CHAPTER ONE
METHODOLOGY

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Every method speaks for itself, as each one is aimed at a particular objective. Each method is a component of various terms. In our thesis too we would like to follow a distinct method that would help us to achieve the objectives. Clarification of the terms used will help us to understand the method and what we want to say through such a method.

1.1. HERMENEUTICS

The basic method we want to follow is Hermeneutical method. Hermeneutics refers to interpretation. The word hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word 'hermeneus' meaning interpreter. In exegesis the interpretation is confined to the principles of biblical hermeneutics. The act of re-reading the Bible from hermeneutical point of view is not a mere literary activity, a work of the specialist or purely academic. It is not a neutral work. Hermeneutics demands that any study starts with experience, event, situation or context. It presupposes two preconditions. They are: 1) profound and enriching questions and suspicions about one's real situation. 2) a new interpretation of


the Bible that is equally profound. Hence the precondition for doing hermeneutics, is the articulation of the problem felt and experienced. It should be the one that emerges from a faith experience. A hermeneutics of suspicion recognizes that biblical texts and their interpretations which through the centuries, have been written, for the most part, to serve mostly the interests of the "Haves" and not the "Have nots". Hence this hermeneutical suspicion now urges us to read the Bible from the perspective of "Have nots", the subaltern peoples.

Theologizing in and for today's world demands that the theologian becomes aware of his/her people's aspirations (problems) and takes them into the study of the text. Thus in the theological search, the praxis and the context join hands with the source(s) of revelation (scripture). In this process we see the possibility of integrating the hermeneutical method with the exegetical method(s). The theologian, as he/she proceeds in this effort, has to be in constant dialogical interaction between the text (the Sitz im Leben of the text) and the reader (one's, his/her, Sitz im Leben).

This approach will help us to read the biblical passage in the context and the context in the passage. Bible always offers an advantage of being read from the point of view of the subaltern peoples. The core experience of the Bible too was marked by deep experience of liberation. The Exodus experience in the Old Testament and Christ's liberative act in the New Testament emphasize that God sent the prophets to liberate

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Severino Croatto, op. cit., p. 54.


His people. Jesus declares emphatically (Lk. 4:18-19) that he has come just for this purpose.

1.1.1. HERMENEUTICAL INTERPRETATION

One of the basic constituents of hermeneutical method is interpretation. The act of interpretation relies on various tools. It may not be possible to apply any given text of the Bible to the present day times in its entirety. But the application of the text to the present times becomes a possibility through interpretation. However, interpretation should always be determined by the context of the time and the situation of the community. Thus the same text from the Bible could be interpreted to Indian society and Western society differently. Hence it may not be possible to have homogeneous interpretation to all the times and places.

The exercise of hermeneutical interpretation moves around the circle of Author-Text-Reader. Hermeneutical Interpretation takes into consideration the dehumanizing experience of the suffering, namely, the subalterns, the powerless. When the Bible is read and interpreted in such tone it provides 'axes of meaning'. However, when we say that biblical text has axes of meaning, we are not forcing the 'meaning' into it but follow its deepest and holistic "semantic axes". Bible has come to us, as a result of a long process of hermeneutics. Bible is a source of inspiration and liberation and is not only normative.

Interpreting a text to one's context is not an easy exercise. To interpret a text to the Indian context is not simple either. The Indian situation is a complex one. It is


10. Severino Croatto, op. cit., p. 58.

characterized by massive poverty, pluriform religiosity and oppressive social structure, especially caste. An Indian interpretation poses a challenge to the researcher to take more seriously the struggle for identity of the Indian subaltern peoples. The struggles of various groups of subaltern peoples for their cultural and social identity brings serious questions to theological and scriptural community.

1.1.2. SOCIOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics too has different orientations. In our thesis we will give importance to sociological hermeneutics. Studying and interpreting biblical passages from the point of view of Sociology has gained momentum over the years, especially with the emergence of Liberation Theology. It has the advantage of reading the Gospel message from the point of view of the people and community. The proper subject matter of Sociology is the man\woman in his\her relationship to his\her particular society. Bible is the story of a particular community. This particular community expresses its loyalty and affiliation to its God in its own way.


