Caste and the Conundrum of Religion and Development in India

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Introduction: religion and development; religion in development; development as religion.

While ‘religion and development’ has gained momentum as a field of enquiry, it has in its slipstream generated critical reactions. Anthropologists (and by now development practitioners too) are accustomed to doubts about the meaning of ‘development,’ which has to some extent transitioned from a category of analysis to a category of practice (Mosse 2013), allowing for more varied and contingent understandings. The pairing of development with ‘religion’ raises in turn questions about the latter category: what is it that is taken as ‘religion’ and what assumptions underpin the use of this category in conjunction with development? Is juxtaposing religion and development a means to ‘render secular’ in a way that conceals the religion in development – perhaps its unexamined assumptions, values, dogma or rituals (Fountain 2013); or does it strip political economy out of religion?

Fountain’s (2013) argument is that nominating religion underpins ‘de-religionised’ development as a value-free project of modernisation, or the expansion of consumer capitalism and liberal democracy. This might be regarded as a parallel to earlier debates on the discovery of ‘the social’ — notably by World Bank experts as ‘social capital’ (Fine 2002, Harriss 2001) — as a means by which the relational dimension of development excluded from economically conceived frameworks was returned and repackaged in appropriate form — that is, as a variable or a class of asset endowment (social capital) whose returns on well-being could be measured and aggregated so as to influence investment decisions (Grootaert et al. 2003: 21). ‘Culture’ and development provides another case where anthropologists were commissioned to elucidate the excluded ‘cultural factors’ or to interpret development failure (or success) in terms of local culture and in doing so ‘provide[s] an invaluable service to the self-staging of development cooperation’ (Rottenburg 2012: 73) as a politically neutral technical affair. Do the debates on ‘religion and development’ likewise make religion available for instrumental packaging as the ‘missing element’ (faith, trust, values, commitment…) now supplied by self-defined Faith-Based

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1 The research for this chapter was undertaken with support from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant ‘Caste out of Development: civil society activism and transnational advocacy on Dalit rights and development’ (RES-062-23-2227).
Organisations (FBOs)? Such an idea certainly lies behind the complaint that the ‘religion and development’ agenda is normative and instrumental in its approach, that it is agency-driven, and involves a narrow or overly institutional notion of religion, focused on ‘faith agencies’ (mostly Christian) as well as enclosing a Christian conception of religion as a matter of belief (Jones and Petersen 2011).

A counterpart to religion and development, is writing on religion in development, or development as religion (Salemink et al. 2004) that pays attention to matters occluded by the planners tendency to, as Tania Li (2005) puts it, engage in a ‘rendering technical’ of social life and development encounters. There are several different kinds of argument here. One set focuses on the orthodoxies and ritualized practices of development agencies themselves, the work of paradigm maintenance of the kind that, for example, led a critic to compare the institutional infallibility of the World Bank’s neoliberal policy to that of the Vatican (Goldman [2000] citing Robert Wade (see also Harper’s [1996] account on the knowledge practices of the IMF). A second set looks at the roles and representations of development actors, their ritual practices and “ceremonial facades” (Stirrat 2008, Mosse 2005, Rottenburg 2009: 70). A third approach regards the aspirations and self-transformations solicited by development as standing in continuity with goals and intentions of action understood as religious. A link between economic progress and moral-spiritual improvement has often been used to point to the rootedness of certain development programming in Christian missionary work (e.g., Pandian 2008, 2009, Viswanath 2014a in the south India context to which I will shortly turn). But of course development as ‘an incitement to work upon oneself ‘ (Pandian 2008: 162) need not be Christian only, nor need it originate with programmers themselves. When Adivasi (tribal) villagers in western India adopted the new technology and the discipline of savings and credit brought to them as part of a British aid project (with which I worked in the 1990s), and responded to the new knowledge and modern lifestyles modelled for them by its well-dressed, educated and prospering NGO workers (ironically declaring the value of local knowledge and people's participation), they did so by connecting changes brought by the development project to a well-established tradition of socio-religious reform and self-improvement. The call to change was mediated by visitations from the goddess (Devi) insisting on new dress, hygiene, diet, modes of religiosity and especially the renunciation of alcohol (daru) a Brahmanic virtue and idiom of progress and modernity. Such reform was also the way in which members of a marginalised and exploited group (the Bhil Adivasis) tried to renegotiate their relationship with, and the terms of recognition by, dominant sections of society (see Mosse 2005, 2011). As a project of moral self-making, development then involves forms of cultural self-critique (here a kind of ‘detribalisation’) and puts in place new scales of social differentiation, distinction and inferiorisation (see Pigg 1992, 1996). The point is
that the negotiation of development (or modernity) manifest in all manner of knowledge, technology or performances, often takes place through discourses which we in the West perceive as ‘religious’.

There is a notion here that religious change accompanies forms of socio-economic transformation, or, in short, that development changes religion. This idea is at the centre of a tradition of scholarship on the spread of the world religions (or various reformist movements within them) preconditioned by changes in the social and economic sphere including integration into state systems or wider markets (e.g., Horton 1971 on the rationality of African conversion). Moreover, it is the power of modernising development through its hold on the ‘discursive imaginary’ (Escobar 2012: xii–xiii) to shape expectations, dreams and aspirations — and in consequence of its imposed goals and values, to render people ‘poor’ or ‘under-developed,’ to foster cultural self-denigration or identify people’s own nature as a problem (Pandian 2008: 159) — that is at the heart of the postmodern critique of development (e.g., Escobar 2012).

