
UNIT 2 ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEWS OF THE DALITS

Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Eschatology: Notional Clarification
- 2.3 Basis for Dalit Eschatology
- 2.4 Materialist Features of Dalit Eschatology
- 2.5 Earthly Abode of God/Goddess
- 2.6 Heavenly Bliss on Earth
- 2.7 Every-dayness as Religious Rituals
- 2.8 Productive Eschatology
- 2.9 Death and Transition
- 2.10 Let us Sum up
- 2.11 Key Words
- 2.12 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit explores into the religious understanding of the Dalits regarding the end of human life and the belief in the ancestors and life after death.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Eschatology is that branch of philosophy or theology which deals with metaphysics. It is about that stuff which comes after physical entities. This means that it deals not with physical stuff but with non-physical or spiritual stuff. It can be understood as after physical substance or beyond physical substance. Hence the branch of eschatology has its logic and meaning only in the acceptance of the spiritual matters that is understood as life or reality existing after the death of the physical entity.

2.2 ESCHATOLOGY: NOTIONAL CLARIFICATION

Eschatology is derived from the Greek word, *eschatos/eschate/eschaton* meaning “last” and “logy” meaning “the study of”. This is first used in English around 1550. It is part of theology, philosophy and futurology. It is concerned with what are believed to be the final events in history, the ultimate destiny of humanity. It is concerned with the four last things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. In mystical phraseology it refers metaphorically to the end of ordinary reality and reunion with the Divine. In the common parlance and understanding, transition from one age to another is often the subject of eschatological discussion. So, instead of “the end of the world” we may speak of “the end of the age” and be referring to the end of “life as we know it” and the beginning of a new reality.

Indeed, most apocalyptic literature do not deal with the “end of time” but rather with the end of a certain period of time, the end of life as it is now, and the beginning of a new period of time. It is usually a crisis that brings an end to current reality and ushers in a new way of living / thinking / being. This crisis may take the form of the intervention of a deity in history, a war, a change in the environment or the reaching of a new level of consciousness. If a better world results, we say it is “utopian”. If a worse, it is “dystopian.” Eschatologies vary as to their degree of optimism or pessimism about the future (indeed, the same future may be utopian for some and dystopic for others - “heaven and hell” for example). Most modern eschatology and apocalypticism, both religious and secular, involves the violent disruption or destruction of the world, whereas Christian and Jewish eschatologies view the end times as the consummation or perfection of God’s creation of the world. For example, according to ancient Hebrew belief, life takes a linear (and not cyclical) path; the world began with God and is constantly headed toward God’s final goal for creation.

2.3 BASIS FOR DALIT ESCHATOLOGY

Egalitarian community

Dalits are those people who have been differentiated and discriminated by the caste system which, was introduced by the Aryans who invaded India in the third millennium BC. When the Aryans invaded India, they did not come as *tabularasa*, i.e. without any religious and philosophical background. They came with their own religious system and philosophical purports which were squarely opposed to the philosophical thoughts of the people who were originally living in the sub-continent. The belief system which originated in the land among its people was basically egalitarian, communitarian and this worldly which also reflected their lifestyle. The people who came to occupy the land found that theirs was very different from that of the original thought pattern here. As a result, the invaders tried to impose their religious faith and social system upon the people and divide the society into high and low so as to profit by that social system. This meant the enslavement of the local people for the menial works for the invaders. The otherwise egalitarian local communities who opposed the invaders’ faith and belief system are the people who are today called the Dalits. They never accepted their religion, their philosophy and their social arrangement. Though most of the philosophical thoughts that the original people of the land owned were destroyed purposely by the Aryan colonizers, there are evidence of those philosophical treatises in some form or other very scantily and sparsely. The people who owned that philosophical system and opposed the other system to come into their life are the Dalits who have been co-opted into many religious, philosophical orientations today.

This-worldly Assertion

Dalit eschatology is the combination and even the summation of many philosophical and theological renderings which came into existence at different times as a revolt to brahminic and late on hindu philosophical and religious teachings about life after death, spirituality, prayer and many other social teachings in the name of religion and philosophy. Of the system that was prevailing among the local people who lived in this country before the Aryan colonization, Carvaka philosophy is said to be the most ancient school of thought. Certain Brihaspati is said to be the author of Carvaka philosophy. According to Carvaka Philosophy, “there is no God, no heaven, no hell; there is no such thing called atman. One does not and cannot perceive the atman, and one cannot establish its existence with help of inference, because inference is not a valid source of knowledge.