The religious sociologist shows interest in discovering patterns in the way in which the believing man/woman behaves. He interprets the biblical message from the interests of the believing person. God's message is announced and delivered in the community. Thus the biblical sociologist tries to discover what God has to offer to the millions of his/her country men/women, especially to the vast majority who live in dehumanizing conditions of society. The concern of the social interpreter should be in the words of Gustavo Gutierrez:

"How can we say to the poor, the exploited classes, to the marginalized races, to the despised cultures, how can we say that God is love and say that all of us are, and not to be in history, sisters and brothers? How can we say this? This is our great question."

For the theologians of this category the principal objective is to study their society from the point of view of social conditions of their brothers and sisters. The starting point for such theologians is the historical situation of oppression, poverty and injustice as it is being lived. Thus we can say that Sociology and Theology go together.

Sociology consists of conflictual grouping of various fields of interest and methodological approaches, which deal with society as a human project. Sociological method includes all methods of inquiry proper to the social sciences (e.g., Anthropology, Sociology, Political Sciences and Economics). Theology on the other hand deals with a

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17. Social study engages biblical scholars, experts in social science, classicists and ancient historians, who collaborate to reconstruct the history and the economic, social, political life of the people in various civilizations that shaped and influenced their civilization. They use art, ancient and contemporary literature, inscriptions, coins and the findings of archeological excavations, etc. (see J. Bruce Malina, "Why Interpret The Bible with Social Science", in ABO, No. 2., (1983), pp. 119 - 133.

particular interest, namely God, man and world. The unity between the two could well be cemented with the understanding that one depends on the other.

The use of Sociology in the study of the Bible is not a new phenomenon. It is actually employed much earlier as a part of form critical method. What is the importance of this method now is that the biblical interpreter uses this tool to make his interpretation a people-oriented interpretation. According to N. K. Gottwald:

"Sociology can be particularly useful in the examination of how biblical texts with similar social data function in relation to the text or the traditions of a similar nature among other peoples."  

Sociology helps the Bible readers to reapply the meaning to one's context, sometimes being aware that the particular biblical text or story originally has little to do with the situation or issue they are addressing at present. But we should note here that sociology is just one among the many tools in biblical studies. Therefore what we need is sociological hermeneutics. We also make it clear that we are not going to do only sociological study in our thesis nor are we employing it as the only method. It will be used in so far as it helps us to arrive at the intended results, namely, response to the problem that we will be stating in the second chapter.

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1.1.3. SUBALTERN HERMENEUTICS

The sociological hermeneutics in our thesis has a definite aim. It is done from the point of view of the subaltern peoples. Subaltern Hermeneutics means hermeneutics done by the subaltern peoples themselves. In subaltern hermeneutics the interpreter is one who knows the sufferings of subaltern peoples. The interpreter has to take into consideration the world views, and perceptions, and the experience of suffering of the concerned subaltern peoples. Subaltern experience belongs to the one from below than the above. The seeds of subaltern hermeneutics are present in the acts of the subaltern peoples in their quest for dignity and acceptance.

1.2. HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD

There have been genuine searches in the realm of methods of biblical study over the years. The commendable thing is that it has always found new horizons in the course of time. As a result, there are, not one, but many methods of exegetical study. The primary intention of this genuine search has always been to make the text relevant to the times. Among many of the methods that are discovered it is the Historical Method, that came to be a standard method of interpreting the Bible. "Historical Method is particularly attentive to the historical development of texts or traditions across the

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23. The underlying principle of Historical Criticism is that an ancient text must first be understood in its original context before it can be engaged as a dialogue partner for our day. This entails textual criticism: an analysis of the variants in the Greek manuscripts so as to determine which reading is most likely to have been the original. We do not have original manuscripts of any of the books of New Testament. The oldest of Luke is portion of the Gospel preserved on a Papyrus manuscript. Papyrus dates to the beginning of the third century C. E. The earliest complete text of the Gospel dates to the fourth century.

passage of time. It can be summed up in the term 'diachronic' Historical-Critical method embraces all the methods of inquiry drawn from the humanities (e.g. literary criticism, form criticism, tradition history, rhetorical criticism, redaction criticism, history of religion, biblical theology). Thus it represents all inclusive methods of exegesis and helps to discover holistic meaning.