Such critique however reintroduces an unhelpful opposition between development and indigenous cultural life, or draws crude parallels between developers and colonial agents or missionaries. More sophisticated treatments would see development, like Christian religious conversion, as taking place through existing categories, which it then transforms (cf. Robbins 2004). This is something John Peel explains in relation to the Yoruba concept qlaju (‘enlightenment’) -- a particular system of metaphors and ideas about knowledge in relation to power, which he shows progressively becoming linked to Western education and its place in Nigerian social policy (Peel 1978). Pandian’s (2008) account of how ideologies of Tamil uzhaiippu (‘toil’) shift from suffering to self-advancement in a development-influenced context provides an parallel example. Articulating indigenous or local concerns in the language of development is also a strategic means to engage with the state in postcolonial societies, as David Gow (2008) explains in relation to Nasa Indians (in post-earthquake resettlements in Colombia) who institutionalize their shamanic knowledge as "indigenous education development" as a means to rework national development simultaneously entering the dominant society and protecting their own.

Suffice it to say from these examples that it is clear that there is much traffic across the constructed categories of ‘religion’ and ‘development’ precisely because social life is not arranged according to this binary divide. My purpose in the rest of this chapter is not further to explore this fact but rather, from the other point of view, to ask how is it that the division between religion and development (or economy or politics) acquires significance, and how institutions of various kinds — missionary, colonial and postcolonial state, NGO, activist — have at different
historical moments invested in these categorical distinctions in their approach to especially vulnerable people; and with what consequences?

To address this question I will focus on the case of Dalits, that is members of inferiorised caste groups historically subordinated as 'untouchables', who comprise some 16-18% of the population in India and remain among the most impoverished and excluded groups. The condition of Dalits has been part of the social policy of the state, missionaries and churches, activists, NGOs and other international organisations; and this social policy has invariably worked in distinctions between religion and development (and analogously caste/class, ritual/economic, status/power, church/state) in ways that has an enduring impact on the life chances of Dalits themselves.

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

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

Since, as I will explain, significant numbers of Dalits are Christian converts, part of this discussion will concern Christianity and development; but not in the expected way. I will not, for example, focus on the inspiration of Christian missionaries or activists, NGO leaders and animators, international supporters and solidarity groups, or their relation to Christian ethical traditions, or the notions of liberation, suffering and freedom involved; nor on the leaders and role models, nor even the place of meditative prayer and reflection in the life of development workers. This is not to say that such factors are unimportant or to be discounted in development practice and outcomes – far from it. But my interest here is not in faith *per se*, but the societal
conditions under which interventions and responses to them come to be defined as ‘religious,’ or how religion and religious identities become part of the political system within which development policy is framed and resources allocated.

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

**Spiritualising poverty: Protestant missionaries and caste**

One of the most striking events of the late-19th and early 20th century south India was the mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity. From the last quarter of the 19th century, for reasons still poorly understood, Christian missionaries of all denominations were astonished to find that the groups they called Pariahs, whom they had mostly overlooked in favour of the sections of society thought to be more influential, began to convert en mass to Christian missions regardless of doctrinal differences. In consequence, the majority of Christians in India today are Dalit. We cannot be sure, but it is likely that conversion here was less a matter of signing up to a new belief or an alternative description of reality, than of new allegiance and commitment that might make a difference to a desperate situation. As Terry Eagleton (2009) says of faith more generally, conversion was performative rather than propositional (Mosse 2012: 54). Protestant Missionaries intervened as allies of people they regarded as subject to ‘slavery’ in ways that had economic effects –freedom from debt bondage, the acquisition of titles to house-sites, or resettlement on agricultural wasteland (Viswanath 2010). However, to avoid the criticism that their converts were insincere materially-driven ‘rice Christians,’ missionaries were constrained to represent this political-economic change as spiritual transformation; and Dalits as oppressed by a Hindu religious system and in need of salvation from ‘spiritual slavery’ (Viswanath 2008, 2010). Precisely because for their Dalit converts the misery of the body and the misery of the spirit were

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2 For the extensive literature on this see bibliographies in Frykenberg 2008 and Webster 1992.
not separate, for the missionaries this separation became crucial, and caste and untouchability entered policy debate and colonial policymaking as Hindu institution and practice. Understood as spiritual servitude, caste was to be challenged by altering mental attitudes. It could be said that missionaries did not seek fundamental change in the structure of an agrarian system, but ‘transformation [of] the attitudes and habits of Pariahs themselves’ (Viswanath 2014a: 4), stripping out the ‘Hindu excrescence’ of caste to leave unchanged a ‘rational core’ of class (Viswanath 2010: 145).

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

Viswanath traces a parallel ‘conceptual apartheid’ (2014a:6) bifurcating the religious and the political-economic — caste and class— in the British colonial state’s Labour Department and labour policy, especially under the influence of (upper-caste) native politicians. This brought about an artefactual distinction between policy on labour, on the one hand, and policy on the ‘Depressed Classes’ (the Dalits), on the other; a separation that, Viswanath explains, led to diminishment of the colonial and postcolonial capacity to address the reality of Dalit poverty. Like those of the missionaries, measures of state welfare for Dalits, emphasised thrift, temperance and self-control, and involved a discourse of moral and economic change focussed on domestic transformation and the family as the source of mobility — celebrating the thrift and self-sacrifice of Dalit women while making irresponsible alcoholic Dalit men the villains — entirely ignoring caste subordination as a structure of antagonistic agrarian relations (2014a: 14).

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

**Making religion the field of contest: Catholic Church and colonial state**

I will return to the implications for colonial and later postcolonial state social policy of the Protestant missionary view of caste as religious; but I want first to explain the Roman Catholic missionaries’ equally significant but very different way of dividing the social world into the ‘religious’ and the ‘political-economic’ and its significance for shaping the field of struggle for resources and respect among Dalit communities.