Matter is real

The Carvakas state that consciousness is not due to the atman. When a man/woman dies, his/her consciousness goes away and one cannot prove that it vanishes and exists somewhere else. Being conscious is a peculiar quality of the living human body. It can keep back the consciousness so long as the physical parts are healthy and stay together in a certain form. Consciousness thus is an emergent quality of the physical parts coming together in specific proportions. For example, when yeast is blended with certain juices, they turn into wine. Therefore according to Carvaka metaphysics, life also is only a new configuration of matter. Nothing but matter is real. Therefore, the atman or self-awareness is only the physical body with a new emerging quality.

There is no spirit

The Carvaka metaphysics speak of the mind (*manas*), which is different from the atman. But the Carvakas appear to think of mind as the consciousness in its knowing function, which of course is not separate from the body. The body together with its consciousness is the atman and consciousness in its experiencing function is the mind. Mind knows the external world through the senses. According to the Carvaka metaphysics, it does not consist of five elements. Earth, water, fire, air, and ether are the usual five elements corresponding to the qualities smell, taste, colour, touch and sound, and also corresponding to the five sense organs, nose, tongue, eye, touch and ear. Excepting ether, the first four elements are perceivable elements that are perceivable are real; elements that are inferable are not real according to Carvakas as inference is not a valid source of knowledge. Hence the Carvakas deny the reality of ether. The other four elements make up the world. They consist of tiny particles. The particles accepted by the Carvakas are visible particles; they could not accept the reality of anything that could not be comprehended with the senses.

There is no external cause

Carvaka metaphysics are of the faith that there is no external cause for the four elements coming together and obtaining the qualities of life and consciousness. It is their inherent quality to come together and to have those qualities. However, one cannot generalize on this process and establish a law that, whenever these four elements come together in certain ratio, life and consciousness will emerge. The elements may alter their nature anytime. One cannot, therefore, say that Nature comprises some eternal laws. Every event is a probability, and if it develops into something, then it develops according to its own peculiar nature.

Indian Materialism

Though Indian Materialism is as old as the Vedas, or even earlier to Vedas, they became very prominent and pronounced during the time of the Vedas as the Vedic philosophy came as a blow to the life and beliefs of the people. The first thing is that the Vedic gods were thirsty after power, prominence, food, money and everything that the world craves for. And secondly, they had innumerable gods and goddesses for whom the Vedic priests were doing oblations throughout the year and demanded food, money, drinks, and other material goods which ultimately went into the bellies of the priests. For example, Rig Vedic gods were treated like human beings and bribed with good food and drinks, through sacrificial oblations. That is where the Materialists, also known as sceptics who asked, which gods should we propitiate with oblations? (*kasmai devaya havisha vidhema?*), implying thereby there are innumerable gods that they cause confusion.

Another dimension of the fury of the people was that the Vedic priests started bantering mantras and slogans which nobody understood, sometime even the priests themselves who recite them as we see even today. Hence the recitation of *mantras* to Vedic gods was compared to croaking of frogs in *Manduka sukta*. As a result, the Lokayatas were accused of jugglery of words (*vitandavada*), and not highly respected because they challenged the authority of Vedas and connected rituals. In fact, Charvak though a sage, is referred to as a demon. Thus, those who denied the authority of the Vedas were dubbed as “heretics”. Others who took the view that nothing really existed except thought and that reality was only a void were described as “Nihilists”.

Naturalism

As happened in ancient Greece, so in India also the human intellect tried to probe and understand nature. It gave birth to philosophy. Since the attempt was to understand and explain natural phenomena, philosophical thought was materialism. So philosophy in India started as materialism. It was called *Swabhava vada* (naturalism). The *Vedas* and early *Upanishads* refer to *Swabhava vada* and its concepts. The latter rejected the Gods of natural religion and the dominance of the priests, which were the products of the Vedas. For them, perception could be the sole source of knowledge. It must be, however, clarified that the references to *Swabhava vada* and its doctrines censured the *Vedas*, and the early *Upanishads* were made only for the purpose of refuting them. It is ironical that while refutations are available, the doctrines which were refuted have disappeared. The cause for such disappearance can be easily deduced.

