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CONVERGING HERMENEUTICAL CURRENTS: EXPLORING A SUBALTERN THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY IN INDIA

Correntes Hermenêuticas Convergentes: Explorando uma Metodologia Teológica Subalterna na Índia

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ABSTRACT: The article is an attempt to explore how a convergence of Eastern and Western hermeneutical traditions could help develop a theological methodology focused on the cause of the subalterns in India. With this intent, it tries to point out the intersection and resonance between the traditional "*dhvani*" method of interpretation and some of the contemporary Western hermeneutical currents. With reference to Indian tradition, the article highlights how the art of interpretation not only follows the text but is involved also in the creation of a plurality of texts. The freedom from textual essentialism, which the Indian hermeneutical tradition embodies, allows a lot of space for the subalterns not only to interpret texts from their standpoints but also create new ones, leading to a liberative hermeneutics. In this context, the article studies the convergence of structural and post-structural hermeneutics with classical Indian hermeneutical currents and how they can help the cause of the subalterns and the articulation of a theology from their perspective.

Keywords: Theology. Hermeneutics. Subalterns. *Dhvani.* Abhinavagupta. Ānandavardhana.

RESUMO: O artigo é uma tentativa de explorar como a convergência das tradições hermenêuticas orientais e ocidentais poderia ajudar a desenvolver uma metodologia teológica centrada na causa dos subalternos na Índia. Com esta intenção, o artigo tenta apontar a intersecção e a ressonância entre o método tradicional de interpretação "dhvani" e algumas das correntes hermenêuticas ocidentais contemporâneas. Com referência à tradição indiana, o artigo destaca o fato de a arte da interpretação não se limitar a seguir o texto, mas estar também envolvida na criação de uma

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pluralidade de textos. A liberdade com relação ao essencialismo do texto, que a tradição hermenêutica indiana incorpora, permite muito espaço aos subalternos não só para interpretarem os textos a partir dos seus pontos de vista, mas também para criarem novos, conduzindo a uma hermenêutica libertadora. Neste contexto, o artigo estuda a convergência da hermenêutica estrutural e pós-estrutural com as correntes hermenêuticas indianas clássicas e como estas podem ajudar a causa dos subalternos e a articulação de uma teologia a partir de sua perspectiva.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teologia. Hermenêutica. Subalternos. Dhvani. Abhinavagupta. Ānandavardhana.

Introduction

In his presidential address to the Indian nation on the eve of the sixty-fifth Republic Day, Shri Pranab Mukherjee spoke of "populist anarchy" (MUKHERJEE, 2014, not paginated) indirectly criticizing Delhi Chief Minister A. Kejriwal's street protests. Kejriwal responded with a simple proposal to have a debate on the subject in democratic spirit (KEJRIWAL, 2014, not paginated). This invitation underscores the polysemy of the word "anarchy" and highlights the diverse, sometimes contradictory, perspectives on any action. In the context of the "populist anarchy" accusation, the key questions would be: What exactly constitutes anarchy? Is political activism, such as a *dharna* (protest) by the ruling Chief Minister, unconstitutional? Can an agitation against corruption be viewed as a precursor to political disorder and confusion?

My second example pertains to one of the seven fundamental rights recognized by the Indian Constitution, namely, the Right to Life. Article 21 of the Constitution states: "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law". Traditionally, this right was interpreted in a liberal spirit, meaning the state guarantees a citizen's security against any assault on his or her life. However, Justice Krishna Iyer of the Supreme Court of India reinterpreted this right, broadening its meaning (CHANCIER, 1992). Moving beyond the narrow perspective of a right to mere physical existence, Iyer's interpretation expanded the understanding of this right to include all essentials that make life livable. Thus, the right to life encompasses the right to all provisions indispensable for a dignified human life. This new interpretation implies, for example, that the state must protect an individual's right to live by providing a clean environment, preventing child malnutrition, and addressing issues like the suicide of indebted farmers as breaches of this fundamental right.

The above examples highlight not only the polysemy of words, the plurality of possible interpretations, and the conflicts of interpretations but

also emphasize how hermeneutics impacts life and everyday experiences. Hermeneutics is thus a vital issue affecting all areas of people's lives and society, including the realm of theology.

My objective is not to address every aspect and question related to hermeneutics, nor to engage in constructing a discourse on Western versus Eastern hermeneutical traditions. Postcolonial studies have demonstrated that reality is far more complex, making such simplistic contrasts unhelpful. Instead, I aim to explore how the convergence of Eastern and Western traditions can contribute to the development of a subaltern theological methodology in India.

To this end, I approach the question of hermeneutics from a deliberate perspective: that of the subalterns. My reflections will therefore centre on the implications of various hermeneutical issues and questions for the lives of the subalterns. This approach is both possible and necessary. Discussing hermeneutics from the subaltern perspective involves highlighting the social and political implications inherent in every act of interpretation. Furthermore, this approach seeks to foster a dialogue between Eastern and Western hermeneutical traditions, focusing on the cause of the subalterns, and to explore how such a dialogue can contribute to the theological project. It also calls for a dialogical approach to truth (WILFRED, 2019, p. 10-22).