300 years before the Dalit conversion movements through which Protestants ‘spiritualised’ caste, Jesuit missionaries (in early 1600s) initiated an opposite project to *secularise* caste as a civil and political institution. Negotiating their presence with rulers and religious elites (the Brahmans) away from colonial power, Jesuits required a means to ‘accommodate’ Christianity to an existing social order, since otherwise their faith was vilified as the religion of the Parangi foreigner or the Pariah untouchable. This required allowing the retention of caste among converts, which in turn necessitated a clear separation of the ‘idolatrous’ (to be rejected) and the ‘civil’ (to be tolerated).\(^4\) While Protestants would later find in caste ‘distinctions [that] are unquestionably religious distinctions, originating in, and maintained by, the operation of Hindu idolatry,’\(^5\) Jesuits found a civil order. While for Protestants spiritual release from the grip of caste was essential, for Jesuits caste was (until the late-20\(^{th}\) century) irrelevant to eternal salvation. The Jesuit approach produced Christian communities embedded in the relational world of caste with all its hierarchy and exclusion. What the Roman Church in India did achieve, however, was a gradual institutionalisation of the domain of *Catholic religion*, in the form of its churches, institutions, liturgy and ceremony, progressively separated from the social-politics of caste. In the 19\(^{th}\) and 20th centuries, French (and later Tamil) Jesuit Catholic parish priests claimed more and more of what had in earlier years of their mission been part of the field of agrarian relations – the

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\(^3\) This distinction, presented as the ‘encompassment’ of the political-economic by the caste-religious, became an anthropological standard through the work of Louis Dumont (1980)

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

\(^5\) Conclusion to an enquiry by the bishop of Madras in 1845 (cited in Forrester 1980: 39).
arrangements of worship, saints’ day festivals and their systems of material and symbolic redistribution (processions and caste honour etc.) -- for their religious domain pitting their (religious) authority against that of village headmen, caste landlords, Hindu rulers and others. Dalits (who had converted) then drew their political-economic struggles with caste dominants into this domain of religion where they would find Church support for caste struggles when presented as claims to religious equality. In this way, an assertive local Dalit politics was born from, and bound up with, the contingent emergence of a realm of Catholic religion, even in the absence of a critical social ethics in the Church. Jesuit support for Dalits depended upon the definition of the field of social contest as religious rather than socio-political, and the field so-defined expanded with institutionalised religion under British rule.

As a result of different missionary processes (Protestant and Catholic), Dalit struggles in rural society put in place a separation of the religious and the social; and a construal of political-economic claims as religious. A further reason why pre-Independence Dalit projects of social advancement could only take place through process/spaces defined as Christian arose from British government in India’s policy of non-interference in affairs of native custom and religion, which precluded legal responses to Dalit protests of injustice. Dalits who were denied access to land or water, to temples or streets, or in other ways subjugated and ill-treated on the grounds of caste, had no recourse to colonial courts since their deprivations arose from the practices of custom and religion. The Christian churches therefore provided them with an important arena for mobilising against caste oppression, which was necessarily framed as religious, and especially involved action through church ceremony. In some areas, for example, forging inter-village links to fight exclusion and gain honours at Catholic saints’ festivals was a precursor to post-Independence secular Dalit politics (Mosse 2012: Ch 5). Through these local caste-based struggles with landlords, Dalits also laid claim to a more universal (and potentially liberating) identity and protection as Christians. Here is one among several reasons why, as Mark Juergensmeyer (1982: 4) comments ‘social revolutions in India have come in the guise of religion.’

The religion of development: religion and entitlement to state development

Indian Independence changed things in interesting but difficult ways for Christian Dalits. The space of equality marked by Christian religion was subsumed under a liberal paradigm of civil rights. Untouchability was secularized as a civic disability and socio-economic backwardness,

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6 By the 19th century, influenced by antislavery campaigns and the Catholic Church’s response to the rights of the poor and the labouring classes in Europe, some Jesuits shifted from otherwise deeply conservative attitudes.
and the Indian state introduced various protections, including laws which criminalized practices of caste discrimination, as well as welfare, reservations and development provision for the so-called Scheduled Castes. But although Dalits gained civic rights and development resources from the state, eligibility to these was defined in terms of religion. State provision was premised on the Protestant missionary idea of ‘untouchability’ as a debility arising from the practices of Hinduism. Thus Dalits who are Christian or Muslim are barred from state protection as Scheduled Castes and from development support, whether this is subsidized credit, scholarships, housing or a host of other schemes, or legal protection against the ‘atrocities’ (a legal category) of untouchability.

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

As Krishnan (2011) points out (following Chatterjee 1999), it is a necessity of the modern state and its politics that social boundaries are simplified and reified, and that community identities are contained and enumerated in ways that disregard social reality: ‘[S]ince caste was considered [by the Indian state] to be a creation of Hindu scriptures it was deemed not possible for Christianity and Islam to have [their] followers identified by caste. If these religions admitted caste how [could] they be demarcated from Hinduism?’ And Christians and Muslims themselves needed these demarcations from the majority religion, Hinduism, if they were ‘to have their social life governed by personal laws other than Hindu personal law and were to be awarded privileges for running their institutions without the supervision of the state, which found it incumbent to
administer the Hindu endowments and temples [...] Hence no matter if people could see as clearly as daylight that caste discrimination existed within Christianity in India, it could not be constitutionally recognised’ (Krishnan 2011).