2.4 MATERIALIST FEATURES OF DALIT ESCHATOLOGY

Today one can argue that there cannot be, strictly speaking, dalit eschatology since there is nothing called Dalit religion or also argue that Dalits are spread out into all religions like Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and many more. What we need to derive as Dalit eschatology is the original revolt against the philosophical and theological systems that were imposed upon them. From this background, today Hinduism, Christianity, Islam can be classified as anti-Dalit and their eschatology is against the nature of Dalit eschatology. On the other hand, what system (Materialism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) opposed the onslaught of Dalit way of life and world view can be classified as the essence of Dalit Eschatology. From that point of view, we need to see the important purports of these schools and their understanding on eschatology. It is a system of philosophy that considers only facts established by the nature of the matter. It believes in the physical world. It attaches prime importance to the individual and his comforts. It denies existence of god and supernaturalism. Kamat Jyotsna scanning through different anti-brahminic and philosophical sources like Carvaka philosophy, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other forms of Naturalism, arrives at the following areas which could be paraphrased as Dalit eschatology.

God is non-existent: According to Carvaka, there is no God who is said to have created the universe. The universe came to be by natural phenomenon and it has been there from time immemorial. Hence there is no God who is the cause of the universe.

There is no pre-existence or after-life: Since there is no primal cause for the existing world and all that is in it, there is also no pre-existence of life and also there is no after-life. This two imply that there is a primal cause or the prime mover of the universe. Since that has been rejected by the materialists, they also

don't believe in the life before and life after.

There is no such thing as salvation (moksha); death itself is salvation:

Life of individuals comes to an end once they die. Everything starts with this world and ends in this world itself. Hence there is no question of salvation or bondage. Everything happens right on this earth. As such, death is the cessation of all activities, animated or imagined. Everything stops with this world and with this life. There is no *moksha*/eternal bliss/heaven or *naraga*/eternal condemnation/hell.

Happiness is the main purpose of life: There is no purpose of living in this world other than living happily and meaningfully in this world. Meaningfulness (friendly, brotherly and leading just life) is the only happiness. And if that is present, there is no need for heaven or hell. Hence the human is called for to live a happy and meaningful life in this world and that is all.

The wise should seek happiness with productive work: Happiness comes through productive and meaningful life. Productivity is the art of living as it helps others also live in this world. People who are not productive but spend their time in chanting, officiating gods and goddesses have no real meaning to live in this world and they have no reason to live in this world. Hence the only reason and logic that we live in this world is for being useful to others. And this is possible only when one becomes productive and useful.

Pursuit of music, erotics, medicines etc., add comfort to life: We are called to live in this world not only meaningfully but also fully and happily. There are certain things like *music, erotics, medicines, etc.* offer good, happy and long life with a lot of enthusiasm to live and think fresh about every day. They bring a lot of enthusiasm, relaxation, and good will in and among the community members. Since the purpose of this life is to live happily and meaningfully, it is comfort and happiness that become the hallmark of human existence.

Distinction of class and caste are humbug: According to the materialists, caste and class are creation of small minded human beings. They have no place in the life of the people. In fact, there was no caste or class discrimination before the Aryans came. Hence it was not part of the Indian social structure and so they call it a big humbug. It is introduced to stratify the society.

The term "chastity for women" is rubbish : According to materialists, 'chastity for women' was introduced by the patriarchal Aryan society upon the egalitarian Indian society gradually after their tent in Indian soil. According to the materialists who represented the people of the land, men and women are alike as far as chastity is concerned. It is introduced to subjugate women and gradually subjugate also the locals.

These are the important tenets of Indian materialists who ruled the country before and even after the Aryans invaded India. In summary, they were the rulers; they ruled people based on the higher principles like quality of class, gender and ethnic origin, fraternity, community living and respect for elders and love for the younger ones. Dependents in the society were not only protected but also very much respected. They organized their life based on the here and now and lived by the dictum of 'be happy and make others happy'.

2.5 EARTHLY ABODE OF GOD/GODDESS

But today, from the way philosophy, theology and other forms of epistemology and metaphysics, we cannot stick to only those anti-brahminic traditions. We have

to take the life of Dalits as a whole from all religious and faith background and see what are the ideologies and principles that arrange their way of life and give meaning. Hence based on the above discussions and their life situation in the modern world, we can adduce the following as the essence of Dalit eschatology.

Dalit eschatology places importance to community life and community harmony than religion or divine intervention in human life. The good and the bad are not based on the religious dictum but on community. Dalits learn good and bad of life at quite an early stage. Each one of these practices is discussed in terms of its morality and immorality. But this morality and immorality is not based on a divine order or divine edict. It is discussed in terms of the harmony of the families.

