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## **Chapter 14: Caste and the Conundrum of Religion and Development in India<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

The emerging debate on 'religion' and 'development' has been challenged by some for unquestioningly deploying what are historically contingent, socially constructed and mutually constitutive categories. Arguably, separating out 'religion' renders development secular, as a value-free project of modernisation, or the expansion of consumer capitalism and liberal democracy; while the paired idea of 'development' strips the political economy out of religion, making it available for instrumental packaging as the 'missing element' (faith, trust, values, commitment) now supplied by self-defined Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) (Fountain 2013). Such an idea certainly lies behind the complaint that the 'religion and development' agenda is normative and instrumental in its approach; that it is agency-driven, and involves a narrow or overly institutional notion of religion, focused on 'faith agencies' (mostly Christian) as well as enclosing a Christian conception of religion as a matter of belief (Jones and Petersen 2011).

A counterpart to religion *and* development, is writing on religion *in* development, and of course religion *as* development or development as religion (Salemink *et al.* 2004). Among other things, this throws light on projects of moral or 'spiritual' improvement contained within various development interventions, and the material transformations through which

religious reform movements are lived. The idea that modernising development itself has gained a hold on the ‘discursive imaginary’, shaping expectations, dreams and aspirations, and in consequence imposing its goals and values so as to render people ‘under-developed,’ to foster cultural self-denigration or cultural malaise, is at the heart of the long-running postmodern critique of development (Escobar 2012: xii–xiii). But, introducing an opposition between development and indigenous cultural life is itself rather unhelpful. After all, however understood, ‘development’ takes place through existing categories and meanings (see Peel 1978, Robbins 2003); and articulating indigenous or local concerns in the language of development is also often a strategic means to engage with the state or other agencies in postcolonial societies (Gow 2008).

These debates arise precisely because social life is *not* arranged according to binary divides such as ‘religion’ and ‘development’. The purpose of this chapter is not further to argue this point, but rather to explore how the division between ‘religion’ and ‘development’ (or economy or politics) nonetheless acquires significance, how institutions of various kinds — missionary, colonial and postcolonial state, NGO, activist — at different historical moments invest in these categorical distinctions in their approach to especially vulnerable people, and what the consequences are?

I focus on the case of Dalits, that is members of inferiorised caste groups historically subordinated as ‘untouchables’, who comprise some 16-18% of the population in India and remain among the most impoverished and excluded groups. The condition of Dalits has been part of the social policy of the state, missionaries and churches, activists, NGOs and other international organisations; and this social policy has produced and reproduced distinctions between religion and development (and analogously caste/class, ritual/economic,

status/power, church/state) in ways that have an enduring impact on the life chances of Dalits themselves.

### **Dalit disadvantage and the categories of social policy**

Until the latter part of the twentieth century the social and economic condition of Dalits in south India was truly grim: they were mostly landless, tied into various types of agrestic servitude to 'upper'-caste patrons and subject to a now well-known range of social-spatial-ritual exclusions and segregations articulated in various idioms including impurity and pollution. Where Dalits are concerned, poverty and the denial of dignity (the refusal of resources and recognition) were both public code and social identity. There was no meaningful distinction between Dalits economically exploited as labourers (a class) and religiously inferiorised and ritually humiliated as a caste (Viswanath 2014a). And still today, control over labour and the distribution of rights to resources, access to public services (water, lighting, sanitation), educational opportunities and much more, arises from historical inequalities of caste. This is not, however, to suggest a situation of social stability or passivity. Changes brought by British rule in the 19th century may in fact have conspired to make matters worse for the Dalits (Washbrook 1993), but at the same time colonialism offered new opportunities, broader identities, and engendered various forms of resistance or challenge that acquired momentum in the century that followed, including those opened up through new religious affiliation.

Since, as I will explain, significant numbers of Dalits are Christian converts, part of this discussion will concern Christianity and development. But my interest here is not in faith *per*

se, but the societal conditions under which interventions and responses to them come to be defined as ‘religious,’ or how religion and religious identities become part of the political system within which development policy is framed and resources allocated.

Inevitably central to this discussion is the effect, first, of separating religious and political-economic aspects of social life where this distinction has little prior meaning; and second, of abstracting the universal (identities and bases of claims) from the particularistic relations within which livelihoods are embedded. The effect is thus not the ‘de-religionising’ of development (Fountain 2013) but rather the ‘spiritualising’ (or ‘culturalising’) of poverty, disembedded from the matrix of particular relations of power and economy. I will suggest that the imposition of categorical distinctions (religion vs economy) and the disembedding of universal from particularistic relations that was born of 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary engagement with caste and untouchability in south India, continues in other realms including both state-led development and international human rights activism in ways that constrain attention to the specific structural disadvantage of Dalits and interrupt their claims (cf. Viswanath 2014b).

