
UNIT 1 DALIT BELIEF SYSTEMS AND RITUALS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to give a brief but comprehensive understanding of the complex reality of the belief systems and rituals of the Dalit religio-cultural world. It presents some initial glimpses into the world-views operative behind the cognitive axis (belief systems) and performative axis (ritual practices) in the Dalit world of religiosity, without claiming to be an exhaustive portrayal of the details. Further, it attempts at dwelling on the ways in which the 'Dalits' encounter their 'sacred' places, persons, and objects in the process of seeking to undo the negativities and experiences and reinforce the dreams of a new world better than that of the present one. By the end of this Unit one could be expected to acquire understanding in the following manner:

- To obtain a basic understanding of Dalits' religious world amidst conflicts
- To have some glimpses into their systems of belief
- To take stock of the Dalit images of the divine
- To journey with them with the memory of the order of orality
- To know the significance of sacrifices and rituals for communicating with the divine

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Dalit journey towards their new identities are often expressed through idioms of revolt against the domination and subordination. This expression marked by struggle and resistance pervades all dimensions of Dalit existence, including their religiosity. In order to break the hegemonic exclusion and degradation imposed on them, the

Dalits evolve strategies to organize themselves. At a moment of history, they may appear to embrace the belief systems and rituals of the dominant. Nevertheless, at another moment of history, they might set aside the same. Interestingly, the Dalit ways of opting for temporary or permanent inclusion or exclusion of the Great Traditions have the ultimate agenda of building a larger human community with a sense of egalitarianism. This is how Dalits tend to handle their own symbolic world with the spirit of an upsurge of self-assertion as against the elitist expectation of uncritical assimilation of their casteist values.

1.2 RELIGIOUS WORLD AMIDST CONFLICTS

The Dalit agenda for integral liberation does not merely attempt at mobilization for acquisition of resources and power. Along with the above, it predominantly addresses the question of basic identity as dignified co-humans with others both as individuals and a people. And hence, any Dalit discourse, mild or articulate, in the last analysis, seeks to project an inclusive ideology. In their on-going struggle for annihilating caste-system and gaining their human dignity, the Dalits are relentlessly optimistic in building a new human family in which there will be no trace of any discriminatory hierarchical consciousness.

With regard to the expression of self-identity and self-assertion of the Dalits, one cannot expect uniformity. The religio-cultural sensibilities of Dalits are not a package but a process of an acquired and constructed system of collective self-representation. They are communicated by means of multivalent symbols held together in a loosely organised pattern, which have emotional, ethical, communicative and resistive dimensions of the Dalits with other humans and the deities.

At the symbolic level, there is a wide spectrum of Dalit responses to their oppression with the process of Sanskritisation on one extreme and of an outright de-Hinduisation on the other. At the secular level, the great personality of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar seems to have captured the collective Dalit imagination as their liberative symbol especially in the recent past. And further, the native cultural expressions of Dalits like *Parayattam* (dance with drums), which has been associated only with funeral and hence dismissed as inauspicious by the elite in the casteist society, is now acclaimed by Dalits as the enthusing mode of celebration of life during their gatherings or festivals.

1.3 BELIEF SYSTEMS OF DALIT WORLD

The context which creates the consciousness is the socio-cultural location. It creates the meaning-generating symbolic world. Dalit location is a complex hybrid of intertextual worlds. They are comprised of textures interwoven with traditions oral, written, celluloid, and electronic. One could have some glimpses into them through the patterns of their spontaneous stories, linguistic expressions, body-language, ritual practices and aesthetic options. Their inner world, as a 'unified mix-up', is constantly in the making with multiple processes of interactions between identities imposed from outside and emerging from within. The constant interplay between intra-subjective and inter-subjective aspects of their life and between the explicit and implicit dimensions of their conflicting consciousness makes the interpretation of the Dalit religious expressions all the more a challenging task.

Before grappling with practices of belief systems and rituals of the Dalits, their experience of marginalization and assertion are presented as follows:

- segregation of the living locations and burial grounds

- step motherly treatment meted out to them regarding their dignified participation in public events, social activities, community worship, or governing institutions
- denial of equal rights in marriage or burial ceremonies and car procession of festivals
- indifference and even opposition towards promotion of vocations to dignified services at the civil level and sacred premises of the worshipping places
- continuing the tradition of endogamy perpetuating the caste systems

By and large, these regular patterns of elbowing out Dalits from the mainline society is taken for granted as the habitual cultural praxis by the caste-minded people with their socio-economic powers operative in their respective locations.