Feminist studies, postcolonial theories, phenomenology, and postmodernism reject the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective, questioning the very concept of objective truth. The last significant attempt to maintain this dichotomy was by Emilio Betti, whose ideological foundations are rooted in the radical distinction between subjectivism and objectivism (BETTI, 1955)[1]. Betti's objectivism made him a staunch opponent of Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical views, which emphasize '*Horizontverschmelzung*' (fusion of horizons) and the dialogical structure of understanding (GADAMMER, 1960)[2]**.** Similarly, E. D. Hirsch opposes Gadamer's stance on the impossibility of achieving an objectively determinable meaning. For Hirsch, meaning is fixed and unchanging, and he redefined hermeneutics as the logic of validation. This position, however, is highly questionable (HIRSCH, 1967; VATTIMO, 1999)[3]. As Amartya Sen argued, what we can realistically strive for is "positional objectivity," akin to what feminist theorists describe as "standpoint epistemology" (HARDING, 2004; ALCOFF; POTTER, 1993; HARAWAY, 1988; HARDING, 1987; FRICKER,

[1] This is a seminal work in which he exposes his approach to hermeneutics. Other volumes dedicate considerable space to discuss Betti's theory. See, ORMISTON; SCHRIFT, 1990; SHAPIRO; SICA, 1984; WACHTERHAUSER, 1994. These works collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of Emilio Betti's objectivist approach to hermeneutics and his contributions to legal theory and interpretation.
[2] Cf. GADAMMER, **1960;** *Idem,* 1975; *Idem,* **1976.**
[3] Cf. HIRSCH, 1967; *Idem,* 1976; *Idem,* 1988; VATTIMO, 1999; HIRSCH, 1981.

2007; COLLINS, 1990; BELENKY, 1986)[4]. This is the perspective I will adopt, as it best helps us understand and interpret the reality and experiences of the subalterns.

1 Convergence of Indian **Dhvani** *and Some of the Contemporary Developments in Western Hermeneutics*

Heideggerian hermeneutics is not merely a method, or a tool. Nor does it limit itself to being an epistemological question of understanding and explorations into the conditions for its possibility. It moves beyond the classical Greek and Western metaphysics of being as an ontic reality with its inherent nature and essence, or as a metaphysics of presence (HEIDEGGER, 1978)[5]. For Heidegger, the very manifestation of being is a hermeneutical act. Being reveals itself through interpretation (*alētheia* – truth as the manifestation of being), with language playing a crucial role, as emphasized in his later works. Interpretation, in this context, is less about extracting the meaning of a text (*Auslegung*) and more about bringing being into manifestation. It focuses not on meaning (*Bedeutung*) but on significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*). Heideggerian hermeneutics concerns the significance and meaning of human existence, interpreting *Dasein* – being-in-the-world. Ultimately, for Heidegger, human understanding of existence is inherently hermeneutical.

I see reflections of the Indian concept of *dhvani* here, and I believe there could be a fruitful encounter between the *dhvani* theory of Ānandavardhana (ninth century CE) and Abhinavagupta (eleventh century CE), and the existential hermeneutics of Heidegger, and to some extent, the anthropological hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur. *Dhvani* is not the primary meaning of a text but its very breath and soul. It is the experience of being drawn into the vortex of the suggested (secondary/implied) meaning of the text, moving beyond its literal meaning. The text evokes this significance, akin to the Heideggerian view of the interpretation of the self and its transformation that happens through understanding the text.

In Indian philosophy, *dhvani* (literally 'sound'), is a hermeneutics of poetics (ĀNANDAVARDHANA, 1982; ABHINAVAGUPTA, 1928; GNOLI, 1968; KUMAR DE, 1963). The word *dhvani* derives from *dhvan*, meaning "to reverberate," signaling the power of *dhvani* poetry to echo endlessly within those hearers or readers capable of merging with its soul. The meaning of

[4] HARDING, 2004; *Idem*, 1986; *Idem*, 1991; ALCOFF; POTTER, 1993; HARAWAY, 1988; HARDING, 1987; FRICKER, 2007; COLLINS, 1990; BELENKY, 1986.
[5] Cf. HEIDEGGER, 1978; *Idem,* 1929; *Idem,* 1935; *Idem,* 1957.

dhvani is "suggestion" or "resonance," referring to the implied and evoked meaning behind a text. This implied meaning often escapes the reader at the first encounter and is only revealed in subsequent readings.