### **Spiritualising poverty: Protestant and Catholic approaches to caste**

From the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for reasons still poorly understood, Christian missionaries of all denominations were astonished to find that the groups they called Pariahs, whom they had mostly overlooked in favour of sections of society thought to be more influential, began to convert en-mass.<sup>2</sup> In consequence, the majority of Christians in India today are Dalit. We cannot be sure, but it is likely that conversion here was less a matter of signing up to a new belief, than of new allegiance and commitment that might make a difference to a situation of oppression. Certainly, Protestant Missionaries intervened as allies of people they regarded as subject to 'slavery' in ways that had economic effects — freedom

from debt bondage, the acquisition of titles to house-sites, or resettlement on agricultural wasteland (Viswanath 2010). However, to avoid the criticism that their converts were insincere materially-driven ‘rice Christians,’ missionaries were constrained to represent this political-economic change as spiritual transformation; and Dalits as oppressed by a Hindu religious system and in need of salvation from ‘spiritual slavery’ (Viswanath 2008, 2010). Precisely because for their Dalit converts the misery of the body and the misery of the spirit were *not* separate, for the missionaries this separation became crucial, and caste and untouchability entered policy debate and colonial policymaking as Hindu institution and practice (ibid). Understood as spiritual servitude, caste was to be challenged by altering mental attitudes. It could be said that missionaries did not seek fundamental change in the structure of an agrarian system, but ‘transformation [of] the attitudes and habits of Pariahs themselves’ (Viswanath 2014a: 4), stripping out the ‘Hindu excrescence’ of caste to leave unchanged a ‘rational core’ of class (Viswanath 2010: 145).

Through missionary discourse on the ‘Pariah problem’ (Viswanath 2014b) Dalits gained access to the public realm (attention being drawn to the conditions of slavery from which India was thought exempt). However, this discourse also consolidated caste and untouchability as matters of religion separate from economic relations and exploitation (Viswanath 2008); and in these terms Hindu reform movements opposing missionaries shifted their perception of Christianity from being a threat to dominant caste interests (through the removal of biddable labour) to a threat to Hindu religion (ibid).

Viswanath traces a parallel ‘conceptual apartheid’ (2014a:6) bifurcating the religious and the political-economic — caste and class— in the British colonial state’s Labour Department and labour policy, especially under the influence of (upper-caste) native politicians. This brought

about an artefactual distinction between policy on labour, on the one hand, and policy on the ‘Depressed Classes’ (the Dalits), on the other; a separation that, Viswanath explains, led to diminishment of the colonial and postcolonial capacity to address the reality of Dalit poverty. Like those of the missionaries, measures of state welfare for Dalits, emphasised thrift, temperance and self-control, and involved a discourse of moral and economic change focussed on domestic transformation and the family as the source of mobility — celebrating the thrift and self-sacrifice of Dalit women while making irresponsible alcoholic Dalit men the villains — entirely ignoring caste subordination as a structure of antagonistic agrarian relations (2014a: 14).

Of course the categories and abstractions of missionaries or the colonial state were not determinant of the meaning of new opportunities and provisions for Dalits themselves. An extensive literature shows how religious conversion and Christianity became part of on-going contests within agrarian society. In a pattern that finds itself repeated in different development eras, the various measures for betterment — whether titles for house sites made available by the state, or chapels and Sunday services provided by the missions — were seized upon by Dalits as the means of struggle in an ‘*agonistic and relational field*’ (Viswanath 2014a: 20, original emphasis), against caste landlords and for greater autonomy, even where (as was often the case) this led to short-term material loss or vulnerability. While external agents imposed a conceptual distinction between the caste-religious and the economic-political<sup>3</sup> that was irrelevant in practice, the local meaning of changes in wages, debt, access to land and other material benefits always exceeded the ‘economic’, being part of the struggles in the relational field of caste; just as at the same time innovations in religious ritual — having a place of worship of one’s own and conversion itself — were essential elements in reworking agrarian relationships and entitlements.

Catholic missions in south India (for reasons explained at length elsewhere, Mosse 2012) imposed a very different kind of distinction between the religious and the secular, but with similar effects. Much earlier (in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century), before the Dalit conversion movements through which Protestants ‘spiritualised’ caste, Jesuits had concluded that caste was a secular or civil order irrelevant to eternal salvation and compatible with Christian conversion. This allowed the retention of caste among converts, based on a clear separation of the ‘idolatrous’ (to be rejected) and the ‘civil’ (to be tolerated).<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Protestants, they did not aim to bring spiritual release from the grip of caste, but rather build the Catholic Church as a religious domain *beyond* caste society. The practical effect was paradoxical: Catholic communities and their ceremonial life and festival practices became profoundly embedded in the relational world of caste, its hierarchy and exclusions; and yet the Church claimed a realm in which people of all castes worshipped as equals in the eyes of God.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the always fraught boundary between secular caste honour (the distinctions of caste that Jesuits tolerated among converts as ‘civil’) and sacred worship (the religious realm in which caste claims were illegitimate) shifted so as to bring more and more practices under ecclesiastical control. Until the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, the physical separation of castes within churches, and the separate administration of the Eucharist to Dalits at the back or outside the churches was compatible with the spiritual equality of all. But by the 1930s, these separations were regarded as infringement of Dalits’ religious rights as Christians, and a range of practices, including caste-organised Catholic saint festival systems, which ascribed ranked duties and honours (and associated entitlement to village resources) to a hierarchy of castes, which were earlier part of the domain of ‘secular’ village headmen, caste landlords and Hindu rulers were re-defined as Christian so as to annul claims to caste rights. Dalit

castes themselves found that Jesuit support for their struggles over entitlements to resources and caste honour depended upon the definition of the field of contest as religious rather than socio-political – that is, as a question of equal rights to worship as Christians.

