

# RE-INTERPRETING THE CONCEPT OF POOR AND LIBERATION – PERSPECTIVES OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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**Abstract:** Liberation theology emerged to counter mainstream theology during the 1950s- 1960s in Latin America. Liberation theology comes out of hermeneutical approaches to the study of the Bible with the eyes of the poor and needy one. In Gustavo Gutierrez Words, “Preferential Option for the Poor” denotes what God saying to the Church from the poor’s standpoint. Suffering is one of the necessary conditions for liberation in Liberation theology. Oppression within a society leads to suffering in the form of a political, socio-economic and religious point of view. According to liberation theologians, the poor are the sufferers in this world because of injustice and exploitation. The poor, according to Liberation theology termed as “collective poor”. The Gospels, suggests Gustavo Gutierrez, reveal three distinct, though inseparable, notions of poverty- Material poverty, Spiritual poverty and Voluntary poverty as a protest. Though these threefold understanding of poverty is distinct, but intrinsically interrelated dimensions of one historical process. The article attempts to focus on preferential options for the poor and how it helps to understand liberation in the light of Christian faith. The present study also attempts to understand the interrelationship between oppression, suffering and liberation in the light of God’s Word.

**Key Words:** Liberation theology, Suffering, Oppression, Poverty, Bible, Jesus, Liberation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Liberation theology was developed within Latin America around 1960s. It was developed to counter the capitalist domination and mode of production which struck the overall development in Latin Americans such a polity, socio-economic, cultural and religious dimensions. Over five centuries the Roman Catholic Church has sided with those in positions of authority and wealth thus maintaining the status quo and thereby impoverishing and enslaving of Latin American people. The Church also promoted the capitalist mode of production in a nation, as a result, there was a vast gap created among the people – rich and poor. The mentality of oppression to the poor and marginalized masses by the capitalist their intention of profit-making was increasing continuously. Therefore, massive revolution broke out as radical movements in the forms of Liberation theology within the Latin American continent. The dynamics of the capitalist economy led to the establishment of a centre and periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions and poverty for the many.

The study of the Biblical texts with the eyes of the poor and the needy is the key concern of Liberation theology. The term Liberation theology was first coined by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1971. Gustavo Gutierrez was a Peruvian priest, who is often referred to as the father of liberation theology. The main concern for the Liberation theology, in the words of Gustavo Gutierrez, “Preferential Option for the Poor” denotes what God says to the Church from the poor’s standpoint. (Gutierrez 1996: p 143) “Preferential Option for the Poor” refers to a trend in the Bible, of preference being given to the well-being of the poor and powerless of society in the teachings and commands of God. The option for the poor is an option to place ourselves in a particular social location, to view reality from the perspectives of the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized. Liberation theology viewed the poor masses as the suffering masses. (Scott, peter 2004: p 291) The question arises why Liberation Theology starts with the poor and marginalised. The reason is poverty which is the root cause of suffering within society. Why the poor became the sufferer? It was due to the injustice and exploitation within society. The poor were the sufferer who confronted the problem of humiliation, injustice and oppression in every sphere of life. So, with the growing needs of the development of capitalist colonizers led to the deprivation and placed poor to the periphery of the society, on the other. The paper tries to study the nature of the suffering of the poor and the marginalized people. The present study tries to focus on preferential options for the poor and how it helps to understand liberation in the light of Christian faith. The present study also attempts to understand the interrelationship between oppression, suffering and liberation in the light of God’s word.

## 2. SUFFERING AS THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED:

The concerns of the Liberation theology start with poor or we can say those who were placed to the lower strata of the society. According to Liberation theology, the poor refers to the “collective poor” means the ‘social poor’ not as an individual poor. It refers to the poor who lived within society as the poor. As stated in the Gospels, Gustavo Gutierrez,

reveal three distinct, though inseparable, the notion of poverty – Material poverty, Spiritual poverty and Voluntary poverty as a protest.

The first category of poverty is Material poverty. It refers to economic poverty. It means the lack of economic goods/wealth necessary for a human life worthy of the name. The poverty in this sense is considered degrading and is rejected by the conscience of contemporary persons. Christians often tend to give material poverty a positive value, considering it almost a human and religious ideal. It is seen as austerity and indifference to the things of this world and a precondition for life in conformity with the teachings of Gospel. This interpretation also means that the demands of Christianity are at cross purposes to the great aspirations of persons today who want to free themselves from subjection to nature, to eliminate the exploitation of some persons by others, and also to create prosperity to everyone. When the poor see its root causes, they rebel against it. This contemporary phenomenon is collective poverty that leads those who suffer from it to forge bonds of solidarity among themselves and to organise in the struggle against the conditions they are in and against those who benefit from these conditions. (Gutierrez 1988: p 163-164) It is also a subhuman situation. This category of poverty is also mentioned in the Gospel (Luke 6: 20-23), where Jesus says that those who are poor, kingdom of God belong to them, those who are hungry will be fed, who are weeping will laugh. Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that one is being exploited, not to know that one is a person.