A corollary of the production of rigid religious boundaries is making religion the privileged category; that is to say the fiction that religion or faith is the determinant of identity and ‘exhaust[s] all the layers of selfhood’ (Krishnan 2011: 10, citing Chatterjee 1999:223). This leads, as Krishnan notes, to the absurd idea that professing Hinduism is necessary to belong to a caste, when, in reality, caste identity depends upon lineage, often residence, and maybe occupation, but not on which god one worships.

What is the effect of rigid categories on development? Any system of state provision that involves targeted categories constrains the articulation of demand and involves reflection by targeted groups on their own identity and entitlement — who they are and what they deserve (Still 2007: 280). Dalits who have become Christian (in pursuit of selfhood) are denied identity as the state’s ‘injured subjects’ (Rao 2009: 177-78, Krishnan 2011: 14), or if they seek progress by means of state support by adopting the religious identity of the welfare identity Scheduled Caste, they have to retreat to the very untouchable and Hindu identities they left behind. Either way, Krishnan points out, Dalits experience an unbridgeable split between the pursuit of recompense or development in the public domain of schemes, scholarships, or legal protection against violence, on the one hand, and the pursuit of transformation in the inner private domain which refuses the pre-assigned identity and asserts difference (through religious conversion); that is, their development through (Christian) religion.7

**Development through religion: Christianity and Dalit self-making**

State categorisation may structure the articulation of demand and impose an inner/outer split, but this does not mean that Dalits ‘work on the self’ enabled by Christianity ceases to be political in challenging exclusion and stigma. Indeed, ethnographic research among poor Protestant Dalits shows how Christianity offers a dignifying identity and various projects of self-fashioning not dependent upon recognition from dominant others, for example in changed clothing, diet, the confident speech that some could acquire from Bible reading, or giving up drink (Mosse 2012: 181-86, Krishnan 2013), and which refuses stigmatised identities. As I have argued elsewhere, Christianity has provided certain Dalits a way of reflecting on difference and changeability that

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7 Even a Hindu Dalit faces the fact that, in the public and legal terms which give her certain rights as a member of a Scheduled Caste, her identity is fixed as a matter of lineage and historical injustice rather than present aspiration, and so this does not ‘relieve her from the burden of bearing the injured identity in her inner domain’ (Krishnan 2011).
is about separating a shameful past from a better future (Mosse 2012: 183). ‘We can say that long before the Tamil churches promoted a theology of social action in the 1990s, Protestant Christianity provided a way of “imagining a different context for autonomy and agency” (Schmalz 2005), a kind of imaginative “space making,” or a cultural capacity akin to what Arjun Appadurai (2004) refers to as the “capacity to aspire”’ (ibid: 184). This involved renegotiation within villages of relationships of labour and services that could not be abandoned, and might even be accompanied by an ‘upper’ caste Hindu perception of Christian Dalits as associated with tidiness/cleanliness (cukāltāram), ‘closer to education’ and as ‘models of progress,’ as Krishnan’s informants told him.8

Those increasing numbers who join Pentecostal congregations also work to fashion lives anew in such ways, finding purpose and direction, in spite of persisting dangers and economic uncertainties. But as Nathaniel Roberts notes of equally poor urban Dalit Pentecostals in Chennai, Christianity is not a matter of faith apart from development (they are not fideists); it is not about change of culture. Christianity is about new knowledge and verifiable truth; about having reason to place trust in Jesus, and the confidence, transformation and displacement of fear that is said to follow. This new knowledge is not an accompaniment of modern development, it is development - a discovered universal, which makes the notion that Christianity is a cultural tradition, still less a western intrusion, absurd. As one Dalit tells Roberts: “Do [people who reject Christianity as foreign] also reject tube lights because they are from the West?” “do they refuse to believe in airplanes?” (Roberts 2012: 278).

Protestant and Pentecostal Christianity provides a means for the poorest Dalits to produce an imaginative break from the past, a disjuncture so profound that it is not seen as cultural. But while Dalits found difference in Christianity, the churches or their Dalit activist leaders increasingly defined Christian Dalit difference in terms of Dalitness, thereby articulating the fact of historical injury that was denied by the state (and by implication downplaying Christian difference). As one prominent theologian wrote (Nirmal 1990, 129) ‘dalitness. . . is what is ‘Christian’ about Dalit theology, the broken Christ whom they [Dalits] can identify themselves with, follow behind and minister to, is for the most part non-Christian!’ (Pieris 1993, 38). Meanwhile, the Dalit turn

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8 In one village in which I have lived there is a significant difference between the social significance of Christianity for Catholic and Protestant Dalits. Because Catholicism was embedded within caste society, Catholic Dalits used church rituals and festivals to pursue struggles against ‘upper’ castes who were also Catholic; progressively securing honour and position within an existing agrarian order (over a period of 50-60 years and as a result of migration and land acquisition that changed their socio-economic position). Their struggle for rights and resources (for education and employment) is continued within the Church. The poorer and more dependent Protestant Dalits (of a different caste) lacked assets or entitlements, and used Christianity not to imagine cultural continuity (as Catholic Dalits had) but to imagine a break with a shameful past as part of their narrative of changeability and moral transformation (see Mosse 2012).
in the Catholic Church (and its development programmes) arose distinctively from its own history as a protest movement (the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement) within and against the Church and its tolerance of caste hierarchy and discrimination in worship, education institutions, and the priesthood. This rebellious call to action by Dalit priests came not from Christian ethics per se, but from their negation in the Church. It too arose from the experience of Dalitness rather than Christianity (and was a rejection of the Church’s conceptual separation of the religious and the social that insisted on the sinfulness of caste prejudice.) The dilemma presented to Dalit Christians can be imagined: they have simultaneously to recover dignity through Christianity by escaping from untouchable pasts, and to claim rights to state development as Christians by remembering that past as Dalits.