In different ways, Protestant and Catholic missions provided Dalits with fields of action in which their struggles against exploitation and subordination could be rendered spiritual (or Christianized) and thereby secure missionary backing. This was especially important because the British government in India had adopted a policy of non-interference in affairs of native custom and religion, which precluded legal action against caste injustice, and meant that Dalits who were denied access to land or water, to temples or streets, or in other ways ill-treated on the grounds of caste, had no recourse to colonial courts since (to Protestant-shaped policy) these deprivations arose from the practices of custom and religion.

### **Religion and entitlement to state development**

Indian Independence changed things in interesting but difficult ways for Christian Dalits. The space of equality marked by Christian religion was subsumed under a liberal paradigm of civil rights. Untouchability was secularized as a civic disability and socio-economic backwardness, and the Indian state introduced various protections, including laws which criminalized practices of caste discrimination, as well as reservations, welfare and development provision for the so-called Scheduled Castes. But although Dalits gained civic rights and development resources from the state, eligibility to these was defined in terms of *religion*. State provision was premised on the Protestant missionary idea of ‘untouchability’ as a debility arising from the practices of Hinduism. Thus, Dalits who were Christian or Muslim were (and are still) barred from legal protection as Scheduled Castes against the



‘atrocities’ (a legal category) of untouchability and from the development support of subsidized credit, scholarships, housing or a host of other schemes.

Dalits who are Christian face a dilemma. On the one hand, despite the importance of their Christian religious identity they continue to be subordinated as ‘untouchables’, and are unable to ‘assert themselves as people other than as described by their birth’ (Krishnan 2011). The churches never had the power to make Christian identity determinate in social life, because this was something always blocked by non-Dalit castes in the village community. On the other hand, the state allows them to be nothing but Christian; their religion determining identity and blocking access to the means of development. The situation leads many thousands of Christian Dalits to convert officially to Hinduism in order to progress (get jobs, houses, credit etc): to convert for development. Eloquent autobiographical accounts capture the humiliation, guilt and betrayal that Christian Dalits experience when their faith is in question, as well as the absurd interrogation and surveillance of individual religious practice that accompanies official verification of benefit entitlement (Gowthaman 2002, Krishnan 2011). Fifty years of Church-backed protest against this as unconstitutional religious discrimination has produced no result. The reason for this has much to do with electoral logic (the extension of development privileges to a section of the Christian minority being a vote loser). But it also reveals a rigidity of categories in the state system, equivalent in its impact to that of Christian missions.

As Krishnan (2011) points out (following Chatterjee 1999), it is a necessity of the modern state and its politics that social boundaries are simplified and reified, and that community identities are contained and enumerated in ways that disregard social reality: ‘[S]ince caste was considered [by the Indian state] to be a creation of Hindu scriptures it was deemed not

possible for Christianity and Islam to have [their] followers identified by caste. If these religions admitted caste how [could] they be demarcated from Hinduism?’ And Christians and Muslims themselves needed these demarcations from the majority religion, Hinduism, if they were ‘to have their social life governed by personal laws other than Hindu personal law and were to be awarded privileges for running their institutions without the supervision of the state, which found it incumbent to administer the Hindu endowments and temples [...] Hence no matter if people could see as clearly as daylight that caste discrimination existed within Christianity in India, it could not be constitutionally recognised’ (Krishnan 2011).

What is the effect of rigid categories on development? Any system of state provision that involves targeted categories constrains the articulation of demand and involves reflection by targeted groups on their own identity and entitlement — who they are and what they deserve (Still 2007: 280). Dalits who have become Christian (in pursuit of selfhood) are denied identity as the state’s ‘injured subjects’ (Rao 2009: 177-78, Krishnan 2011: 14), or if they seek progress by means of state support by adopting the religious identity of the welfare category Scheduled Caste, they have to retreat to the very untouchable and Hindu identities they left behind. Either way, Krishnan points out, Dalits experience an unbridgeable split between the pursuit of recompense or development in the public domain of schemes, scholarships, or legal protection against violence, on the one hand, and the pursuit of transformation in the inner private domain which refuses the pre-assigned identity and asserts difference (through religious conversion); that is, their development *through* (Christian) religion.<sup>5</sup> If missionaries disregarded the economic-political (‘development’) realities of Dalits by imposing on these the inner language of the spirit; the Indian state disregards the inner struggles for dignity, identity and spirit in the organisation of outer categories of ‘development’ entitlement.