1.4 PROBLEM OF EVIL: DALIT PERSPECTIVE

As the victims of the shameful practice of untouchability, the Dalits are subjected to lots of suffering as indicated below.

- The damage of human dignity with arbitrary attribution of permanent pollution as untouchables due to the practice of caste hierarchy.
- The contradiction between being wanted as menial executives and unwanted as people with equal footing.
- The inner conflicts between the personal desire for equal placement with others and the impersonal duty of being reduced to be lesser humans in the socio-political ladders.
- Conflicting expressions of the explicit consciousness (immediate agenda of survival) and the implicit consciousness (sustaining passion for collective human identity).
- When the achieved status is ridiculed and camouflaged by attributed inferior status.
- When multiple forms of day-to-day socio-psychological and politico-physiological violence are trivialized by routinization, naturalization or even legitimization by the media, bureaucracy or judiciary.
- The vicious cycle of behaviour due to depression or self-hatred resulting in fear of alienation and punishment.
- Ever carrying the heavy burden of initiating the painful process of reconciliation, at least for the short-term political alliances, with the anti-Dalit forces which are just above in the social pyramid of caste hierarchy.
- When Dalit ethical sensibilities are thrown overboard as eccentric claims for any regional, national or international discourse.

While scanning through all these sources, we realize that these sufferings are not inflicted by the Dalits upon themselves. And hence the classical ways of approaching the problem of evil (suffering) cannot be adequate while dealing with Dalit suffering.

1.5 PRAGMATIC AND CONSTRUCTIVE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Religious energies possess the capacity to function as a counter-symbolic factory whereby subaltern communities like Dalits reject the hegemonic symbolic universe

of the dominant caste communities and construct one of their own. The act of constructing their own symbolic world-view in the face of severe domination becomes the basis of hope, not just for their resistance but, more importantly, for the working out of their own assertive power.

In response to the tyranny of the systematic and effective marginalization by the sacred tradition of the elite in the caste system, the Dalits create their pragmatic and constructive counter-symbols, in order to uphold the values of protection of life, production for livelihood and procreation of new life. These aspects of protection (drum, goddesses protecting the boundaries), production (the *Mulaippari*, *Pongal*, plough – as in Tamil Dalit tradition) and procreation (rituals related to puberty, child-birth, post-natal ceremonies) are passionately attended to even by the most wretched at least in a small scale in simple forms.

These primordial symbols signifying protection, production and procreation are still embedded in the substratum of Dalit consciousness irrespective of the osmosis of cultural elements shared with the dominant. For instance, in the realm of Dalit symbolic world “the drum” symbolizes the mediating and empowering presence of the divine. In spite of the process of denigration, defamation and vilification of the Dalit drum by the non-Dalits down the centuries, the very drum seems to be the foundational symbol of sustenance, nurture and empowerment of the Dalits. And the audible nature of the music of the drum is capable of piercing through the borderline of purity-pollution. While the caste elite could control the aspects of touch and sight by reducing the Dalits as untouchable and ‘unseeable,’ the audibility of the drum-beat cannot be controlled by them. And it is this audibility of the drumbeaters, that poses the challenge to those who live by *Sruti* (what is heard). Being deprived even of the possibility of hearing these sacred traditions being recited, the Dalits do create their own *Sruti* through their drum beat and continue to cheerfully dance to its tune even during the funeral processions.

Contemplative stillness and interior composure constitute the dominant knowledge system based on literacy, transcendentalism, other worldly powers, one-way traffic of the grace, revelation, *sabda pramana* etc. These may not be the mainline categories in Dalit celebration of life. Rather differential and disadvantaged historical memories of the collective Dalit consciousness will be the platform upon which their mythologies are constructed. What matters here, then, is insight rather than instruction, bodily site than ideational site, action than reflection.

Word-based concepts, texts or discourses may not occupy the matrix of Dalit festivities in which inter-subjective communication of meaning occurs. It occurs through the ‘performative language’ originated from the roots of ‘the whole being’ of the Dalits involving the personal autonomy, self-definition, and power operative in a full swing especially during the luminal elevation. Discursive aspects of language may not fit in here.