The ancient grammarian Patanjali explained *dhvani* thus: a word has two facets, the *sphoṭa* – a permanent and invariable element of the articulated sound, and *dhvani* – the actualized, variable element of the sound (RAJA, 1963, p. 17-148). But it was Ānandavardhana who developed the hermeneutical theory of *dhvani* in his classical work *Dhvanyāloka.* In doing so, he let Indian linguistics move beyond the realm of mere semantics to the realm of poetics. This tradition was expanded further by Abhinavagupta who linked literary interpretation to the emotional experience of *rasa* (the taste) the text brings in. The different Indian schools of thought did not accept the theory of *dhvani* and the implied, suggested meaning it represented. The opposition was strongest in the Nyaya and Mimamsa schools which laid emphasis on the grammar and structure of a text, especially in that of poetry; it did not recognize the evocative role of a text.

Here are three examples of *dhvani*. The first one refers to a seemingly banal experience in day-to-day life. As dusk approaches, a grandmother says: "It is already getting dark" (AMALADOSS, 2003, p. 102; LEELAVATHY, 2002, p. 129-144; VASUDEVAN, p. 343-348). Though the distinct phonetic, syntactic and semantic features of the phrase "it is getting dark" is fixed, and though the sentence signifies the setting sun and the fast-approaching night, the suggested meaning of the utterance varies. The differences in the meaning of this phrase depend directly on the context, the speaker's intention, the hearer's disposition, and so forth. Thus, the simple evocation of the grandmother "it is getting dark" triggers various existential responses from those around, the father, the mother, and the child. For the father, it is time to get the cattle home; for the mother, it is time to light the lamp; and for the child, a warning to finish the homework. In another context, the same sentence would imply the time for tryst with one's beloved. The phrase is experienced differently according to one's situatedness, one's existence as father, mother, child, or beloved. In fact, the suggested meanings are infinite. Likewise, a text becomes polysemous in relation to one's singular existential condition, and it could perhaps even be pointless to assign a universal meaning to any text for that matter.

The second example refers to the reading experiences that most of us have had. A book that held us spellbound as children has lost its magic when we return to it as an adult. Or, a book that seemed simple when read as a child, brings out clusters of meaning that we never suspected it had, when read at a later stage of life. It is as if meanings lay glued in secret layers behind the words, with each reading revealing more hidden meaning. The text has not finished speaking to us. In the first experience, the text which held us enthralled as a child does not speak to us as before;

does not evoke in us sentiments or feelings as earlier, because we neither perceive nor receive it as we once did. In the second reading experience, we have allowed the soul of the text touch us by sensing, and receiving what lay beyond the literal meaning of the printed words that we had not hitherto perceived.

My last example is from *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana, and is a *vastu--dhvani*:

Mother-in-law lies there, lost in sleep; and I here;

> You should mark these before it is dark,
> O traveller, blinded by night
> Tumble not into our beds aright (AMALADOSS, 2003, p. 103).

In the above verse, the speaker, a married woman, is in fact, contrarily to the denoted meaning of her words, extending an invitation to the passing traveller. The idea (*vastu*) is suggested, and not voiced. Her real needs and desires lie veiled, but resonate alone with the traveller alert to the suggested meaning behind her words. The negative in the formulation – "Trumble not into our beds aright" – actually means a positive invitation to come to their beds!

Dhvani is, therefore, neither a matter of moving beyond literal sense to metaphorical meaning, nor finding a *sensus plenior*. *Dhvani* is the soul to the body of a text. According to Ānandhavardhana the meaning of a text does not lie neither in its literal sense (*abhidā*), nor in its metaphorical interpretation (*lakshanā*), but in the suggested meaning (*vyañjanā*). Here we can note an intersection with the hermeneutics of Heidegger. We can observe the echo of *dhvani* in the Heideggerian hermeneutics in more than one respect. As in *dhvani*, in Heidegger the meaning goes beyond the literal which is closely linked to his conception of truth as unconcealment or unveiling. In both cases – *dhvani* and Heidegger – the approach to meaning has to do with what the interpreter captures in terms of a subjective experience as *rasa* or interpretation of the existential self (*Dasein*). The true meaning of a text lies in the emotions and experiences it evokes. In short, both in *dhvani* and Heidegger the interpretation is not an intellectual elucidation of the text but an experiential one inviting the reader to engage with the text and uncover its many layered meanings in relation to oneself and one's existential life. By letting the reader uncover the unsaid in terms of experience and existential self-interpretation, both traditions of hermeneutics confer a certain dynamism to the process of interpretation with focus on contextuality.

Both these traditions – *dhvani* and Heideggerian hermeneutics – invite us to explore a further aspect with reference to the *collective dimension of human existence*. Society, or a group, is not merely an aggregate of individuals.

There is a collective 'we'. Can't we expand the hermeneutics of Heidegger and *dhvani* by giving a collective and subaltern twist? Interpretation is not simply an understanding of one's individual being and situatedness – and here is the limit of Heideggerian hermeneutics — but also interpreting the existence and *situatedness of a group* as subaltern, as oppressed, marginalized and excluded. Let me explain the point further.