## **Christian Dalit development: Dalitising Christianity and the culturalising of caste**

We should not of course presume that because Dalit struggles against oppression were bound by the dichotomous categories of missionary or state agents that these provided the frameworks of meaning for Dalits themselves. The field of Christian religious action was inseparably political and economic. Thus the ritual honours over which Dalits mobilised claims at Catholic saint festivals were signifiers of opportunity and chits for access to wider resources and recognition. In fact, post-Independence Dalit political mobilisation was born out of such contestation at saint festival (Mosse 2012). The work on the self, enabled by Protestant Christianity, for example in changed clothing, diet, the confident speech that some could acquire from Bible reading, or giving up drink (Krishnan 2010), was also a political challenge to exclusion and stigma. As argued elsewhere (Mosse 2012: 181-6), Christianity has provided certain Dalits a way of reflecting on difference and changeability, separating a shameful past from a better future and is productive of a cultural capacity akin to what Appadurai (2004) calls the “capacity to aspire”.’ Locally, this enabled renegotiation within villages of relationships of labour and services that could not be abandoned, and might even be accompanied by an ‘upper’ caste Hindu perception of Christian Dalits as associated with tidiness/cleanliness, ‘closer to education’ and as ‘models of progress,’ as Krishnan’s (2010) informants told him.

Those increasing numbers who join Pentecostal congregations also work to fashion lives anew in such ways, finding purpose and direction, in spite of persisting dangers and economic uncertainties. As Nathaniel Roberts notes of equally poor urban Dalit Pentecostals in Chennai, again Christianity is not a matter of *faith* apart from development (they are not fideists); it is not about change of culture. Christianity is about new knowledge and verifiable

truth; about having reason to place trust in Jesus, and the confidence, transformation and displacement of fear that is said to follow. This new knowledge is not an accompaniment of modern development, it *is* development - a discovered universal, which makes the notion that Christianity is a cultural tradition, still less a western intrusion, absurd. As one Dalit tells Roberts: “Do [people who reject Christianity as foreign] also reject tube lights because they are from the West?” “do they refuse to believe in airplanes?” (Roberts 2012: 278).

Christianity may itself have had powerful effects on Dalit lives, or perhaps its practices provided a coordination point for pre-existing elements of Dalit identification now brought together and articulated in new ways. Either way, Christian identity and action embodied development and dignity independent of the particularism of caste. However, from the late-1980s church leaders and activists influenced by a wider Dalit politics sought the recovery of socio-political caste — of Dalitness — that was concealed in this ‘Christianisation’ of struggle.

In the more caste-embedded Catholic Church, this Dalit turn arose distinctively as a protest movement (the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement) within and against the Church and its tolerance of caste discrimination in worship, education institutions, and the priesthood. This rebellious call to action by Dalit priests articulated the experience of Dalitness rather than Christianity. Indeed, Dalit activist leaders across the churches increasingly defined Christian Dalit difference in terms of *Dalitness* (rather than Christianity). As one prominent theologian wrote (Nirmal 1990, 129) ‘dalitness. . . is what is ‘Christian’ about Dalit theology, the broken Christ whom they [Dalits] can identify themselves with, follow behind and minister to, is for the most part non-Christian!’ (Pieris 1993, 38). Protestant churches especially provided centres for theological and cultural production, articulating an honourable ‘Christianised’

Dalitness that fed into Dalit NGOs and movements connecting ideas of liberation and development to the assertion of cultural difference (a conversion discourse). Various types of symbolic reversal were drawn together to honour an “outcaste” culture, Dalit art and religion. Publicly staged celebrations of Dalit arts in theological seminaries involved re-imagining formerly inferiorized drumming and dance forms, setting them apart from the relational context of servitude, and rendering Dalit arts as ‘weapons for liberation.’<sup>6</sup>

Articulating Dalitness (and the political claim to Dalit development) from *within* Christianity may have been a way of challenging the state’s categorical boundaries around caste and religion; forcing recognition of Christians as Scheduled Castes while drawing Christianity into the politics of caste. But the cultural and theological work of Dalit activists also rearticulated Dalit struggle as a *religio-cultural* struggle against Brahmanic Hinduism in a manner that echoed 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary models of caste. The central role of seminaries, churches and theologians in the Dalitisation of Christianity re-centralised religion in the matter of caste. These discourses of countercultural dissent were thus ironically aligned with the state interpretation of caste as based on a particular (Hindu, Brahmanic) religion.<sup>7</sup>

The effect of disembedding caste into the language of religion and culture has also been to fix the meaning of caste and ignore evidence on how caste is perpetuated in many different ways, serving various purposes of exclusion and domination, labour control, surplus extraction and opportunity hoarding (Mosse 2010). When caste is conceived as Brahmanical culture to be resisted through ideological challenges (including religious conversion), it is abstracted from the broader reality of caste as a system of graded economic rights, unequalised access to all sources of wealth (land, water, produce, education, employment etc.); from caste as a

structure of agrarian and urban class relations, and a form of political domination that is compatible with *different* religions.<sup>8</sup>

Arguably the repeated process of ‘rendering religious’ for which caste provides a pretext has had a disabling influence on civil society actors working for Dalit development (see below); but it has also ensured the exclusion of the caste system from official (state and donor) frameworks for the analysis of poverty and the achievement the Millennium Development Goals in India and South Asia. This is again because the Indian government’s affirmative action is premised on the idea of compensation for historical disadvantage arising from the practices of Hinduism, rather than on caste discrimination as an *on-going* aspect of the economic system (Thorat & Newman 2010, Deshpande 2011). As a matter of religion (rather than socio-economics), caste falls outside the purview of mainstream economic planning and development policy of the secular state. As a matter which is ‘inner’ or cultural, it is one to which the Indian state works hard to block international engagement, whether by development agencies or the UN human rights system. And international agencies become themselves complicit in the way religion as a category is the pretext for a narrowed conception of caste and development.<sup>9</sup>

### **The ‘Dalitisation’ of development and human rights**

There has been a two-decade long effort to break the structure of categories of religion and development and to bring caste into Indian development discourse. I want briefly to explain aspects of this development effort as well as how it inadvertently reintroduced some of the categorical distinctions and distortions of Dalit experience which it sought to challenge.