The particularity and elasticity of oral culture along with the native ritual components allows them to present themselves through maximum use of the available space (geographical, political or social) with energetic kinaesthetic gestures upon the bodily site during the festivals. In other words, it is the power discourse seeking to publicize the hidden or suppressed conflicts between the activated ‘popular authority’ and the existing traditional authority. It is done consciously or unconsciously by creating disorderliness vociferously manifest (through the power of ‘voice’) in view of self-empowerment. And Dalit festivities are predominantly oppositional in their expressions, and pro-active in promoting equality.

Check Your Progress I

NOTE: Use the space provided for your answer

1) How do we understand the 'Conflicting Consciousness' of the Dalits?

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2) Explain the relationship between the Dalit cultural context and their religiosity.

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1.6 RELIGIOUS WORLD IN DAILY LIFE

Dalit worship is at once iconic as well as 'a-iconic.' Though originally 'a-iconic,' they incorporated the iconic ethos into their cult, because of close proximity with the caste society coloured by the brahminic temple-centred outlook. That is why the depiction of the gods and goddesses in the worship places solely owned by the Dalit communities could be the unseasoned raw stones with no roof upon them or the well-made sculptures made out of mud or other cheap materials. The metallic icons with their exorbitant costs-productive and maintenance- may not suit to the slender budgets of the Dalit communities. The pouring out of costly materials like milk, honey, fruit-mixture (*panchamirtham* - Tamil) is not the standard practice prevalent among the Dalits

The decorations of the deities, both within the make-shift mini temples or in the car (*ther* – Tamil) are, by and large, of the natural (leaves and flowers) and inexpensive materials (plastic pieces or paper bits). Dazzling colours for these materials are preferably chosen for arresting the attention of the eyes.

By and large, the Dalit festivals are marked with noisy atmosphere. The movements of the divine cannot be dissociated from animated boisterous blare of noise. The absolute erupts into the universe as a roaring noise and the drumming rhythm rending the air with thunderous clamour. The legitimate pride and the hidden shame as well latently operative so far in the unconscious become ferociously revealed during such luminal experiences, obviously through the medium of human body. It is, as it were, the harmonious rhythm of the whole universe has been thrown out of gear on the verge of becoming an irretrievable disorder. It could be an amalgam of uncontrollable emotions like astonishment, disorientation, fright and inevitably desire too.

The duality experienced due to imposed social stigma (social death Vs human dignity) is sought to be resolved through the roars of such divine cries. On the plane of the religious rituals there may be an ambiguity whether they might emerge victorious or not. But these assertive cries of the divine roar become the soteriological vehicle insofar as they enable the eruption of the hope of a new life of equality as the dignified co-human with others.

Prophetic oracles construed as the enunciation of God's will through the medium of possessed humans is a celebrated aspect of Dalit religio-cultural world. Such oracles (*kuri sollurathu* or *saamiaattam*) are actively found for authoritatively addressing the situation of personal deprivation or societal need. Prophetic defiance of the imposed order of the rulers is the endearing theme attuned to the Dalit culture of disobedience to caste norms. When the elite, be it from within or outside of the Jewish world, is admonished in the prophetic texts for the excesses committed against the disempowered, the Dalit self-assertion is reinvigorated. When oracles of consolations are addressed they regain their composure in order to encounter the inimical world with confidence and courage.

Dalit religiosity has to be traced to their folk religious practices. Their religions are naturalistic, spontaneously materialistic and they are non-institutionalised. They are the symbolic treasure houses of the sufferings and joys of those people. They are the wailing walls of the people as well as the gorilla-war pits of the people. They are the local utopias of the people.

When Dalits encounter the apocalyptic narratives of direct divine intervention of God to protect the good and punish the evil, they are quite much enthused to vibrate with them. The only way-out for the hapless disempowered from the multiple forms of repression by the ruling elite is through the apocalyptic irruption. Abounding in rich symbolism, the wounded psyche of the victims seek to subvert or reject the existing order imposed on them while continuing to project and dream an alternative order in its place. The mega colonial or caste powers would be opposed by the powerless even within the limited political space. In other words, the apocalyptic visions are the weapons of the weak against the dominant forces.

Check Your Progress II

NOTE: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What are the differences between the religious world of Dalits and the dominant classical traditions?

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- 2) Spell out the relationship between Dalit powers and religious symbols.

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1.7 IMAGING THE DIVINE

The native Dalit religiosity, by and large, revolves around the down-to-earth deities. They could be broadly classified under the categories following categories: Mother Goddesses, Memory Stones for the Martyred leaders, Memory of the Dead among the Kinsfolk.

