call social history. The Marxist historiography reinforced this understanding of history. The masses not only have had their own history but they also made history and, in reality the ruling classes are the products and functions of the mass society. - I think it is absolutely necessary to produce more ideas of the Dalits history, of the historical works of the masses in India. Otherwise we cannot understand the real history of India at all. - Today we know something about the minorities of the ruling classes. But to begin to explore something unknown you have to invent ideas, concepts and frameworks to begin the process of exploration. Our academic research in this field is not willing to make hypothetical inventions. Ninety nine percent of the theses produced in our universities are repetition of the old stories of those people who were interested in defending their class privileges and powers. But James Massey's idea of the Harappan Dalits, opens a broad field of a new historiography. It is a big merit for the Indian historiography, even if at last his thesis would be wrong. The Harappan theory performs a very real, essential and political function: it stops the ignoring theory of the so called non-historical existence of the Dalits at all. - The uprising of the concept of historization of the Dalits does not occur by chance. It starts at the very moment when the Dalits start to make history consciously and struggle to make politics according to their own necessities and interests. The real awakening of the Dalits today creates that new historiographical interest and that historiographical interest is the surest symptom that the Dalits are leaving their historical unconsciousness. The political revolution of the West European bourgeoisie started with the creation of the critical historiography - especially with the very critical Bible research. Their historical function has been the destruction of the religious legitimization of the feudal society. The Dalit historiography has to destroy the legitimization of the hierarchical varna system. - Some historical sources tell us about the old Dalits living in the post-Harappan era, such as the Rigveda. Massey has mentioned the fight of the Aryans and the Dasyus. The interesting point in the traditional interpretation of that fight consists in interpreting the sources in a moralistic and individualistic way - as a fight of good and bad within the individual. The symbolist interpretation of the social history not only means the dehistorization of the Dalits, but also of the old Aryan winners too. Their so-called successors and descendants covered their own history. They started to divinize and mythologize their actual social conditions. But this divinization or, as Karl Marx says, mystification of their own higher social position means dehistorization or dehumanization of the twice-born, particularly the brahmins and kshatriya too. They cannot understand any more that their social position and power is the result of very human victories of their very human forefathers and ancestors. This is the reason that they are afraid of the power of the Dalits. It also makes them aware of the fact that they themselves are weak and superfluous. Their only chance to perpetuate their privilege was and is to control the consciousness of the Dalits. The usual moral and individualistic interpretation is one way to close the door of understanding history - the history of Dalits as well as of the oppressors and the reason why the transient character of societies vanished. - If the Gods or the Divine have established the concrete social system, then the ruling classes are very weak, their superiority does not depend on their actual power. It depends on the manipulation of the consciousness. The consequence of this situation is the immobility of the society. The practical conclusion of this consciousness concept is clear: change the consciousness of the people, that is enough - and then the historical change of the society can be done peacefully - fight isn't necessary anymore. - It is interesting to see that the bourgeois interpretation of the Bible stories was moralistic and individualistic too. And now a days we see the predominance of a more social interpretation.