I begin in the late 1980s when I was first closely involved with south Indian NGOs (by then the most visible agents intervening in the lives of Dalit communities) as Oxfam's Regional Representative (in Bangalore). The prevailing policy categories at that time involved a still unchallenged 'economisation' of poverty and a 'culturalisation' of caste. Officially, caste was peripheralized as a religio-cultural accretion obscuring the class relations that were the proper focus of change — a view encouraged by the radical priests in Christian organisations whose Marxian and Liberation Theology training inspired the first generation of social action NGOs in the 1970s. Of course in the villages, NGO schemes of various kinds were in actuality folded into caste struggles that focussed simultaneously on fair wages and festival honours, land claims and teashop discrimination, electricity and temple entry, street lights, access to water and the refusal of ritual subordination at funerals. But the obdurate separation in policy of material from ritual relations, class from caste, and the inadequate representation of Dalit experience, was especially apparent to NGO field coordinators who were themselves Dalit, working within familiar caste-structured village life, and who soon out of frustration with this formed their own NGOs. The rise of Dalit-led NGOs was one of several factors that moved caste and the fight against discrimination to the centre of NGO work in south India in the 1990s (see Mosse 2011).

The 'Dalitization' of NGO development policy was facilitated by the growing influence of Dalit activism and its multiplicity of movements, organisations and (later) political parties including the American Black-influenced Dalit Panther movement (Gorringe 2005), as well as by the allied turn to Dalits within Church social policy (noted above), which for example recast the Jesuit 'preferential option for the poor' as an 'option for Dalits' in 1987 (see Mosse 2012: Ch 6). Such a reframing of development drew inspiration from the work of the preeminent Dalit leader Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar (d. 1956), whose birth centenary in 1991

brought national celebration and the availability of his writings newly in the vernacular. The centralisation of Dalits in development was promoted too by the opportunities opened up by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act on local government, which reserved constituencies for Dalits and for women in elected bodies (Panchayats), and equally by the brutal denial to Dalits of these same constitutionally-guaranteed political rights, and by a broader swath of violence against Dalits across south India that manifested a reaction to Dalit acts of insubordination, self-respect and economic autonomy, targeting Dalit bodies (especially sexual attack on Dalit women) and property, and marking out for destruction signs of Dalit development — radios, scooters, tiled houses — by dominant castes for whom development was emphatically a relational matter.

Thus, from within the NGO development field there appeared to come an approach that built on the everyday experience of the Dalit communities, and challenged the institutionalised separation of the religious-cultural and development. For the first time, caste was a development issue. The NGO capacity to articulate Dalit aspirations and to mobilise action in terms that were meaningful to the men and women with whom they worked was a hallmark of these initiatives. This ‘Dalit development’ approach could be (and came to be) articulated and sustained as a coherent discourse, capable of enrolling a wide range of actors and agencies — Dalit movements, state actors, lawyers, churches, donors and their European supporters, national campaigns and transnational advocacy groups.

However, the manner in which caste was brought into development had inadvertent effects that paralleled the earlier disembedding of caste from the ‘totality of social relations’ (Steuer 2012: 64) by missionary and state discourses. Three aspects of this can briefly be highlighted: first, the relative autonomy of the framing of Dalit approaches to development from localised



relations of caste power; second, the selectivity and re-framing of Dalit experience involved; and third, a change in the articulation of demand by Dalits themselves that is brought about.

On the first point, articulating a Dalit approach within the field of international development was never going to be simply a matter of transmitting local caste struggles for wider and wider support; it was not just a movement out from the local to ‘the global’ in order to solve village problems by linking them to ‘higher levels’ (Steur 2012). As in the earlier case of the missionaries, in order to build and sustain support, Dalit experience was abstracted and transformed as it came to be translated into other institutional agendas. Or, as Steur (2012) argues, ‘Dalit activism and the articulation of Dalitness is not constituted at any particular “local” level but emerged in a transnational social field’ (2012: 64). It was in the language human rights (HR) (especially after the 50<sup>th</sup> year celebration of the Universal Declaration in 1998) that the Dalit turn in development policy was transnationally constituted, and through the set of pre-existing activist and institutional links that the HR discourse afforded. Following the success (by 1994) of campaigns against apartheid, Steur points out, HR groups such as Human Rights Watch turned attention to India and to the continuing caste discrimination and spectacular atrocities against Dalits (see HRW 1999), as did international Church networks (in particular the World Council of Churches and the World Lutheran Federation), concerned for the large (Dalit) Christian population subject to violation of their human rights (ibid).<sup>10</sup>