Dalits do not have the consciousness of the other world: the divine and the spiritual which is trans-sensory. They have materiality and temporality rooted in historical and spatial continuum. There is a big difference in the eschatology of Dalits who are very much of the world and the caste people who are against the world. Brahmin children are not taught to go to the field, or to look after the cattle or crops, but is supposed to go to school at an early age. Dalit children learn the ultimate meaning and purpose of life in the fields and life generating activities while Hindu children learn them in the books and papers to impose upon others and delink their life with ultimate principles.

The concept of God is introduced for Dalit children in the form of the moon, the sun and other natural objects which have close linkage with their life and livelihood. As children grow up, they also get acquainted with local deities and ancestral figures like Pochamma, Polimeramma, Kattamaisama, Kaatamaraju, Polaraju and other deities as Kancha Ilaiah would say. Among the Dalits, there is no concept of a temple in a definite place or form. Goddesses and Gods live in all forms and in all shapes and in different places. These gods and goddesses don't have permanent places like temples, but make shift arrangement under a tree or at the end of the village.

Though Dalits believe in the existence of 'spirit', the *atma* (soul), it is the dead people who come back to re-live in our own surroundings in the form of ghosts if they have not been fed well while they were alive; but there is no *swarga* (heaven) and there is no *naraga* (hell). All the dead live together somewhere in the skies. The Dalit spirit in its essence is not a Hindu spirit because the Hindu patriarchal Gods do not exist among the Dalits. Dalits are less religious unlike the Hindus. For them even hell and heaven do not exist. Every day, earning the food for that day is at the heart of their life struggle. A day without food is hell and a day with food is heaven for them

Dalits do not have intermediaries between them and their gods and goddesses like between the people and Pochamma; there is no priest. In fact, there is no need of a priest at all in the worship of Dalit Gods and goddess. Dalits relate to gods and goddesses for day-to-day needs and deliverance like small pox or fever. They don't pray for *swarga* which is unreal for them but pray for deliverance from fever and small pox, etc. which are real in their life. In Brahmin wadas and families, narratives about heroes and heroines do not exist within a human context. This is because Brahmin life is alienated from the kind of socio-economic environment in which a real hero or heroine can be constructed.... Brahminical culture recognizes negative heroes and heroines. For e.g., Krishna who encourages one to kill one's own relatives is a hero. Arjuna who killed his relatives is a hero. In the Dalit world, there is a number of real-life situations from which ideal heroes and heroines emerge. Also their heroes and heroines are not negative in life, but

who do positive things. For ex, Pochamma and Mariamma became heroines, Kattamaisamma became heroine and Beerappa became hero, Madurai veeran became hero because they saved life from diseases, from hunger and so on.

2.6 HEAVENLY BLISS ON EARTH

The difference between man and woman, boy and a girl which one finds in a caste Hindu family as very rigid is not present in Dalit homeland. In the Hindu family the sex and age are two determining factors and measuring rods of the status within the family which is very much absent in the Dalit family. Dalits don't perform any ceremony to initiate boys into religion which aims at making the Hindu twice born, one in this world and the other in the next world. They have only one birth, even according to Hindu texts. As a result no Dalit performs the '*upanayana*'-wearing the sacred thread as a sign of becoming Hindu. Hence they don't have life after death, but only one life in this world. Dalits remain once-born. They are happy about it. For Dalits marriage is a worldly and human affair that performs the human functions of production and procreation. This is clear from a proverb that our people use very often. "Without the couple, how can there be a crop?" Power relations between men and women in Dalit families are not 'sacred' and therefore less manipulative. The divine stories do not structure them into an ideology that works on the human plane as male control over the female. To that extent there is a less complicated and less oppressive relationship between man and woman among the Dalits.