Texts, symbols and works of art create a different resonance in Dalits, tribals, women, African-Americans, aboriginals, indigenous peoples and others. They bring out a different *rasa* and emotional response (MISHRA, 1964; MUNI; GHOSH, 1950; SETURAMAN, 2000; SCHWARTZ, 2008; VATSYAYAN, 2008). *Rasa* is the expansion of *dhvani*. Could there be a conversation between Western existentialism and phenomenological hermeneutics and the *dhvani* theory of interpretation, especially in its aspect of *rasa* and emotion? Heidegger's hermeneutics and *dhvani* converge in that both of them point towards transformation. Besides this similarity, I think there is one other dimension of *dhvani* which can help Heidegger's hermeneutics to expand further. I mean the *emotional aspect* or the *rasa* aspect of *dhvani*, which is missing in the Heidggerian hermeneutics. But, subsequent developments in hermeneutics in the West after Heidegger, especially the rhetorical criticism, have taken into account this emotional aspect in interpretation. But this dimension is not sufficiently explored.

A point of bridging between the *dhvani* interpretation and Heideggerian existential hermeneutics could be found in the New Testament, especially in the parables of Jesus. The Indian biblical scholar Soares-Prabhu and others have deployed *dhvani* in interpreting some of the significant New Testament passages and narratives (SOARES-PRABHU, 2003, p. 145-154; SOARES-PRABHU; KUTHIRAKKATTEL, 1999, p. 245-255). The parables are not meant to be taken literally. Rather, they point to another world of reality to which the listener is invited to respond, not simply through intellectual assent, but with the involvement of one's whole being, and with emotions.

It appears to me that the *rhetorical criticism* as a hermeneutical method approximates the *dhvani* interpretation. In rhetorical criticism, a text is independent of the author; it exists with semantic autonomy like a work of art, going beyond the origin of the text and the meaning intended by the author. The parables become *metaphors* (different from *simile* where the comparison is explicit), as it evokes, suggests, transforms the listener, the reader. Thus, the parables of the Kingdom evoke and suggest a different reality rather than explain it. In contemporary Christology when Jesus is spoken of as the metaphor of God, something profound is being said. It does not give an intellectual explanation of who Jesus is as Chalcedon did, but brings before the reader or the listener a new

world of experience[6]. While the historical criticism is limiting, because it confines itself to the meaning of the text as the authorial meaning, a *dhvani* interpretation of a parable like the Good Samaritan, or the father of the prodigal son, has evocative power and eternal fascination on a wide range of audience. They provoke response, so to say, at the gut level.

Furthermore, I find resonance of the *dhvani* concept in Paul Ricoeur's distinction between explanation (explication) and understanding (comprehension), between sense and reference. He argues that the interpretation of a text is not simply a matter of giving explanation but leading to understanding, incorporating the reader's subjective experience.

> The sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text. Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation. It seeks to grasp the world-propositions opened up by the reference of the text. To understand a text is to follow its movements *from sense to reference*: from what it *says* to what it *talks* about (RICŒUR, 1976, p. 87).

In Ricœur's thought, the texts or works (*oeuvres*) are triggers to the interpretation of existence, a disclosure of a possible world. And this applies as well in the case of the collective existence of the subalterns. There are texts which served to hide and obscure their true selves (like *manusmriti* in the case of women and outcastes), and there are alternative texts that bring out the true being of Dalits, women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized and discriminated against groups. What types of *dhvani* do classical religious and literary texts, symbols, and signs evoke for subaltern communities? Do these elements potentially reflect a reality of oppression and discrimination? If so, what kinds of aesthetic experiences and *rasa* might they offer to the subalterns?

The interpretative processes suggested by *Dhvani*, Heidegger, and Ricoeur, with their focus on unveiling the unsaid, is crucial for a liberative subaltern hermeneutics. They bring to light the silenced and hidden voices of subalterns, uncovering their struggles. By engaging with texts, narratives, and works of art produced by subalterns themselves, readers can revive these silenced voices and experiences, fostering sympathy and solidarity for their cause. The concept of truth as unconcealment helps reveal the hidden realities of subaltern life. This approach enriches our understanding of hermeneutics and underscores its relevance in addressing contemporary social and political issues, ultimately contributing to the empowerment and liberation of subaltern communities.

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[6] I am reminded here of the well-known work of Haight (1999). More appropriate, from the perspective of dhvani, would have been a title like, *Jesus the Metaphor of God* which has much greater evocative power than the word "symbol".

The above considerations lead us to a second cluster of issues and a new set of reflections.

2 Text-Constitution and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has its origin in the interpretation of classical philology and canonical texts (both judicial documents as well as sacred texts). As such, hermeneutics had the following tasks:

Interpretation: Conflicts in interpretations of classical and sacred texts, due to multiple factors, necessitated an art of interpretation (*ars interpretandi*) to provide rules of exegesis. This was the traditional role of hermeneutics. It was in service of resolving contradictions and settling controversies regarding the correct meaning of a text. We could note that this reconciling function of interpretation throughout Indian history. For, a wrong interpretation would undermine the authority of the sacred texts. In Indian thought, the simplest devise to resolve contradictions in interpretation was to make a distinction between the literal sense (*abhidā*) and the figurative, metaphorical sense or metonymy (*lakshanā*). In the West, at first, interpretation was concerned with the two-fold meanings in a text, the literal and the allegorical, and to its refinement; in the Middle Ages this led to the four-fold types of interpretations: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Those seemingly contradictory passages in the sacred texts were sorted out with the help of these distinctions.