The tabling of the issue of caste discrimination at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban, and the large-scale presence of Dalit activists enabled by international support (ibid), were focal for regional and local NGO networking on ‘Dalit Human Rights’ within India. What occurred in south India was a rapid expansion of Dalit NGO networks, and ‘networks of networks’ such as the Human Rights Forum for Dalit

Liberation. Under the slogan ‘Dalit rights are human rights’ these networks served to articulate and consolidate a discourse on development as a question of Dalit rights (and underdevelopment — inequality of opportunity, persistent poverty, unemployment, ill-health or low education levels — as the effect of caste discrimination). International NGO donors (church and secular) found their own reasons to support a policy focus on Dalit rights and dignity, for example because this brought a desired holistic (material, social, spiritual) perspective to human development, or because as a target for funding, NGO networks could be imagined as social action that was locally initiated but regionally interconnected into a kind of self-organising social movement for ‘structural’ change.

The sheer speed of this process and the consequent weakness of underlying institutional structures meant that donor-supported Dalit NGO networks with their widening connections and high public profile were always going to be more significant as a discursive effect (Knox *et al.* 2006) than as an organisational structure fostering a sustained locally rooted social movement (see Mosse 2011 for an exploration of the implications of this). Here was a powerful representational machinery on Dalit human rights manifest in episodic events, and selectively foregrounding aspects of Dalit lives and struggles which could be subject to the available and effective instruments of Dalit human rights monitoring and legal support, public hearings and jury panels linked to national and international human rights bodies (the latter having the objective of bringing international pressure on the Indian state on the question of caste discrimination) — all part of the internationally linked network function.

This brings me to the second effect of the Dalitisation of development under an international civil society human rights frame, namely the selectivity of attention to Dalit experience it involved. There are again different aspects to this. For one thing, within this frame Dalits are

positioned as ‘specific victims of discrimination and violence’ (Steur 2012: 65-6). The horrific cases of violence, rape and murder have, not surprisingly, been most prominent in construing Dalit experience as the abuse of human rights. This brings a legal framing and recourse to special criminal legislation (the Scheduled Castes [Prevention of Atrocities] Act 1989) with the inevitable consequence that everyday actions of anti-Dalit violence and humiliation are ‘recontextualized’ into crimes that individualize and arguably exceptionalize caste discrimination (Rao 2009). This leads Steur to ask whether the human rights focus might ‘detract from examination of structural socio-economic relations’ (2012: 66). This question applies equally to manifestations of untouchability beyond the most extreme atrocities, especially the routine indignities including exclusion from teashops, streets, burial grounds, temples or worship prioritised within Dalit human rights action. Might attention again be drawn to untouchability as a ritual relationship isolated from a wider set of relationships of exploitation, exclusion and restricted opportunity?

Dalit NGO-backed claims to, and conflicts over, village resources have indeed been construed as action against untouchability. Particular focus is placed on the *commons* such as water, fish, trees or grazing land through which caste hierarchy was (and is) symbolically and ritually enacted. NGOs have also organised action for the repossession of lands allocated by British district administrators to Dalits but alienated by ‘upper’ castes (the *panchama* land). Not only does such action recall histories of caste injury and involve acts of Dalit political assertions, signified for example by the planting statues of Dr Ambedkar, using slogans, drumming, cooking beef and other reversed symbols of Dalit humiliation (Mosse 2012: 222-4), but it also frames action against caste abuse in a way that allows appeal to anti-untouchability law.

This is strategically important action, but because of the way in which the discourse on caste has been historically constituted and internationally articulated, Dalit experience tends to be selectively construed in ways that import distinctions (caste/non-caste) which reproduced rather than break from the inherited conceptual divide between the religious-cultural and the political-economic, caste and class, caste and gender, and analogous distinctions. The Dalit rights agenda tends to be conceptualised in ways that takes the village as the quintessential site of struggle; if not over ritual exclusion and the humiliations of untouchability, it is in the form of struggles over land, the commons or village-level power. This can be problematic because it is not always possible to localise the Dalit rights agenda into collective caste struggles since today caste is active in shaping opportunity in new and invisible ways through the connections and capital necessary for entry into higher education or employment in public or private sectors, or through 'non-traditional' forms of discrimination in hiring, renting, or in the weakness of Dalit caste networks (or the lack of capital) in securing education, skills or employment; crucial structural processes that are not easily made visible as Dalit rights abuse. Many of the concerns of Dalit villagers themselves— access to credit, education, jobs in towns, migrant labour, especially among young women and men— may not articulate well with the anti-untouchability or caste-culture framing of development. In this vein Anandhi (2012) explains how the Dalit rights discourses of national/international networks into which local NGOs are linked can hinder their ability to respond to complex forms of local gender-and-caste oppression, including persisting patriarchy and domestic violence.