From the 1980s, the churches have tried to square the circle by offering Christianity as the means to honour Dalits, to recognise suffering and centre the experience and identity of their oppressed majority members. An honourable Christianised dalitness was then the focus of theological reflection and of development effort. To this end, the churches provided centres for Dalit cultural production feeding into Dalit NGOs and movements – connecting ideas of cultural difference to liberation. Various streams and capacities for symbolic manipulation or reversal were drawn together to honour an “outcaste” culture. Publicly staged celebrations of Dalit performance arts in theological seminaries involved re-imagining formerly inferiorized drumming and dance forms, funeral service, or beef eating, setting them apart from the relational context of servitude, and rendering Dalit arts as ‘weapons for liberation’. Christianity and its institutional practices provided a coordination point for pre-existing elements of Dalit identification now brought together and articulated in ways that have proved significant to contemporary Dalit activism and development.9

Articulating caste and Dalitness was a way of placing Christian emancipation back into the public realm of development, challenging the state’s categorical boundaries (through the assertion of Dalitness from within Christianity) and staging the political claim to Dalit development. But paradoxically, this conjunction of Christian and Dalit also reaffirmed the centrality of religion in matters of caste and development. The Christian cultural and theological work was underpinned by Dalit activist ideas about the history of Brahmanic cultural oppression and ritual humiliation abstracted from a wider field of relations, including a history of labour exploitation and political domination by non-Brahman ‘upper’ castes. Specifically, Christian cultural work drew from Dalit

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9 This itself proved controversial, since some castes among Dalits were and some were not associated with the Christian churches, and contests arise over who defines ‘Dalit culture’ or ‘Dalit religion’ or ‘Dalit arts’. In an increasingly fissiparous caste social field, the question of whose religion or culture is ‘Dalit’ contentious. .
intellectuals who (from the late 19th century) had articulated Dalit dissent as the rejection of Brahmanic Hindu ideology and the assertion of counter-cultural difference. These Dalit leaders, in turn, echoed 19th century Protestant missionary models (which placed non-Brahmans outside of dominant caste culture and prepared for Christianisation – Dirks 2001). So, ironically, these discourses of countercultural dissent were aligned with the state interpretation of caste as based on a particular (Hindu, Brahmanic) religion.10

The point is, there has been a repeated disembedding and isolation of a (Hindu) religious culture of caste from the actual system of graded economic rights, unequalised access all sources of wealth (land, water, produce, education, employment etc.) and a form of political domination that is compatible with different religions. By implication, Dalit intellectuals and theologians laid emphasis on ideological challenge and a cultural politics apart from existing caste power and the structure of agrarian or urban class relations. That tendency is only further underlined by Hindu nationalist trends in Indian politics that entrenched a conceptual faultline between Dalits and ‘caste Hindus’.

The effect of disembedding caste into the language of religion and culture has also been to fix the meaning of caste and ignore evidence on way caste is perpetuated in many different ways, serving various purposes of exclusion and domination, labour control, surplus extraction and opportunity hoarding (Mosse 2010). Arguably the repeated process of ‘rendering religious’ for which caste provides a pretext has had a disabling influence on civil society actors working for Dalit development (see below); but it has also ensured the exclusion of the caste system from official (state and donor) frameworks for the analysis of poverty and the achievement the Millennium Development Goals in India and South Asia. This is again because the Indian government’s affirmative action is premised on the idea of compensation for historical disadvantage, rather than on caste discrimination as an on-going aspect of the economic system (Thorat & Newman 2010, Deshpande 2011), and of course the fact that in official discourse historical disadvantage is linked in particular to ‘untouchability’ as a debility arising from the practices of Hinduism. As a matter of religion (rather than socio-economics), caste falls outside the purview of mainstream economic planning and development policy of the secular state, or of the international institutions it deals with. Significantly, the World Bank’s recent India Poverty Assessment negotiated with the government, deftly combines institutionalism and cultural reification, asserting that: ‘The rules of the game in the caste system—to borrow a formulation of North (1990)—are rooted in a religiously sanctioned ordering of occupations described in ancient

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10 Krishnan (2011) has traced these developments across the discourses of government and political actors through a detailed reading of vernacular and ideological literature.
Hindu texts such as the Manu smriti.’ International organisations too are complicit in the way ‘religion’ as a category is the pretext for a narrowed conception of development.

Social and research projects aimed at saving the understanding of Dalit social life from the categorical traps of policy are afoot. Meanwhile, Dalits draw Christianity into their individual, family and community life choices and ambitions through education and enterprise, in dealing with uncertainty in ways unencumbered by the separation of religion and development, but also unsupported by the state.

The ‘Dalitisation’ of development

In this final part of the chapter, I suggest that the structure of categories that has shaped caste and development in relation to religion and to Christianity is (not coincidentally) reproduced in relation to another universalist tradition, namely human rights, as part of the work of Indian and international NGOs.

Since the 1970s, NGOs rather than churches have been the most visible agents of development intervening in the lives of south Indian Dalit communities (although the two kinds of institutions overlap and interconnect considerably). In the late-1980s and early 90s, I was closely involved with south Indian NGOs as Oxfam’s Regional Representative (in Bangalore) and, having also spent a period living in a Tamil village, I was well aware of the way in which development (as well as missionary) discourse abstracts the everyday struggles of Dalits into the distinct authorised categories of prevailing policy. At the time NGO discourse again involved an ‘economisation’ of poverty and a ‘culturalisation’ of caste. By and large in NGO work, caste was peripheralized as a religio-cultural accretion obscuring the class relations that were the proper focus of change. This was a view also encouraged by the radical priests in Christian organisations whose Marxian and Liberation Theology training inspired the first generation of social action NGOs in the 1970s. The representational separation of the religious and the material (caste from class) was of course contradicted in the villages where NGO schemes of various kinds were in actuality folded into caste struggles that focussed simultaneously on fair wages and festival honours, land claims and teashop discrimination, electricity and temple entry, street lights, access to water and the refusal of ritual subordination at funerals.