A second role is that of *clarification*: Obscure passages in the texts, or aphorisms like the terse *Sutras* required explanations, explications, and further elucidations. In Indian schools of thought this would take the form of commentaries (*bhāṣya*), and commentaries on the commentaries.

A further role is that of *reconstruction*: In some cases, hermeneutics helped in reconstructing the original texts (*Urtext*), which were most often extinct. The Indian hermeneutical tradition is a rich and multifaceted tapestry that encompasses not only the interpretation of fixed, given texts but also the creation of new texts. This dynamic process is vividly illustrated in the case of the many Ramayanas, where the epic narrative of Rama is reinterpreted and retold across different cultures, languages, and epochs, and in the dynamic process producing new texts[7]. In short, we can observe a fluid and evolving character of textuality in the Indian tradition.

[7] Thus, we have Valmiki Ramayna, the sixteenth century Tulasidas' Ramacharitams, the Ramanayam of the Tamil poet Kambar, Southeast Asian texts of Ramayana in Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia and so on.

The act of choosing a particular text to be considered sacred from myriads of similar texts requires interpretation. In other words, the inclusion (of certain texts as sacred) and the exclusion of other texts from the Canon is a hermeneutical act. The formation of the Canon in which inclusion and exclusion are practiced is a primordial act in which hermeneutics, and the background of the practitioners of hermeneutics, are implicated. The fixing of the New Testament Canon, for example, meant the exclusion of many early Christian literature like the excellent treatise the *Didache*, or the materials of *Apocrypha*. The case is much more so with Indian scriptures.

Thus, hermeneutics not only follows but also precedes the creation of sacred texts. To consider a text as valid and authoritative is itself hermeneutics. Interpreters confer an authoritative character on a text by claiming it to be of divine origin, of having been inspired, and so forth. In its most fundamental(ist) form, inspiration is interpreted as a divine dictation. As *śruti*, Vedas are considered to be eternal, not authored by humans – *apauruṣeyā.* It is the source of all revelation and knowledge (the principle of *vedamulatvam*). But before being regarded as sacred, the Vedas faced significant interpretive conflicts, with their authority and validity being questioned and challenged, particularly by the *Carvaka* and the *Sramana* traditions, which include Jainism and Buddhism. The distinction between *āstika* and *nāstika* schools is not primarily about belief in God or the lack thereof; rather, it centres on the acceptance or denial of the Vedas' authority.

> The Vedas were not, originally, *scriptures*, for they were written only late in history. They were a fixed text, kept alive by oral recitation as a symbol of the community. Acceptance of the Vedas meant an acceptance of a valid point of reference accepted by the community. In a sense the acceptance of the Vedas seems to have a role similar to the singing of the national hymn, or the recitation of the creed in a Christian public worship: it expresses primarily the will of faithfulness to one's tradition, subject always to different interpretations about its significance (GISPERT-SAUCH, 2014, p. 114).

Even among those who accepted the sacred texts as symbols of the community, there were differences in interpretation. The *Mimamsa* school regarded the Vedas as the exclusive authority, while the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* school viewed rituals not as ends in themselves, but as means or preparations for attaining wisdom.

Most significant concepts in the Indian epistemology which can support theological pluralism and diversity, as well as the cause of the subalterns is represented in the Jain school. Jain epistemology is deeply rooted in concepts such as *syādvāda* (the doctrine of conditioned predication), e*kanaṭa (*absolutism) and *anekanta* (non-asbolutism). This conceptual cohort offers a nuanced understanding of truth, pluralism and the pursuit of diverse paths in theological endeavours (SHAH, 2004; MAHENDRA KUMAR,

1999; SCHUBRING, 2000; PIOTR, 2013; SHAH, 2001). *Syādvāda* which can be also translated as the 'doctrine of maybe', is a pivotal principle of Jain epistemology. It holds that the truth or falsity of a statement or proposition is indeterminate as it depends upon the context, on various conditions and perspectives. *Syādvāda* is built on the limits of all human knowledge and the possibility of multiple viewpoints., S. Radhakrishnan speaks of "pluralistic realism of the Jains" and notes in this regard,

> Jainism offers us an empirical classification of things in the universe, and so argues for a plurality of spirits. In logic, as we have seen, it takes its stand on the relativity of knowledge, the obvious fact that the relations of objects within the world are not fixed or independent, but are the results of interpretation. Moreover, the theory that reality and meaning are inseparable makes for monism in metaphysics and not pluralism. As a matter of fact, the pluralistic universe in Jainism is only a relative point of view, and not an ultimate truth (RADHAKRISHNAN, 1994, p. 302).