NGO workers are not unaware of these dilemmas. While framed in the language of Dalit human rights, their interventions are understood and acted upon locally in different and more meaningful terms. So, for example, grassroots women's groups reinterpret networked Dalit

rights activism to address gender-specific local issues such as obtaining house-sites in women's names (Anandhi 2012, 2013); or in another case, anti-untouchability criminal law is deliberately used to back land reoccupation, not to underline the caste basis of the claim, but because the legal procedure allows the infringement of Dalit rights to be *individualised* to particular non-Dalit occupiers of *panchami* land thereby avoiding broader conflict between Dalits and caste Hindus (Sundara Babu 2012).

Nonetheless, it is the case that caste/class and other distinctions through which action is represented become increasingly rigid as the discourse of Dalit rights travels 'outward' to national campaigns, UN advocacy, or to debates on caste discrimination in other legal jurisdictions (e.g., the U.K.) wherein the specific injuries of inherited status, ritual impurity, pollution and stigma are re-centred.<sup>11</sup> The critical question is whether a 'culturalisation' of caste inherited from the earlier missionary 'spiritualisation' of caste-poverty threatens to diminish the capacity of development actors (state, NGO, Church) to address the reality of Dalit poverty by obstructing the understanding of complex and changing local realities requiring varied approaches. At the very least, work is needed by development's varied brokers and translators (Lewis and Mosse 2006) to mediate the disjunctures between NGO discourse shaped by its own political logic (as was the missionaries') and the realities of local problems and actions.

The third effect of rights approaches more broadly, concerns the way these are changing the local articulation of demand. In this regard, Krishnan (2011: 1) observes among Dalit villagers 'a tendency to move from cultural-political emancipatory approaches to those of right-based approaches'. Rather than engage in agonistic relationships with dominant castes in struggles over resources and respect, Dalits 'characterise the grievances suffered as a

failure of the state in implementing statutory measures of welfare and compensation,' conceived as the abrogation of their rights – right to work, right to education, right to health (etc.) — even though at one level a history of caste domination lies behind such state failure.

The discourse of rights and of discrimination in development comes with the deeper politicisation of Dalit identity in relation to demand from the state. The struggles for land or employment are for *Dalit* land and *Dalit* jobs or *Dalit* enterprises. At the micro-level, as Krishnan notes (pers.comm.), when Dalits are excluded for example from a water source installed by the state in the main village (the *ur*), the conflict that arises is resolved by provision of another water facility in the Dalit 'colony' (the *ceri*). The absence of collective action to break down the residential segregations produced historically through mechanisms of power, labour control, and denial of property which divide Tamil villages into the dominant *ur* and the Dalit *ceri* is striking.<sup>12</sup> At the macro level, Dalit organisations campaign for a proportionally-allocated budget for the Dalit population, known as the Special Component Plan under the slogan 'where is *our* money?'<sup>13</sup> that is, for a share of resources generated by capitalist growth, but not necessarily against the structural inequalities produced by that model of growth (Steur 2012). Thus, while NGO networks have significantly increased the effectiveness of mobilisation of Dalits against discrimination and for rights to development through politicized identities, it may be asked whether these demands for welfare parity leave unchallenged the structural relations of power and political economy (Steur, forthcoming). Does the tactical focus on Dalit rights involve a merely *political* reversal in face of political-economic transformations (here neoliberal ones) that impoverish or dispossess (to use terms from Steur's [forthcoming] engagement with Partha Chatterjee and Eric Wolf); might structural power even push tactical struggles in the direction of 'mere' identity politics which reproduce the divisions of caste among those with shared

interests as exploited groups, perhaps through the agency of Dalit NGOs themselves (ibid)?

This is not the place to further debate these issues. But what can be noted is the way in which caste continues as a means for the articulation of ‘old antimonies of materialism and idealism’ (Roseberry 1982 in Steur forthcoming).

### **Summary and conclusions**

As a contribution to contentious debate on ‘religion’ and ‘development’, my purpose in this chapter has been to trace connections and continuities in a long trajectory of the artefactual and institutionally-driven bifurcation of religion and economy, culture and development, caste and class, identity politics and political economy, idealism and materialism and the related processes of disembedding and abstraction whether in Christian mission, development or Dalit human rights activism. We started with the fact that drawing a distinction between the religious and the political-economic, or between caste and class, misunderstands the condition of Dalits for whom caste is a political-economic-ritual relationship, and whose labour was (and is) organised and controlled through ritual relations. This reality of caste is independent of religious affiliation (Hindu, Muslim, Christian). This is significant because a long history of ‘development’ interventions on behalf of Dalits — missionary, state and NGO, colonial and postcolonial — had a double effect: first ‘culturalising’ caste (Natrajan 2012) to producing the modern Dalit as a religious identity subject to ritual humiliation and ideological challenge (for example through religious conversion) and institutionalised into a denial of state protections and privileges to Christian or Muslim Dalits; and second producing the modern category of ‘labour’ separate from caste, or ‘shorn of heathenish caste characteristics’ (Viswanath 2014a: 8). The categorical distinctions between the religious and the economic and caste and class, served the particular interests of outsiders and their

political and administrative exigencies (Viswanath 2014a: 3). Beginning with Christian missionaries, these categorisations shaped the field of development for the state and NGOs, and provide a mould for contemporary forms of activism and advocacy on Dalit human rights and development.