This partial representation of Dalit experience in policy was especially apparent to NGO field coordinators who were themselves Dalit, working within familiar caste-structured village life, and who soon formed their own NGOs. The rise of Dalit-led NGOs was one of several factors that moved caste and the fight against discrimination to the centre of NGO work in south India in the
1990s (see Mosse 2011). There was a ‘Dalitization’ of NGO development policy facilitated also by the growing influence of Dalit activism and its multiplicity of movements, organisations and (later) political parties including the American Black-influenced Dalit Panther movement (Gorringe 2005), as well as by the allied turn to Dalits within Church social policy noted above, which for example recast the Jesuit ‘preferential option for the poor’ as an ‘option for Dalits’ in 1987 (see Mosse 2012: Ch 6). Such a reframing of development drew inspiration from the work of the preeminent Dalit leader Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar (d. 1956), whose birth centenary in 1991 brought national celebration and the availability of his writings newly in the vernaculars. The reframing was promoted too by the development opportunities opened by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which reserved constituencies for Dalits and for women in elected local government bodies (Panchayats). At the same time, the centralisation of Dalit issues was propelled by the brutal denial to Dalits of these same constitutionally-guaranteed political rights, and by a broader swath of violence against Dalits across south India that manifested a reaction to Dalit acts of insubordination, self-respect and economic autonomy, targeting Dalit bodies (including sexual attack on Dalit women) and property, and marking out for destruction signs of Dalit development — radios, scooters, tiled houses — by dominant castes for whom development was emphatically a relational matter (ref.).

Thus, from within the NGO development field there appeared to come an approach to that built on the everyday experience of the Dalit communities and challenged the institutionalised separation of the religious-cultural and development. The NGO capacity to articulate Dalit aspirations and to mobilise action in terms that were meaningful to the men and women with whom they worked was a hallmark of these initiatives. However, the way in which the ‘Dalit development’ approach could be (and came to be) articulated and sustained as a coherent discourse, capable of enrolling a range of actors and agencies — Dalit movements, state actors, lawyers, churches, donors and their European supporters, national campaigns and transnational advocacy groups — could never simply be a matter for transmitting these local struggles for wider and wider support; it was not just a movement out from the local to ‘the global’ in order to solve village problems by linking them to ‘higher levels’ (Steur 2012). As in the earlier case of the missionaries, in order to build and sustain support, Dalit experience was abstracted and transformed as it came to be translated into these other institutional agendas. Or as Steur (2012) argues, ‘Dalit activism and the articulation of Dalitness is not constituted at any particular “local” level but emerged in a transnational social field’ (2012: 64).

**Dalit development and human rights**
If the Dalit turn in development policy was transnationally constituted (ibid), this was in the language of human rights abuse, and through a set of pre-existing activist and institutional links that the human rights discourse afforded. Following the success (by 1994) of campaigns against apartheid, Steur points out, human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch turned attention to India and to the continuing caste discrimination and spectacular atrocities against Dalits (see HRW 1999), as did international Church networks (in particular the World Council of Churches and the World Lutheran Federation), concerned for the large (Dalit) Christian population subject to violation of their human rights (ibid). 11

The tabling of the issue of caste discrimination at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban, and the large scale presence of Dalit activists enabled by international support (ibid), was focal for regional and local NGO networking on ‘Dalit Human Rights’ within India. What occurred in south India was a rapid expansion of Dalit NGO networks, and ‘networks of networks’ such as the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation- Tamil Nadu. Under the slogan ‘Dalit rights are human rights’ these networks served to articulate and consolidate a discourse on development as a question of Dalit rights (and underdevelopment — inequality of opportunity, persistent poverty, unemployment, ill-health or low education levels — as the effect of caste discrimination). A range of development agencies including international NGO donors (church and secular) found their own reasons to support a policy focus on Dalit rights and dignity, for example because this brought a much needed holistic (material, social, spiritual) perspective to human development (the view of a Catholic donor representative); and they favoured NGO networking as a target for funding because this was imagined as social action that was locally initiated but regionally interconnected into a kind of self-organising social movement for ‘structural’ change.

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

11 Throughout the 1990s, Church-based NGO donors had been especially willing to re-frame their development objectives in Dalit terms because of the nature of their home and Indian constituencies and the mediated links between them. And in the other direction, for Dalits (and NGO leaders), being Christian and participating in the universalist language of Christianity allowed a collaboration with other universalist languages in development or human rights within which caste discrimination could be understood and acted upon (Mosse 2012: 278).
international human rights bodies (the latter having the objective of bringing international pressure on the Indian state on the question of caste discrimination) — all part of the internationally linked network function.

For the purposes of my present argument, I want to draw attention to two effects of these network processes. The first is the way in which a human rights framework disembeds caste from the ‘totality of social relations’ (Steur 2012: 64) in a manner that provides a counterpart to missionary and state discourses. This involves representation of Dalits as a certain kind of victim and subject to specific disadvantages which tend to reproduced (rather than break from) the inherited conceptual divide between the religious-cultural and the political-economic. The second effect is a change in the articulation of demand by Dalits themselves brought about by rights approaches.