While maintaining this pluralism, Jaina thought is critical of *ekanaṭa*, namely an absolutist position which swears by a single viewpoint or perspective with the claim of being the ultimate truth and above all other perspectives. In short, the concepts developed within Jain philosophy challenge hegemonic thought and advocate the emergence of voices from the margins and their inclusion in truth-finding.

It is interesting to note that the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and especially its Office of Theological Concerns resonate the Jain epistemology and approach to pluralism (TIRIMANNA, 2007; WILFRED, 2019, p. 10-22; *idem*., 2024). The Jaina epistemology has also great potential to nurture the emergence of subaltern theologies. For example, we could raise the question of the participation of the subalterns, the marginalized and the victims in the process of text creation, especially when these texts are the sources for their oppression, discrimination and social marginalization. In other words, we need to raise the question: who creates the text? Who interprets it? To whose advantage are the texts interpreted? Without such critical scrutiny the claims of sacrality could become counterproductive to the cause of humanization, especially for the cause of the subalterns.

This issue is evident in the conflict of interpretations shaped by the questions and concerns of individuals and communities. These differing perspectives lead to various versions of the original text, each highlighting distinct standpoints. Thus, we have not only Valmiki's version of the epic Ramayana, but also various adaptations and versions, with the most well--known being the North and South Indian versions. We can observe a similar plurality of textual traditions in Indian stories, myths, and legends within the Hindu tradition. In short, hermeneutics not only interprets texts but also creates a multiplicity of texts and interpolations.

The role of the community is crucial in this context. The process of generating sacred texts through hermeneutics often brings issues of orthodoxy and heterodoxy into focus. From a power perspective, interpretations from marginalized and powerless communities are frequently labelled as heterodox. In other words, the distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is inseparable from the social realities and differences within communities. Textual pluralism can be viewed as deconstructing the hegemonic power structures associated with textual idolatry, and in this sense, it can be considered a process of liberation for the subalterns.

3 Critical Hermeneutics for the Cause of the Subalterns

Habermas' critique of the hermeneutics of Gadamer needs to be taken seriously. We cannot assume that every interpretation happens successfully and that "understanding persons are willing to submit themselves to the claims of the text and to enter into the traditions which the text represents" (JEANROND, 1991, p. 67). For, besides the limits to hermeneutical understanding, there is an ideological, and we may add, a political element in every act of interpretation causing often a systemic distortion in communication. The scope of hermeneutics gets larger at this juncture, because its challenge is now not only to interpret, but to also facilitate a process of non-repressive communication. Here, hermeneutics become really a critical intervention as it raises suspicion about a given text or commonly accepted interpretation.

Let me at this point highlight the importance of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" for the subalterns. This critical hermeneutics unmasks and deconstructs the prejudices inherent in the text (RICOEUR, 1970; HAMPTON, 1990; FOUCAULT, 1969; ALTHUSSER, 1981)[8]. A good example would be the deconstruction of the entire Bible, especially the New Testament by feminist theology, and the deconstruction of classical works, including *manusmriti* by Indian feminists (AMBEDKAR, 1950)[9].

To substantiate my claim for the necessity of critical hermeneutics and its importance for the cause of the subalterns, I draw an example from the postcolonial, ideologically coloured interpretation of the parables by the biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias. Specifically, I refer to his interpretation of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16). Jeremias suggests that the labourers were standing idly in the marketplace because,

[8] The author applies a hermeneutics of suspicion to literary texts. He is of the view that all cultural artifacts are embedded political meaning and ideology.
[9] This seminal work has provided inspiration for many feminist works of critique of *manusmriti*: RAO, 2005; SANGARI; VAID, 1989; CHAKRAVARTI, 2002; *Idem.*, 1998.

in the Orient, people are lazy and do not work! The question of the employer, whey they were standing idle, the workers responded, "Because no one hired us". Jeremias comments on this verse thus: "The poor excuse conceals their oriental indifference" (JEREMIAS, 1972, p. 137). The well-known postcolonial thinker Edward Said offers many similar examples of prejudice in his celebrated work, *Orientalism* (SAID, 1978). Such prejudices are deeply embedded in colonial texts and their knowledge systems. Postcolonial hermeneutics, as a form of critical hermeneutics, performs extensive deconstructions of these biases (SUGIRTHARAJAH, 2016; *Idem,* 2001; *Idem,* 2003); DUBE, 2000; *Idem,* 2002; PUI-LAN, 2005; *Idem*, 2003; SEGOVIA, 2000; SEGOVIA; MOORE, 2005; TOLBERT; SEGOVIA, 1995.).