While the disembedding of particularistic caste into the universals of religion or rights constantly reintroduces misleading categorical distinctions, it should not be ignored that this may also be important, even necessary, as well as constraining. The Protestant Christian rendering caste as ‘spiritual slavery’ vastly increased the attention to untouchability (as an extreme form of subordination) and widened the potential networks of support and solidarity in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The human rights (rather than religious) framing of untouchability achieves even wider reach for Dalits today. It has enabled the problem of caste to be explained in ways that can be communicated to an international audience (for example, as a form of racism, Indian apartheid, religious persecution) and inserted within global forums such as the WCAR or the World Social Forum. The idea of Dalit rights has facilitated the mobilisation of financial support for Dalit NGO work in the expectation that this framing empowers local claims for resources or justice (Steuer 2012).

But we also know that what works well for ‘upward’ channelling within a Dalit human rights chain, or outward transmission to national and global forums, does not best serve the need for horizontal connections between different identities (Dalit, tribal [*adivasi*], labour, migrant) in relation to some particular and urgent livelihood threats or impoverishing processes. As Luisa Steuer (2012) puts it, the question is what sort of solidarity is possible or desirable: a compassion-based response to Dalit suffering, or a solidarity-based response to



dispossession? In practice these imply different kinds of networks, on the one hand, networks of professionalised NGOs and churches, on the other labour movements and unions. Several NGO donors have themselves now begun to disfavour building development strategies on caste identities or Dalit dignity separate from class; investing not in ‘caste-communitarian’ development, but in wider coalitions of interest around exploitation, and livelihood threats, or land and employment rights in the context of India’s rapid capitalist growth; reconnecting the politics of recognition to the politics of redistribution (see Mosse 2011). In this connection, Steur (forthcoming) shows how building alliances to challenge a ‘land grab’ from multinational corporate investments near Chennai produced new practices of Dalit identity reconnected to land and economy. This involved different horizontal and international connections, while facing off co-opting ‘corporate social responsibility’ discourses and the state criminalisation of local protest.

Meanwhile, Indian Dalit activism itself turns from claims about injury, to claims *for* development, from universal human rights to specific economic rights in the form of national budgeting and the Special Component Plan which is itself a challenge to the in-built assumption that Dalits derive entitlements as compensation for religiously-defined disadvantage suffered historically (or even on-going discrimination within the social and economic system), but insists instead on Dalits’ common entitlement (as Hindus, Muslims, or Christians) to a share of the national wealth. Both the NGO ‘de-dalitisation’ of development in favour of solidarity, and the demands for state budget allocations involve different ways to secularise caste and to dismantle the inherited categories of religion and development through which responses to Dalit impoverishment continue to be structured.

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<sup>2</sup> For the extensive literature on this see bibliography in Frykenberg 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Honed into a theoretical position in the work of Louis Dumont (1980)

<sup>4</sup> Such cross-cultural mission encounters played a significant part in the early modern separation of the religious and the secular in Europe (and the establishment of a secular framework within which the current debate on religion and development is possible).

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<sup>5</sup> Even a Hindu Dalit faces the fact that, in the public and legal terms which give her certain rights as a member of a Scheduled Caste, her identity is fixed as a matter of lineage and historical injustice rather than present aspiration, and so this does not ‘relieve her from the burden of bearing the injured identity in her inner domain’ (Krishnan 2011).

<sup>6</sup> This itself proved controversial, since some castes among Dalits were and some were not associated with the Christian churches, and in an increasingly caste-divided Dalit social field contests arise over who defines ‘Dalit culture’ or ‘Dalit religion’ or ‘Dalit arts’.

<sup>7</sup> Krishnan (2011) has traced these developments across the discourses of government and political actors through a detailed reading of vernacular and ideological literature.

<sup>8</sup> This is further underlined by Hindu nationalist trends in Indian politics that entrenched a conceptual fault line between Dalits and ‘caste Hindus’.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the World Bank’s recent India Poverty Assessment negotiated with the government, deftly combines institutionalism and cultural reification, asserting that: ‘The rules of the game in the caste system—to borrow a formulation of North (1990)—are rooted in a religiously sanctioned ordering of occupations described in ancient Hindu texts such as the Manusmriti.’

<sup>10</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Church-based NGO donors had been especially willing to re-frame their development objectives in Dalit terms because of the nature of their home and Indian constituencies and the mediated links between them. And in the other direction, for Dalits (and NGO leaders), being Christian and participating in the universalist language of Christianity allowed a collaboration with other universalist languages in development or human rights within which caste discrimination could be understood and acted upon (Mosse 2012: 278).

<sup>11</sup> Thus the debates on legislation against caste discrimination in the UK mobilised religious groups (Hindu, Sikh) as stakeholders alongside Dalit ones (see Dhanda et al. 2014).

<sup>12</sup> For an exceptional break with the social geography of the “caste street” see Mosse 2012: 244.

<sup>13</sup> The increase in state revenues, and a dramatic reduction in, and greater state surveillance of, foreign funding for NGOs is also in part responsible for this focused attention on state-backed Dalit development to ensure that Dalits are part of India’s ‘inclusive growth’ (Steur 2012).