Spiritual poverty is the second notion of poverty. It is the “poor in spirit.” It is seen as an interior attitude of non-attachment to the goods of this world. Spiritual poverty is expressed in the Gospel of Matthew. (Matthew 5: 3-12), where Jesus says about the kingdom of God kept for the poor. The poor person is the “client” of Yahweh (Jewish God). Poverty is the “ability to welcome God, openness to God, a willingness to be used by God, humility before God.” (Gutierrez 1988: p 169) Spiritual poverty is synonymous with the faith, with abandonment and trust with God. Spiritual poverty is a precondition for approaching God. Spiritual poverty finds its highest expression in the Beatitudes of the New Testament. It is the precondition for being able to receive the word of God. This type of poverty has no direct relationship to wealth. In the first instance, it is not a question of indifference to goods of this world. It goes deeper than that; it means to have no other sustenance than the will of God. This category also classified as an attitude of Christ.

### **3. SUFFERING AND LIBERATION:**

Liberation is the ultimate goal to mankind with a society or for spiritual realms. The poor mass wants to live in a society free from injustice and exploitation. Rather, as a result of injustice and exploitation by the capitalist mode of production in the society, the poor are placed to the periphery of society. Hence, the poor want to live in a society where there will not be injustice and exploitation. By considering the fact, Liberation theology tries to find out the solution to the situation of injustice and exploitation to the poor. To find the solution, Liberation theology goes further to describe in the third notion of poverty. The intrinsic connection between material and spiritual poverty is the third notion of poverty. It is a type of Voluntary poverty, in a sense a person becomes voluntarily poor, to enter in solidarity with the poor. It is poverty as a commitment of solidarity and protest. Though, voluntary poverty is a continuous historical process.

Moreover, Gustavo Gutierrez stated three distinct though inseparable dimensions of Liberation that is Political Liberation, Psychological or Anthropological Liberation and Liberation from Sin. The transformation of social structures categorized in the first level. Liberation entails an interior; transformation through which the poor person comes to affirm once the historical agency is coming under the second level of liberation. Finally, in the third level, liberation is identified with Salvation, that the liberation from sin affected through the crucified and risen Christ. Though, these dimensions are theoretically distinct, always connected within a single liberative process. The deepest and fullest realization of the third dimension is brought about through God’s gratuitous love in the person of Jesus Christ. This love always made concrete in history. We simultaneously open ourselves to and encounter God’s grace in history, when you help to transform history in accord with God’s will. The deepest meaning of poverty is found in Christ, who carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression for the poor. If we take the instances from Gospel where Jesus who comes from the weaker section of the society or to say from the underprivileged community and also try to uplift and to liberate the society from injustice and oppression. By taking the clue from the historical journey of Jesus which is solely directed towards the poor and underprivileged people of the society, Liberation theology taking the same clue and try to interpret the situation of suffering and injustice and also try to find the solution in the light of Jesus and his Gospel’s teaching. So, Christ became human, died, and rose from the dead to set us free so that we might enjoy freedom. To die and rise again with Christ is to vanquish death and to enter into a new life. The cross and the resurrection are the seals of our liberty.

Poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has a redemptive value. If the ultimate of human exploitation and alienation is selfishness, the deepest reason for voluntary poverty is love for neighbour. The Gospel message and the New Testament also witnesses the love towards one’s neighbour. In the Bible, neighbour means fellow human beings. Among many examples, the parable of ‘Good Samaritan’ is very much noticeable. (Luke 10: 25-37) It has meaning

only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice. Rather, it is not a question of idealizing poverty, but taking it on as it is an evil to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it. Christian poverty, is an expression of love, is solidarity with the poor and is a protest against poverty. This is the concrete, contemporary meaning of the witness of poverty. It is poverty lived not for its own sake, but rather as an authentic imitation of Christ or deeds of Jesus Christ. It is poverty which means taking on the sinful human condition to liberate humankind from and all consequences. (Gutierrez 1988: p 172)

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Hence, from the above understanding, it is clear that though the nature of poverty is different, but is intrinsically inseparable and also interrelated to each other. Though, the cause of poverty resulted from injustice and exploitation. In the capitalist mode of production, though the promising nature of development, in reality as consequences it excludes some sections of people in society – especially poor and disadvantages. Therefore, in search of equality and get liberate from injustice, Liberation theology interprets the Biblical texts for better comprehension of the root cause of suffering and also to seek for the solution from the theological point of view. It is the dimension of one historical process. Moreover, suffering is necessarily conditioned for seeking liberation to the poor in the light of Christian faith and teaching by considering Jesus as an epicentre. Only authentic solidarity with the poor and fellow human beings and a real protest against poverty can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for the theological discussion of poverty. The absence of commitment to the poor, the marginal, and the exploited is perhaps the fundamental reason why we have no concrete reflection on the witness of poverty.

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