For instance, the Exodus narrative is typically depicted as the liberative hand of God leading the Israelites safely into the promised land. However, postcolonial hermeneutics deconstructs this narrative, examining it from the perspective of the dispossessed Canaanites, paralleling the contemporary experiences of indigenous people deprived of their lands and livelihoods. Examples of such reinterpretations are abundant. While the narrative of the Canaanite woman is traditionally portrayed as a test of her faith, postcolonial hermeneutics reveals the ethnic prejudices at play and Jesus' own initial reluctance to come to her aid.

Critical hermeneutics can relate to an entire system of thought, deconstruct it, and present a counter-perspective. This is what Daya Krishna, one of the great contemporary philosophers of India, did in his *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective* (KRISHNA, 1991). In fact, Daya's entire writings reflect a counter-perspectival hermeneutics. So is also, the deconstruction of the myth of *purushasūkta* by the Dalits, which is in line with the millennial old deconstructive critique of the *cārvākas* and of the *śramaṇa* tradition.

The subaltern condition interpreted through postcolonial hermeneutics converges with the Biblical understanding of the poor, and its perspectives on them. In a way, postcolonial hermeneutics goes beyond a liberation hermeneutics interpreted through Marxist theory and analysis. For, in postcolonial hermeneutics, there is not only a class analysis but also analysis on the basis of caste, gender, geography, etc.

Having said that, we need to direct our attention also to the fact that the Bible itself presents situations and practices in the context of empires and diverse forms of colonialism – Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and so on. One may not understand the Book of Esther, for example, except in the context of Babylonian empire and its colonial practices. The book of Jonah is situated in the context of the Assyrian empire. The New Testament has the backdrop of the imperial Roman rule and domination. The people of Palestine of Jesus' times were under the Roman colonial rule. Such being the case, the Bible itself presents many ambiguous and

complex interpretations, sometimes tending to favour the colonial rule and other narrations representing a resistance and revolt against it. Bible in that sense is an admixture of both colonial ideology and postcolonial theory, which fact necessitates that it should be subjected to critical scrutiny, and may not be used solely as an unambiguous text to speak of God, the world and of human beings. It requires not merely the application of historico-critical method and literary criticism, but also a good measure of postcolonial hermeneutics.

Such a critical hermeneutics, with its ideological critique and deconstruction, will prepare the ground for the liberation of the subalterns, and help bring out their agency.

4 The Significance of Structuralist and Poststructuralist Hermeneutics for the Cause of the Subalterns

Indian tradition also has a structuralist approach to language, and to the relationship of various units of a sentence, text etc. especially in the *Purva Mīmāṃsā* school of thought. This traditional heritage is well brought out in modern times by Kunjuni Raja in his *Indian Theories of Meaning* (RAJA, 2000). In the West, with Ferdinand de Saussure, a structural-linguistic approach came about. Both these traditions share many things in common, and they go beyond a genetic, lexicographic and philological study of language, namely the diachronic approach to language. Both the Indian and Western structuralist traditions have *synchronic* approach to language and its structure.

Structuralism may be critiqued for being a closed, self-referential system, but this view only captures part of the picture. Positively, structuralism highlights the radical relativity of language, where the nature and meaning of any element are entirely dependent on its relationships with other elements and the whole (STURROCK, 1986; SAUSSURE, 1974; LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1968; DERRIDA, 1978; *Idem*, 1955, p. 428-444; STURROCK, 1979). This perspective in linguistics serves as a paradigm for interpreting society, interpersonal relationships, community dynamics, and various aspects of our lives and actions. Post-structuralism does not take for granted the structures, but goes behind them to investigate the genesis of the structures and its constitution as well as the process of structuration. As tool of radical critique of the structuring process of structures themselves, post-structuralism opens a vast field of liberation for the marginalized.

Poststructuralist hermeneutics brings our attention to the gaps and silences found in texts, history, tradition, literature, and cultural expressions. For instance, postmodern and poststructuralist approaches to historiography

challenge the notion of historical narratives as seamless constructs and reveal how the voices of the silenced and marginalized are suppressed. While colonial and nationalist historiographies may seem opposed, they share a commonality in that both have marginalized subaltern voices and narratives. The subaltern approach has contributed to revising mainstream historiographies, leading to the development of a critical subaltern historiography. The same could be said of any hermeneutics that is focused on deconstructing dominant narratives. It allows for the questioning and dismantling narratives that have historically silenced or misrepresented the subalterns. By uncovering the mechanisms at work in the dominant texts, poststructuralism provides subaltern groups with the tools to challenge the identities imposed upon them and to assert their own, multifaceted identities. This dynamics has been at work all through Indian tradition from the times of the *cārvākas* of the pre-Christian era, who made the first attempt to deconstruct the canonical texts of Vedas and have set an example by providing the tools for the liberation of the subalterns.

Further, if structuralism, especially structural linguistics, shows that the very identity of the various constituents of the language stand in interdependent relationship to each other and to the whole, thus bringing out the radical relativity in the meaning making process, post-structuralism and postmodernism help us realize the infinity of the semantic potential of texts through an unending process of interpretations. Both of them play a liberative role for the subalterns in as much as they release texts and symbols from the tyranny of canons and censures, and create new spaces for the display of the subjecthood and agency of the subalterns.