The leisurely class of people alienated from the culture of daily manual work tend to construct their religious culture with the heavenly myths as the epicentre. The nomadic people may not have the agrarian sensibilities as part of their religious universe. But the Dalits, by and large, though reduced to be landless migrants, are closely attuned to the religio-cultural sensibilities of the agrarian culture. Their experience of divinity could be characterized as the agrarian pluralism of deities from the anthropological roots. These deities emerge from the humans as a continuum. When immanent here-and-now is the hall-mark of Dalit deities, the transcendental otherness is the overriding trait of those who are not in direct touch with manual labour. The agricultural symbolism (the Earth-related world) marks Dalit worship; whereas the desert symbolism (the Heaven-related world) marks the worship of other people.

In the Dalit world, the mother goddesses play a vital and indispensable role in their battered human consciousness. But on the other hand, the feminine face of God in the organised religions practised by the caste-minded elite is either subjugated to the male gods or regrettably relegated. Even those organised religions celebrating the symbols of fertility and mother goddesses tend to undermine such symbols with the superiority of the male gods. The autonomy of the female goddesses free from the grip of the control of the male gods could be one of the major items in the Dalit religio-cultural world.

The image of the deity as belonging to the family (*kula dheivam*) or an ethnic group of people (*namma saami*) evokes positive response from Dalits. They are at home with the image of the Protector-God (*kaaval deivam*) and Powerful God with expression of wrath (*kaliyamman*). The god of mobility (temporary icon under the tree) is more endearing to them than the god of stability (permanent icon within Temple). While the former represents the on-going solidarity of the deity as living with them, the latter evokes in them the sense of alienation from such a deity already domesticated by the caste ideology.

Being attuned to down-to-earth spirituality built upon material concreteness of here and now, Dalits are at home with the anthropomorphism of God. This understanding is rather closely vibrant with divine-human continuum of the Dalit experience of God. Monotheistic import of the organised religions across the globe and especially of distant and transcendental of God may not be the essential component or the epicentre of the Dalit religious world. At the same time, Dalit world is not against the One and the Only Righteous God to arbitrate immediate justice to the last and the least of the humanity thrown to the periphery. There is a sense of repulsion with regard to stipulations related to purity and pollution of some of the religious traditions. There is an element of Dalit aversion towards elaborate ritual prescriptions for individual and collective worship. Long narratives with minute details and stories with dramatic turns of events attract the Dalit listener/ reader more effectively than the prolonged discourses with monotonous formulaic enumeration of codes or sayings.

The stories of promise-and-fulfilment in the discourses between the devotees and deities strike a concordant note with their perennial act of hopeful expectation of a promising future. When the religious stories portray the fulfillment of the humanly impossible things in the far or near future by God's direct or indirect intervention, the hope-generating mechanism within the Dalit psyche and their collective consciousness is revived with new enthusiasm. The fulfillment quotations, nostalgic reminiscences of the past victory or the painful memory of any defeat or triumph in any religio-cultural stories create a sense of solidarity when the Dalits encounter them. As a people deprived of land ownership, Dalits actively vibrate with the

themes and religious narratives related to the acquisition of land. The figurative language of prophetic poets and the parabolic and anecdotal modes of religious stories forcefully rivet their attention. That is why, many stories eyed through the lens of the Dalits come out with new perspectives different from the traditional ones.

1.8 ACCESS THROUGH MEMORY, SACRIFICES AND RITUALS

Many of the Dalits who had been murdered while protecting the village or for defying imposed casteist norms have been eventually deified (*kolayil udita deivangal*). They are represented through the symbols of formless stones, sandy mounds, tree or metal spear or statues. Such symbols are made of easily available materials mud, limestone, mortar, cement etc. By and large, these statues holding the rustic weapons are portrayed with the energetic postures and brisk expressions of wrath. Tranquil postures in deep contemplation or slumber are not part of the mainstream deities of Dalits.

The respect paid to the dead is quite profound in the Dalit world. The food consumed or the materials used by the dead ones are specially offered to the dead ones on their graveyard. Interestingly each event of remembering the dead is marked with the collective meal in memory of them. Memory and meal are the inseparables from the Dalit world. The aspect of collectively shared meal is the hallmark of the practices of animal sacrifice. The communitarian meal in memory of the dead who was killed as the martyr for having had the fellowship meal with the so-called polluted ones is also in tune with the Dalit sensibility.

