

## **DALIT SPIRITUALITY IN GIFT IN GREEN BY SARAH JOSEPH: A DALIT RE- READING**

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### **Abstract**

Dalit community, an umbrella term for communities with a common socio-historical background, but multiple and rich cultural and spiritual dimensions, has always been alienated from their identity and left in the ghettos, by the mainstream. The mainstream appropriates, absorbs and eventually abuses the Dalit identity. Dalit Spirituality too underwent such a process of denigration. A spirituality that is deeply rooted in nature, founded on the notion of co-existence and eco-friendly living, Dalit Spirituality relies on local deities, with localized myths and belief systems centered on it, as the soul and driving force of existence. The upsurge of neo-capitalist class, gender and market equations lead to a commodification and commercialization of such spiritual icons. The icons are appropriated and thus marketed, much like the Dravidian and native Indian belief systems were superimposed upon by the Aryan invasion. Gift in Green by Sarah Joseph depicts such a community in 'Aathi', with a culture, tradition and life style of its own, overrun by the effects of globalization and class upgradation. 'Thampuran', the presiding deity becomes the first victim of this appropriation. The writer is not a Dalit, nor is the

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The advent of the Aryans and their self declared superiority marginalized the native Dravidians, Dalits and tribals. The native theology, which was based on nature centred existence, veneration of physical labour and god concepts with more of human qualities, was pushed to the periphery, both geographically and socially. The Aryans imposed the Varna System, which excluded these natives as the untouchables and the Panchama.

The oppressive caste system found a threat as the Dalits began to convert to other religions, as a way of social upgradation. The first alternative for the Dalits was Buddhism because it practised no caste and no untouchability. Mahavir Swami rejected the notion of caste and violence in the brahmanical structure. The monotheistic Bhakthi Movement of Kabir Das, Sur Das, Tulsi Das and teachings of Guru Nanak provided alternatives to the Dalits. In the later centuries, Christianity and Islam which preached universal brotherhood and the negation of caste discrimination, led to the large scale conversion of the Dalits. At a later stage, the emergence of market economy furthered this Dalit liberation. The Brahminical hindu community, in its attempt to prevent this imbalance in their social order resorted to enforcing a hindu identity on the Dalit community, through appropriation of Dalit culture, beliefs and identities, leading to the popular misconception that Dalit spirituality is essentially Hindu spirituality. Dr. J. J. Pallath calls this Sanskritisation and says,

Brahmanic Hindu Fundamentalist groups, are trying to hinduise the Dalit cultures by imposing brahmanic cultural values. So also, the rituals, symbols, myths and celebrations of the Dalits are being replaced by the brahmanic religious practices. Many of the Dalit priests are now being replaced by brahmanic priests in well known Dalit places of worship. In short, in the name of hinduising India the simple cultures are being eliminated by the brahmanic dominant cultures. ('The Humanizing Potential of Dalit Cultures')

Dalit Spirituality entails fossilized myths and symbols. As Dr. J.J. Pallath points out, it may be mere stories or capsuled values. Many a times, these give centrality to womanhood and are almost always egalitarian and democratic in nature; they focus on a relaxed moral code and a comparatively liberated internal social system. Their rituals tolerate the new and unfamiliar and are open towards absorption. Rituals for the Dalits are extensions of nature and expression of social protests, seeking their solutions. Dalit spirituality promotes an imaginative, intuitive, mythic, cosmic and unifying world view.

Dalit Spirituality can thus be defined as a spirituality, independent of the main stream religions, having myths, symbols and belief systems of its own, focusing on nature, humans and the relationship between the two founded on the principle of co-existence. The gods are more human in nature, with man creating the god image and the rituals expressing the psyche of the community. Women enjoy a central position in it, with minimized sex difference and powerful women images. It is tolerant, open to influence and above all, flexible to adapt to any other established spiritualities, for the greater cause of liberation of the community from the clutches of oppression.

renovation of the shrine of Thampuran was a collective venture, led by the women; the day when Thampuran arrived, Pathamudayam is a day of festivity for the people and any act of irreverence against the shrine or Thampuran was the collective concern of the community.

### **Appropriation of the Thampuran Myth**

Dalit spiritual icons have been appropriated over time, especially as part of Sanskritisation, thereby leaving the community bereft of their unifying factors. Moreover, they are brought under the Brahminical social structure, with an underprivileged status, negating their independent identity. This is a well-scripted, step by step process. In *Gift in Green* the Thampuran myth is being appropriated thus, by Kumaran, with the aim to commodify and market the very core of Aathi-Thampuran himself.

In the first chapter of the novel, an outsider, a man in black glasses, claims the Thampuran's land to be his and produces documents to prove the same. In chapter 9, Kumaran, an emerging entrepreneur, camouflaged as an advocate of development and well wisher of Aathi attempts to renovate the shrine. He, along with his friends, offers prayers by prostrating in front of the shrine, an unconventional non-Dalit ritual in Aathi. He presents to them his plan for the renovation, "a roof of gold, gold covered walls, steps veneered in gold, a gold lamp in the lamp hut" (51). By the seventeenth chapter, some of natives seem to accept Kumaran's renovation plan and despises the argument to have the shrine as a modest one.

The unexpected entry of a priest into the frame takes the process of Sanskritisation to a new level of blatant negation of the Dalit identity of Thampuran. The priest, "clad in white and carrying his gods in a bag" (107) enquires "Which Thampuran" is the presiding deity of the shrine, a question that shatters the Aathi spirituality into a system of multiple god images. The categorical dismissal of the Dalit spirituality by the priest as "Darkness is the deity here...the surest way to ruin the whole place," is ironical, as the new deity in fact brings about the ruin and not Thampuran. Chapter 17 works on this symbol of darkness and light, to denigrate the native spiritual icon and thereby the Dalit identity. Like a sales executive, the priest displays his gods and asks the people to choose a deity that they like. The youth is divided under the leadership of Ambu and Ponmani, for and against the new deity, respectively, leading to a conflict. Thampuran myth, which was a uniting force, has lost its unifying power and things begin to fall apart. Karnavar disperses the crowd and settles the matter temporarily. His voice acts as the residue of the voice of tradition that still lingered. However, the next morning the shrine of Thampuran is seen demolished and Karnavar collapses and dies.

The ensuing conversation between Dinakaran, the protagonist, and Ambu, an ardent follower of Kumaran, details about Kumaran's plan to develop the shrine into a world famous temple to attract religious tourists to Aathi. For that, Thampuran

seen as the final, desperate attempt of the Dalits to reclaim their spirituality and rituals. But the neo- Brahminical Ambu denies it saying profane things should not be brought into the temple or its premises, as it would pollute the presiding deity. Here again, we see a third major move by the women in upholding their tradition. Realizing that the thirst of Thampuram would be quenched only by re-establishing the agrarian, Dalit culture, they attempt to re-liven the fields, even when they knew it would yield nothing.

The novel thus ends with the futile efforts by the Dalit community to withstand the appropriation of its tradition, culture and spirituality, by the advocates of class upgradation, driven by the upper caste ideals. Women put up severe and bold resistance to this, in ways that were more radical than the traditional ways followed by men. The final and the most desperate attempt to reclaim the tradition and spirituality comes with the flooded river, re-creating the Thampuram myth, by bringing ashore the weak and bruised body of Dinakaran, wrapped in a mat. In his mother's lap he dies, leaving behind him the possibility of a renewed beginning, the creation of a new Dalit god.

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