5 The Pragmatics of Hermeneutics – East and West

Pragmatic and liberational orientations can be identified in the Bible, Marxist-inspired liberation hermeneutics, and in certain aspects of Buddhist hermeneutical traditions. Notably, Buddha's silence on ultimate questions and his critique of unproductive speculation and intellectualism reflect a focus on addressing existential suffering rather than engaging in theoretical debates for their own sake. The Biblical, Marxist, and Buddhist traditions view hermeneutics as a means to achieve liberation, which I refer to as the pragmatics of hermeneutics, driven by practical and pedagogical concerns. This perspective highlights how Buddhism challenges the undue emphasis placed on hermeneutics in conventional theology and religious studies, particularly when studying ultimate reality.

By asserting that illumination is a path to liberation accessible to all, Buddhism advanced its pragmatic orientation. The Vedas and their intellectual interpretations do not serve this purpose and were thus suspect and

rejected. The *Buddha, dharma, and sangha* are practical goals and ideals to be pursued without relying on texts, interpretations, or knowledge. Furthermore, Buddhism became wary of conceptualizing the ultimate reality due to the risk of objectification. This does not deny the intellectually rich epistemology and vigorous hermeneutical tradition that emerged in Buddhist history, which has different orientations and goals than interpreting the Vedas. In essence, Buddhism cautions against interpretations divorced from *anubhava* (experience), *anubhuti* (personal realization), and *satori* (enlightenment). Interpretations should be tailored to individuals' needs and capacities, as Shakyamuni did, similar to how a physician prescribes different remedies for different ailments.

Pragmatic and pedagogical (*upāya*) concerns have also shaped Buddhist hermeneutics. It could be illustrated with the parable of the burning house from the *Lotus Sutra* (WATSON, 1993; **EDELGLASS; GARFIELD,** 2009). A fire broke out in the house of a wealthy man whose many children were playing inside the mansion, engrossed in their games and unaware of the fast-engulfing fire. When all appeals of the father to the children to come out went unheeded, he resorted to a practical way to lure them out of the burning house to safety. Understanding their attachment to toys, the father devised a plan. He promised them loudly those very toys which they always wanted, and which he knew they would not resist: bullock carts, goat carts, deer carts, each to their liking. The children rushed out of the blazing house eagerly to find a real bullock cart, and not toy, draped with precious clothes, adorned with jewels and drawn by many white bullocks. The parable shows the inadequacy of intellectual perception for liberation. Any amount of reasoning on the danger of fire would not have brought liberation to the children. It is rather the *upāya-kauśalya* (skillful or clever means) that led to liberation. The issue here is not whether the man resorted to trickery to get his children out of the burning house, whether he was guilty of falsehood for promising them toys, and whether he kept his promise or not. The real issue was to save the children from the fire.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several areas warrant further exploration. In our globalized world, one of the crucial questions is alterity and pluralism: how do we deal with differences and identities, and how are these constructed? Classical and modern hermeneutics offer many insights into issues of alterity—cultural, ethnic, linguistic, geographic, and more. They foster a world where pluralism can thrive by allowing myriad interpretations. This sea of interpretations is open for everyone to explore. Inter-cultural or cross-cultural hermeneutics preserves this pluralism from becoming disoriented freedom and autonomy. It facilitates conversations between

interpretations, leading to mutual transformation. It helps us enter into the world of the other and create space for the other in our own world. How should we approach cross-cultural hermeneutics when the other is not a neutral entity, but marginalized, discriminated against, and victimized? Subaltern hermeneutics must explore how it can provide a liberational perspective to cross-cultural hermeneutics. These are issues which any subaltern theology should address.

Furthermore, a subaltern theological approach would advocate for a communitarian hermeneutics, where concepts like pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis)* and the hermeneutical circle are retooled to address the questions and concerns of the community, rather than being confined to the individual. Despite this, there are still strong traces of liberal and individualistic hermeneutics in both the East and the West, which are now being challenged by the subaltern perspective.

Another area I have not addressed here, but recognize as extremely important, is the field of tradition and hermeneutics. This vast and critical domain is beautifully illustrated by Abhinavagupta, a ninth-century Indian expert in hermeneutics. In his commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (the science of dance), Abhinavagupta compares the past and present to the lower and higher rungs of a ladder. He suggests that while there is continuity with the past, it is not oppressive; one climbs upward using the lower rungs. Standing on the higher rung provides a better vision of reality, unattainable in the past, and allows for a deeper understanding of the past.

Hermeneutics should not be confined to merely interpreting tradition, its heritage, and its symbols. It should serve the cause of liberation and be oriented towards the future, even when interpreting the past. The lower rungs can act as a trampoline for a better future, rather than as obstacles to progress and a higher tomorrow. This metaphor offers valuable lessons for a subaltern theological approach that is creative and not weighed down by traditions.

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