Taking the first effect, the Dalitisation of development under an international civil society human rights frame positioned Dalits as ‘specific victims of discrimination and violence’ (Steur 2012: 65-6). The horrific cases of violence, rape and murder have, not surprisingly, been most prominent. These also bring a legal framing and recourse to special criminal legislation (the Scheduled Castes [Prevention of Atrocities] Act 1989). In these cases, there is the inevitable consequence that everyday actions of anti-Dalit violence and humiliation are ‘recontextualized’ into crimes that individualize and arguably exceptionalize caste discrimination (Rao 2009), which leads Steur to ask whether the human rights focus might ‘detract from examination of structural socio-economic relations’ (2012: 66). This issue applies equally to manifestations of untouchability beyond the most extreme atrocities, especially the routine indignities including exclusion from teashops, streets, burial grounds, temples or worship that Dalits experience.

Construed as human rights issues, continuing practise of untouchability have been the first focus of local Dalit-led NGOs. Secondly, they have supported resource struggles, in particular over the commons such as water, fish, trees or grazing land through which caste inequality was (and is) symbolically and ritually enacted. They have also organised action for the repossession of lands allocated by British district administrators to Dalits but alienated by ‘upper’ castes (the panchami land). Understood as action against untouchability (the abuse of Dalit human rights), such development interventions could then be backed up by anti-untouchability law, as well as being accompanied by Dalit political assertions through symbolic acts such as planting statues of Dr Ambedkar, using slogans, drumming, cooking beef and other reversed symbols of Dalit humiliation (Mosse 2012: 222-4).

12 Note, however, that some Dalit NGOs use the prevention of caste atrocities legislation to back land reoccupation deliberately, not just to raise the profile of the caste basis of their claims, but also to ensure that the legal procedure individualises the ‘atrocity’ to particular non-Dalit occupiers of panchami land so as to diffuse any broader conflict between Dalits and caste Hindus (Sundara Babu ).
Demarcating development in terms of Dalit human rights through identity-linked collective action inevitably involved selective attention or representation. Caste-inclusive initiatives such as microfinance with individualised benefits tended to be set apart, while NGO workers faced the problem that the concerns of Dalit villagers themselves—access to education, jobs in towns, migrant labour especially among young women and men—might not articulate well with the anti-untouchability or caste-culture framing of development. It was not always possible to localise the Dalit rights agenda into collective struggles (e.g., over land, CPRs, or village-level power) since caste is now invisibly active in shaping opportunity through the connections and capital necessary for entry into higher education or employment in public or private sectors, and through ‘non-traditional’ forms of discrimination in hiring, renting, or in the weakness of Dalit caste networks (or the lack of capital) in securing education, skills or employment. Anandhi (2012) furthermore explains how the Dalit rights discourses of national/international networks into which local NGOs are linked can hinder their response to complex forms of local gender-and-caste oppression, including persisting patriarchy and domestic violence (cf. Mangubhai 2014, Still 2014).

The point is not to detract from networked Dalit NGOs but merely to suggest that, because of the way in which the discourse on caste has been historically constituted and internationally articulated, NGOs work within an inherited structure of representation which continues to separate the cultural-religious and the political-economic, caste and class, caste and gender, and analogous distinctions. These distinctions become increasingly rigid as the discourse of Dalit rights travels ‘outward’ to national campaigns, UN advocacy or debates on caste discrimination in other legal jurisdictions (e.g., the U.K.) wherein the specific injuries of inherited status, ritual impurity, pollution and stigma are re-centred. The critical question is whether a ‘culturalisation’ of caste inherited from the earlier missionary ‘spiritualisation’ of caste-poverty threatens to diminish the capacity of development actors (state, NGO, Church) to address the reality of Dalit poverty by obstructing the understanding of complex and changing local realities requiring varied approaches. This effect is of course to a degree mitigated by the fact that in practice while framed in the language of Dalit human rights, NGO interventions are understood and acted upon locally in different and more meaningful terms. So that, for example, grassroots women’s groups reinterpret network Dalit rights activism to address gender-specific local issues such as obtaining house-sites in women’s names (Anandhi 2012, 2013). It is then the work of development’s varied brokers and translators to mediate the disjunctures between NGO discourse

13 Thus the debates on legislation against caste discrimination in the UK mobilised religious groups (Hindu, Sikh) as stakeholders alongside Dalit ones (see Dhanda et al. 2014).
shaped by their own political logic (as were the missionaries’) and the realities of local problems and actions (Lewis and Mosse 2006).

The second effect, of rights approaches more broadly, concerns the way they are shaping the local understandings themselves, and shifting the articulation of demand. In this regard, Krishnan (2011) observes among Dalit villagers ‘a tendency to move from cultural-political emancipatory approaches to those of right based approaches’. Rather than engage in agonistic relationships with dominant castes in struggles over resources and respect, Dalits ‘characterise the grievances suffered as a failure of the state in implementing statutory measures of welfare and compensation,’ conceived as the abrogation of their rights – right to work, right to education, right to health (etc.) — even though at one level a history of caste domination lies behind such state failure.