2.7 EVERY-DAYNESS AS RELIGIOUS RITUALS

Dalits are not used to reading the book, going to the temple, chanting prayers or doing the *sandhyavandana* (evening prayer). The Bhagavat Gita is said to be a Hindu religious text. But that book was not supposed to enter Dalit homes. Dalits don't have any religious text as their own and so have no boundaries either in accepting or rejecting gods and religions. Their gods and religions are very practical and convenient. Religious texts and sacred rituals are alien to Dalits. The stories of Rama and Krishna, poems from the Puranas, the names of the two epics called Ramayana and Mahabharata are not part of the religious world of Dalits. For them their fields, flock, sun, moon, darkness and light are more real and so more important than myths, legends and Puranas. Dalits rise from their beds and begin either to clear or cure the skins or prepare the leather for shoe-making. In the majority of cases, they then go to their master's fields to cut the crop or to bundle it up. In the rush of the day and in the midst of the scores of house and field works they do not have time to think about God or prayer. After that the women cook some sort of porridge or even rice with water, the food of the poor where even the one curry was as it is made in a Kurumaa or a Goudaa house does not exist. Hence they cook some liquid stuff to swallow. The woman must rush because they must reach the working point in the fields much before the dawn breaks. All Dalit men and women must do this. Their work never starts with a morning prayer or cold water bath. The *surya-vandana* (Morning Prayer) that the Hindu does never finds a place in their day's timetable. The very lifestyle does not provide the space for god, worship, morning and evening prayer, etc. For a Dalit woman cooking is a mundane activity, meant to feed the human body and keep it going. For a Hindu, God is center even in the kitchen. The notion of God and the notion of religion does not figure in the Dalit cooking. There is not the concept of *prasadam* (food offered to God) in the Dalit families.

2.8 PRODUCTIVE ESCHATOLOGY

In the Dalit communities, they have a philosophy in performing productive work which is distinctly different from the Hindu philosophy. It is a mundane, human philosophy. It does not belong to the 'other world' and 'other life', but deals with this world. Its everyday life belongs to the present *janma* (life). This philosophy is taught right from their childhood and it seeps into the making of life are expressed in one sentence which can be understood, not only by these communities but also by Brahmins and Banias. This is repeatedly expressed in our day today life as "unless the hand works the mouth cannot eat". Gita philosophy of life, "you have the right to work, but not to the fruits". It establishes an ideology which says that our masses, the Dalits must work, but they must not aspire to enjoy the fruits of the work. It is not detachment as it is often preached but deprivation and disparagement of the working class, the Dalits.

2.9 DEATH AND TRANSITION

The difference between the Hindu Brahminic death and Dalit death lies in the very concept of death itself. What is the Brahmin's notion of life and death? A Brahmin believes that life must be lived for the sake of death which will make him eternal. To live this way is to live a life that constantly thinks about death. Life in this universe must ensure a perennial life in the other world, that is, in heaven. The Gods that he/she propitiates, time and again are to provide two things. One, a happy life here on this earth, which in philosophical terms is a *kshanabhanguram* (a life that survives only a minute). At the same time, however, this short span on this earth must also be made to ensure a permanent life of privilege and pleasure. So, for a hindu, death is a transition from this *kshanabhanguram* to eternity. Death for a Dalit is end of everything. Hence he gives the best and most extravagant ceremony to bid goodbye to his/her beloved who departs this world. It is also a joyful occasion as death is the cessation of all pain from this world. Though the relatives will mourn the death, they know that all his/her pain and suffering stops with death and so feel happy and satisfied.

Today conversion to religion for a Dalit is a vehicle to social equality and mobility. They know that Brahmins and other Aryan communities climbed up in the social ladder using religion and religious philosophy as a vehicle. Hence today Dalits reject the religion which the Aryans used to subjugate them. Dalits reject that religion and feel free to convert to any other religion like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc. to climb up the social ladder. This again proves that they don't place much importance to religious teachings and its principles, but social dimension of religion as to which religion can socially and economically liberate them becomes their faith. Thus they don't find meaning which preaches life after death but does not ensure prosperity in this life. Hence they don't believe in the life after death. In Dalit philosophy of life, we find the absence of eschatological transition from life miserable here on earth to a blissful life after death.

We can boldly say that Dalit community is the only community in Indian context which keeps changing and ideologically growing while all other caste communities get frozen with some ideological trajectories. It is because this is the only community which has come out of the strict religious and ethical teachings that were imposed upon them. This is the community which basically feels that religion and moral codes and norms were basically to constrict the growth and realization of human potential in its full. While all other communities accepted them as good to a great extent, it is Dalit community which critically looks at it and evaluates from existential

point of view. That is the reason, it keeps on expanding its vision and mission ever more.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

Dalit eschatology in its original sense is an antithesis to eschatology itself. But it can be grouped under eschatology because, they do believe in certain principles which are life giving and ultimate in their life. Principles of equality, universal brotherhood and freedom of all irrespective of age, colour, sex, caste and other orientations are the dearly loved and cherished values in the Dalit community. These can be considered as Dalit eschatology which takes its inspiration not from the extra worldly life but very much in the here and now and which can bring meaning and happiness for all in the here and now. This is the core of Dalit eschatology.

2.11 KEY WORDS

Janma : life given to a living being

Swarga : Heavenly bliss

2.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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