The following are some of the notable features in the worship patterns of the Dalits: offering of the replica symbols (of the members of the body) made of some costly or cheap metals tonsuring of the head, moving towards the sacred spots on knees, walking with burning candles or oil lamps in deep devotion, offer of coconut sapling, sacrificing goats whose thigh portion is offered to the deity or priests, and other portions for feeding a large number of people, offer of brooms for acquiring protection from the onslaught of epidemics, carrying bow shaped burden on the shoulders (*kavadi*), carrying milk containers on the head (*palkudam*), piercing of the tongue with sharp lance (*alagu*), pulling the sacred cart by hooks pierced into the skin of pilgrims (*padukalam*), the walking pilgrimage undertaken on sacred months (*padayatra*), and carrying on the head the small baggage of materials required for the rituals at the shrine.

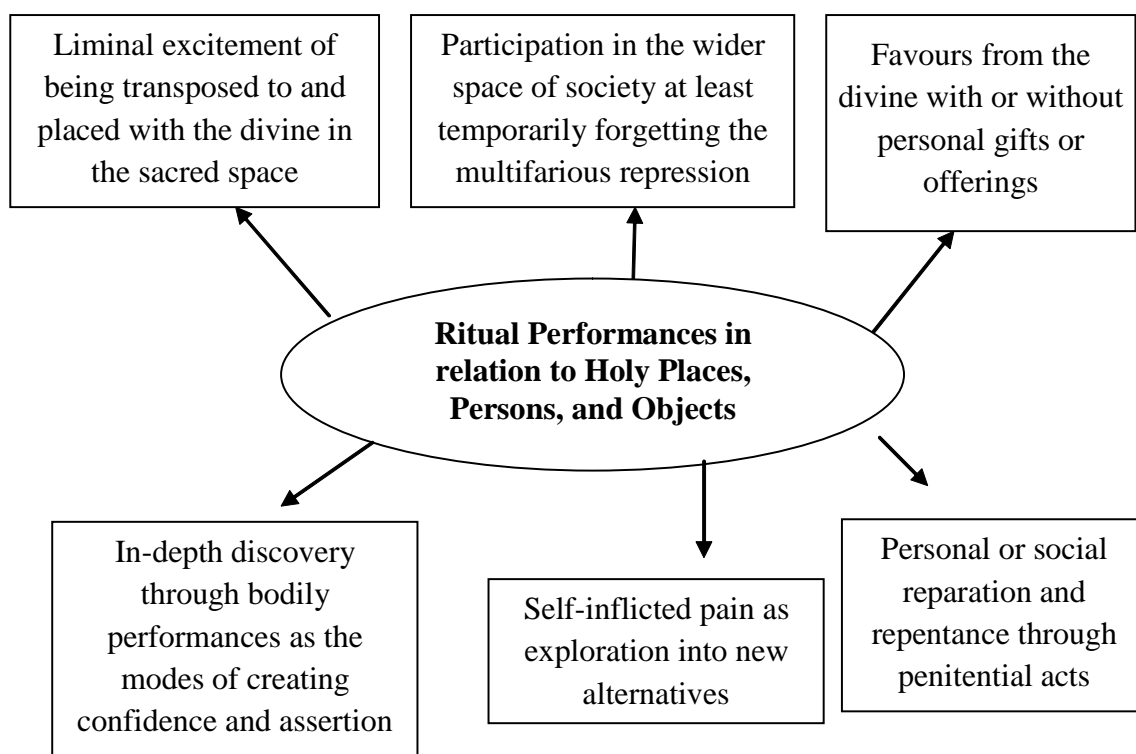
Dalit world counts the animal sacrifice to their gods as religiously significant. In the sacrificial context, the blood itself is a symbol of fertility and multiplication that the people anticipate and cherish in their life. The sacrificial blood mediates the people with their deities. It is a covenant and a performed agreement between the people and the deities. By performing a sacrifice, the people compel the deities to pledge welfare for them. The functions of sacrificial blood are multifarious as contracting covenant, atonement, expiation, reconciliation between parties involved. Both in the worlds of Dalits and the Bible, the body of the sacrificial victim divested of its blood are shared as a communitarian meal. Though burnt offerings were accepted by the Israelites as well as elite Brahminic prescriptions (*yajna* in which animals, cereals, ghee or sarees are sacrificed in fire), they are rejected by Dalits as the unproductive desecration and unpardonable wastage.