Now we realize that the Bible was misused as a moral code for bourgeois purposes by bourgeois individuals. Serious historical interpretation means the radical demythologization of human history, the humanization of human work. - The weakness of the ruling class in India started very early - proved by the varna-ideology and the Bhakti religion. The Bhagavad Gita is nothing else than a social history - in fact, a historical compromise between the upper and the lower jatis; everybody can get salvation by Bhakti, but the worldly existence and the social order and structure must not be changed. To get salvation means to be human being, to have a soul. The Bhaktireligion gave the lower caste people the feeling of being human beings. The Indian ethical Bhakti movement has its counter part in the West: Christianity propagating the idea that all are equal in Christ, but unequal in the world: the slave should not change his external social condition. - When the Buddhist, Hindu and other Indian traditions say, that the Chandala has created his actual social position by himself, they argue defensively; anymore human victors have thrown down, have given them by their own power that low status-not even the gods have the power to do that. But the dialectical dynamics of the karma-samsara-doctrine have their own conclusions: 1. All Dalits are souls; 2. souls are masters of their fortune and 3. the Dalits can change their conditions. The ruling class cannot say anymore : these are soulless beings, they are not human beings, they are underdogs. They can only say, their karmic situation, their present existence differs from that of other jatis and varnas. But this does not stay like this all the time. There is a possibility of change and the manager of that change is nobody else than the Dalit himself. No brahmin, no god, no Bhagavata Purana, no Christ can help him. He has to take his fate into his own hands. - Let me add another idea to this point - the idea of Brahmasutra and Shaiva doctrine that there is the possibility to destroy, to burn the whole karmaphala of the past, present and future at once by strong penances or sudden illumination. This is the next step. It is the predecessor of Dalit liberation, it is once more an ideological drawback for the ruling class. - And the medieval Bhakti is the last stop. Here you know the ruling ideologists lost their dominance of interpretation of the Holy Texts, they had to face competition from non-brahminical pujaris and what is most important, everybody including Dalits can get salvation in their lifetime, not just the elected religious specialists. It is the utopian imagination of liberation from samsara in this lifetime. - People produced the formal shape of the destruction of the automatically working system of karma-samsara ideology. Caste-status can be changed in *this* life. In this regard these ideas are not illusionary but predecessors of illumination and enlightenment. It is the beginning of the worldly liberation of the Dalits as well as the other oppressed jatis, but expressed in traditional terms. Medieval bhakti completed that process by saying that everybody could get salvation as a normal member of society; it was no longer necessary to be a brahmin or sanyasin. - Another important idea that I found in the thesis of James Massey was his assertion that the caste system is not a religious but a pre-religious, a secular one. He shows that every Indian religion was and still is more or less obedient to that system even today. There is only a difference between those religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism which do not deny their involvement in the caste system and those religions which declare themselves as egalitarian communities but follow uncontrolled and unreflected that system. - And last not least: If those religions which declare that all beings are equal and the same including the highest God, then brahminism is the most egalitarian religion. - It is really a great academic merit that James Massey stresses the fact that the caste-system is an all pervading structure in Indian society. So people coming from all the religious traditions can together fight that system. They will not be divided by the hypocritical ideology of egalitarianism. The use of this ideology is only to divide the people and to make the religious Hindu the bogeyman. - Let me add another remark: It is absolutely necessary to make a clear distinction between the concepts of 'casteless' and of 'secular' society. A secular society is not automatically casteless. It is only casteless if it destroys that very secular caste system. Religion can not destroy that secular system and history has shown this fact very clearly. The