The discourse of rights and of discrimination in development comes with the deeper politicisation of Dalit identity in relation to demand from the state. The struggles for land or employment are for Dalit land and Dalit jobs or Dalit enterprises. At the micro-level, as Krishnan notes (pers.comm.), when Dalits are excluded for example from a water source installed by the state in the main village or ur, the conflict that arises is resolved by provision of another water facility in the Dalit ‘colony’ or ceri. The absence of collective action to break down the residential segregations produced historically through mechanisms of power, labour control, and denial of property which divide Tamil villages into the dominant ur and the Dalit ‘colony’ (or ceri) is striking.¹⁴ At the macro level, Dalit organisations campaign for the proportionally-allocated budget for the Dalit population, known as the Special Component Plan under the slogan ‘where is our money?’¹⁵ that is, for a share of resources generated by capitalist growth, but not necessarily against the structural inequalities produced by that model of growth (Steur 2012). Thus, while NGO networks have significantly increased the effectiveness of mobilisation of Dalits against discrimination and for rights to development through politicized identities, it may be asked whether these demands for welfare parity leave unchallenged the structural relations of power and political economy (Steur, forthcoming). Does the tactical focus on Dalit rights involve a merely political reversal in face of political-economic transformations (here neoliberal ones) that impoverish or dispossess (to use terms from Steur’s [forthcoming] engagement with Partha Chatterjee and Eric Wolf); might structural power even push tactical struggles in the direction of ‘mere’ identity politics which reproduce the divisions of caste among those with shared interests

¹⁴ For an exceptional break with the social geography of the “caste street” see Mosse 2012: 244.
¹⁵ The increase in state revenues, and a dramatic reduction in, and greater state surveillance of, foreign funding for NGOs is also in part responsible for this focused attention on state-backed Dalit development to ensure that Dalits are part of India’s ‘inclusive growth’ (Steur 2012).
as exploited groups, perhaps through the agency of Dalit NGOs themselves (ibid)? This is not the place to further debate these issues. But what can be noted is the way in which caste continues as a means for the articulation of ‘old antimonies of materialism and idealism’ (Roseberry 1982 in Steur forthcoming).

Development has changed the discourse of caste itself, making ‘livelihoo and [a] dignified standard of living foremost concerns of rural Dalits primarily address[ed] [to] the state agencies and actors’ (Krishnan 2011). And as already noted, Dalit access to education, jobs, consumer durables and other signs of ‘development’ has itself become pretext for anti-Dalit violence by dominant castes. But even here, Krishnan argues, it is the role of the state actors (police and revenue officials), and invocation of legal protection that is increasingly central, suggesting that ‘Dalits have considerable stake in liberal narratives of citizenship’ (ibid).

Indeed, looking back we see Dalits adding progressively universal identifications in pursuit of their social projects of justice and wellbeing: particularistic caste-bound claims become assertions as Christians, as citizens, and as holders of universal human rights, even while, as Krishnan point out, particularist caste identity is recentered in their mobilisation as a collective locally and in electoral politics since meaningful action requires that human rights are re-clothed in caste.

Summary and conclusions

My purpose in this chapter has been to trace connections and continuities in a long trajectory of the bifurcation of religion and economy, culture and development, caste and class, identity politics and political economy, idealism and materialism and the related processes of disembedding and abstraction whether in Christian mission, development or Dalit human rights activism. We started with the fact that drawing a distinction between the religious and the political-economic, or between caste and class, misunderstands the condition of Dalits for whom caste is a political-economic-ritual relationship, and whose labour was (and is) organised and controlled through ritual relations. This reality of caste is independent of religious affiliation (Hindu, Muslim, Christian). This is significant because a long history of ‘development’ interventions on behalf of Dalits — missionary, state and NGO, colonial and postcolonial — had a double effect: first ‘culturalising’ caste (Natraj 2012) to producing the modern Dalit as a religious identity subject to ritual humiliation and ideological challenge (for example through religious conversion) and institutionalised into a denial of state protections and privileges to Christian or Muslim Dalits; and second producing the modern category of ‘labour’ separate from caste, or ‘shorn of heathenish caste characteristics’ (Viswanath 2014a: 8). The categorical distinctions between the religious and the economic and caste and class, served the particular interests of outsiders and their political and administrative exigencies (Viswanath 2014a: 3).
Beginning with Christian missionaries, these categorisations shaped the field of development for the state and NGOs, and provide a mould for contemporary forms of activism and advocacy on Dalit human rights and development.

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

But we also know that what works well for ‘upward’ channelling within a Dalit human rights chain, or outward transmission to national and global forums, does not best serve the need for horizontal connections between different identities (Dalit, tribal [adivasi], labour, migrant) in relation to some particular and urgent livelihood threats or impoverishing processes. As Luisa Steur (2012) puts it, the question is what sort of solidarity is possible or desirable: a compassion-based response to Dalit suffering, or a solidarity-based response to dispossession? In practice these imply different kinds of networks, on the one hand, networks of professionalised NGOs and churches, on the other labour movements and unions.

Several NGO donors have themselves now begun to disfavour building development strategies on caste identities or Dalit dignity separate from class; investing not in ‘caste-communitarian’ development, but in wider coalitions of interest around exploitation, and livelihood threats, or land and employment rights in the context of India’s rapid capitalist growth; reconnecting the politics of recognition to the politics of redistribution (see Mosse 2011). In this connection, Steur (forthcoming) shows how building alliances to challenge a ‘land grab’ from multinational corporate investments near Chennai produced new practices of Dalit identity reconnected to land and economy. This involved different horizontal and international connections, while facing off co-opting ‘corporate social responsibility’ discourses and the state criminalisation of local protest.
Meanwhile, Indian Dalit activism itself turns from claims about injury, to claims for development, from universal human rights to specific economic rights in the form of national budgeting and the Special Component Plan which is itself a challenge to the in-built assumption that Dalits derive entitlements as compensation for religiously-defined disadvantage suffered historically (or even on-going discrimination within the social and economic system), but insists instead on Dalits’ common entitlement (as Hindus, Muslims, or Christians) to a share of the national wealth.

Both the NGO ‘de-dalitisation’ of development in favour of solidarity, and the demands from state budget allocations involve different ways to secularise caste and to dismantle the inherited categories of religion and development through which responses to Dalit impoverishment has been structured.

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