The expectations from, perceptions on and interior movements during the pilgrimages of the Dalits to the shrines are quite complex with the constant interplay

of multiple variables seem to be the admixture of the following aspects as indicated below:

- endearment to the divine
- persuading the divine for certain favours
- act of fulfilment of the promise made to the divine
- fear of possible divine wrath for not fulfilling the same promise
- addiction to tradition
- participation in a social event
- thrill of undertaking a spiritual journey
- joining the world of people at large away from the local situation of oppression
- escape into a different world which creates a temporary anonymity for hiding the existing situation of anguish
- outlet for bent up, unresolved and accumulated emotional baggage
- substitute to fill in the inner vacuum created by imposed humiliation or disappointment
- acquisition of a sense of equality with other pilgrims irrespective of their case or status
- new status symbol by aping the spiritual practices of the dominant caste
- assertion in terms of following their own religious practices different from or independent of those religious practices of the dominant
- weapon for instilling fear of their own divine in the minds of the oppressors
- expressive ways of tackling imposed inferiority or low self-image through the means of rigorous penance or easy-going practices
- scrupulous moralistic outlook
- reprioritising ethical choices
- stepping up the dignity of the self and family
- disciplining oneself from drinking, smoking, or extra marital affairs
- breaking the code of conduct expected of the pilgrims either deliberately or inadvertently
- entertainment with an all-out abandon with individual inebriation or community celebration with overeating and drinking
- excessive bodily expressions with colourful costumes, high decibels with noisy duels with emotional outbursts
- punishing both the body and the inner world
- deterrent to evil tendencies and sins
- prevention of committing a pattern of sins
- purification and exploration
- exemplary acts for the edification of others
- corrective measure towards rehabilitation
- restoration back to mainstream of society

Shrines and pilgrimages evoke the inner world of imagination of the Dalits as sites of religious aesthetics. Mere propositions on aesthetic objects or acts especially in the religious realm do not evoke active and activated response especially from them. But performances in the body evoke a lot in terms of chain of further acts. For the body or mind to be in a position of eliciting an effect, power, or capability from any other sources (venerable object, sacred place, holy person), it must manifest itself in a particular concrete way, which then becomes the triggering point or moment. This can only be done through the appropriate aesthetic performance. It is not what the object 'says' or 'expresses' by itself is the key issue here. But what it does and what forms of action and social relations the object elicits is significant here. And hence from the point of view of aesthetic fulfilment in the religious realm, we could identify some of the internal factors which seem to determine the various levels of contentment among the Dalits. They are indicated in the illustration below:



The above aspects, though not exhaustive, seem to be at play when the Dalits perform their rituals in relation to the holy places, persons, and objects. One cannot lose sight of the vital aspect of the interior processing of the negativities and deprivations experienced in their day-to-day life in the religio-cultural representations. Simultaneously the dreams and visions of the new possibilities of life better than the existing one are also part of their prayers, articulate and inarticulate, addressed to their deities in the course of such ritual practices.

Through all these religio-cultural cognition and performance, Dalits are struggling to do away with the existing sad states of affairs in constructing a new world order ensuring personal dignity to be celebrated with all other humans as sisters and brothers.

Check Your Progress III

NOTE: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Comment on Dalit images of the divine.

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2) What are the affective and emotive aspects of Dalit rituals?

1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to offer some glimpses into the world of Dalit belief system and rituals. Dalit journey towards their new identities are often expressed through idioms of revolt against the domination and subordination. This expression marked by struggle and resistance pervades all dimensions of Dalit existence, including their religiosity. When the minority but dominant elite pontificate themselves as associated with the holy living cow, the Dalits are indiscriminately associated with the dead polluting cow. The awareness about the 'contradictory consciousness' of the Dalits alerts us to be rather less enthusiastic in conceptually understanding reality as the infra-structure (economy and power) above which the superstructure (culture and religion) is built. In spite of the fact that the religion could be also the ideological construct hiding the exploitative nature of the structures, the dimension of the agency of the Dalits in the realm of religion-making cannot be ignored.

1.10 KEY WORDS

CONFLICT CONSCIOUSNESS: an implicit and dormant dalit consciousness that unites them with other co-dalits in the practical transformation of the real world.

DALIT RELIGIOSITY : the act of constructing their own symbolic world-view on the basis of hope.

AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF DALIT RITUALS : Luminal excitement of being transposed to & placed with the divine in the sacred, in-depth discovery through bodily performances as the modes of creating confidence and assertion.

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