secular caste system is too powerful; it will, as long as it functions, threaten and pervert all religions and subdue all religious communities. - Let me make another additional remark about the concept of so-called re-Hinduization. This concept maintains that the caste system has been produced and is still maintained by the Hindu religion. Therefore all the religions which actually follow the caste system against their ideals are re-Hinduized. I have two questions regarding this: Did there ever exist any religious community in India without the caste system? I don't know any community which successfully eradicated the caste system; no doubt that they could change religion or even profession. - Also if the caste system would be a product of Hindu religion as such, why do we find those hierarchical systems in Europe and other non-Indian societies too? But as a church historian I can not remember any Hindu missionary in Europe until the twentieth century. - I do not understand why the real varna-system in Europe together with its theological justification is not really and effectively a subject of Christian theological debate particularly in India? The separation of table and bed between the hierarchically constituted orders has been absolute and was constituted by birth in the European society. Even at the end of the nineteenth century an imperial prince of Austria lost all his heritage and even his name when he married a woman of the middle class. And every religion in Europe has been involved in the justification and legitimization of its feudal system. They were justifying and even defending the western varna society. The French Revolution, particularly the deistic and anti-clerical party changed the political system and not any of the religious denominations present in Europe. - James Massey is absolutely right in saying that the Christian missionaries in India did not change the social conditions of the converted people. This is because they came from a caste structured western society and didn't feel the need to change the caste conditions of the converted ones. But here I want to add one point. The Lutheran missionaries did not bring, as James Massey is saying, 'half-salvation' to the Indian converts. They brought 'whole salvation' but according to their own understanding of salvation. As Lutherans they knew that the organization of worldly affairs did not belong to their proper office as missionaries, because their proper job was to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. But the organization of the whole of human nature belongs to the worldly authorities; whoever has taken over the worldly 'regiment'. These people are officers of the so called law which regulates in the name of God all the relations between human beings and even the relationship of human beings to God. The legitimate means of that organization is human reason only, not special acts of God's will. - I think these Lutheran missionaries saw the social system at home being very similar to the Indian, therefore they were not very aggressive against the caste order. They were very serious, true and honest, not hypocrites preaching an ideal Christianity which was not realized in their home countries. In the understanding of the Lutheran missionaries therefore preaching the Gospel was the predominant task of the church and to interfere in the social conditions in India not very necessary. - The neo-Calvinists and then the neo-Lutheran tradition of the nineteenth century confused gospel and law. Due to this confusion social organization became a religious theocratic affair. They said that western civilization (but an idealized one) is the kingdom of God on earth. They started to identify the religious community with the worldly community. As bourgeois people, they destroyed the solidarity of jatis but did not give back a true sense of solidarity to their poor followers. They made them still more helpless individuals who would accept their colonial rulers. The problem is that they declared concrete political systems and programs as an immediate concretization of God's will. And if you have the power to declare that everybody has to obey you and none is allowed to question your ideology and political ideas, then this is the consequence. These kind of missionaries have become real neo-brahmins divinizing their colonial kshatriya brothers and their own monopoly and dominance in interpreting the social truth. Even today we see that this brahminization of politics is in power. - Another item is the question of what is theology. James Massey says that Indian theology is recasting old brahminical subjects and is using the

neo-brahminical neo-Sanskrit, English language. The real meaning of this observation seems to be: there has developed a new second varna system within the church. The clergy has become the new Brahmins, isolated from the ordinary laymen's problems using a language which the Christian masses cannot understand. - I agree when James Massey is saying theology has to express the meanings and feelings of the masses and Dalits. This is right considering the formal communicability of the theological subject and the selection of details. - The last and ultimate reality, the essence of our truth is unconditioned. I will say that whatever the experiences of the brahmins and Dalits are, such as enlightenment, ignorance, power and poverty - these experiences of life cannot affect the ultimate reality of human existence. To communicate the Gospel, will say, the idea that anthropological utopia is unchangeable - this is the original task of theology. But theology has to demonstrate that the realm of the Divine law, that the world is conditioned and always changing. This world of change is not and cannot be divine. If we propagate a special set of social mores as 'Gods' kingdom on earth' then we declare conditioned things as everlasting. - And just that is the cruel fate of the Dalits. Their counterpart thought and thinks that this actual caste system is Gods' will, so it has not to be changed. In the 1900 years of Christianity we had something like a caste system and the churches justified it as God's will. Therefore we were not able to change the social conditions when it became necessary. Thomas Aquinas, the most prominent theologian of the Catholic church, defended the medieval caste system and in consequence denounced the poor. He said: The people who are poor by birth or by misfortune, these poor people are particularly susceptible to sin because they are always greedy for money and other material goods. But the voluntary poor such as monks, friars etc. are safe from this inclination. - The Protestant churches forgot their founders particularly Martin Luther, who declared that the social order as such is God's will, but not the concrete historical one. According to Martin Luther we have got for the concretization of social order anything else than our God given reason. And this reason is universal, so the caste system and any alternative to that is a question of reason only.

Notes

[1] James Massey, Dr.phil. habil. (University of Frankfurt/Main, Germany). Scholar in Religious Studies. Member of the National Commission for the Minorities - Government of India.

[2] James Massey: Dalits in India, Delhi: Manohar 1995

**Lecture given to the Christian Institute for Religious Studies, Batala, Panjab, India, 1994. First publication: Bulletin of the Christian Institute for Religious Studies, ed. by Dr. Clarence O. McMullen, vol. 23, no. 2, July 1994*

Mailto: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de