1.3. CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

The title of the thesis states that we want to make a Christian commitment towards the suffering subaltern peoples. By saying Christian we are specifying that it is a Christian response to the problem. The response of Jesus though not exclusive to Christians alone, for, he is an universal Saviour, is found in the Christian faith.

Commitment means 'a pledge and a promise'. It involves an obligation from the part of one who makes it. Commitment becomes all the more binding as it is born out of a faith experience, lived in experience from self awareness and involved association with the suffering peoples. It is inspired from Christ himself. Commitment calls for an option. Option is for the marginalized subaltern peoples. To be marginalized is not simply to be economically deprived but also to be deprived of political power and human dignity.27


Our concern in the thesis is the plight of the subaltern peoples. The use of the term 'subaltern' is a recent development. It means 'of inferior rank'. Now it is used as a name for general attribute of subordination in society in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way. The subaltern is one from below. The word 'subaltern' could be divided as “sub-altern” meaning 'as those who are below the altar'. People who could be altered. The higher groups of society call the rest of the people as "people" meaning lesser people. Some have treated the subaltern as 'non-people'. Until as late as the years immediately after the Independence of India the ruling class (circars) looked down on the public (those who are ruled) as people (janam), in the sense of subaltern meaning. Subaltern also means those who are "Under class, oppressed, 


31. In 1980s some writers used the term “subaltern" to denote those groups who have been marginalized from the main stream. Indian democracy, however imperfectly, has enabled these groups to find voice and press their claims as equal citizens. See Swapna Dasgupta, in India Today, 28th July, 1997, p. 20.

32. The word “circar" (also transliterated as 'Sarkar') is used for the government in some of Indian languages, especially in the languages with Hindi background. The ruling class or the governing people are called as circar.

33. The word “janam" (root word is from Sanskrit) means "public or common people". It is pejorative word. The ruling or high caste people use this word to the common people, with contempt.
Dalit, bahujan (many people). The word 'subaltern' is always in plural form denoting a group or groups of people.

1.4.1. BIBLE AS SUBALTERN LITERATURE

Touched by the hard realities of life of the subaltern peoples of the biblical world, we shall attempt to read the Bible from the point of view of the sufferings of the subaltern peoples. In the words of Ranjit Guha:

"Written for an oppressed people, it (e.g. the Bible) is truly a part of the Dalit (Subaltern) literature with an unmistakable message for both the victims of oppression and all those who, like us, have actively or by default contributed to their distress."

The subaltern peoples of Andhra Pradesh have similarities with those of the Bible. Bible contains the history of the people of Israel. Though Israel started as one single group, it ended up as many groups. Most of these groups are considered as marginalized subaltern people who long for their identity. The Exodus-Credo known as the 'Historical Creed' of Israel (Deut.26:5-10) manifests the longings of subaltern peoples of Israel. In this quintessence of Israel's faith the subaltern peoples experience freedom and dignity worthy of a people created in the image of God. In the prophetic language the subaltern peoples are same as the 'non-people (Is. 3:12-15). Jesus calls them "Poor" (Lk. 4:18). The elites of Palestine community, considered the subalterns as 'polluted' people. By subaltern reading we mean, reading of the Bible by the subaltern peoples themselves and the people who are committed to the cause of the liberation of the subaltern peoples after


17. They include: Pharisees, Sadducees, High priests, Elders and the Rich.
the praxis of Christ, the Saviour of the marginalized subaltern peoples, in order to restore their dignity and full humanity. It is only when the theologians attempt to do theology from the subaltern perspective that they can unlock its message of liberation relevant to the subaltern peoples.

1.5. CONCLUSION

Any one who is familiar with the exegetical world would find easy to understand the above terms. However, why a particular researcher uses them is the occasion to explain their significance. The purpose of the thesis determines their functions. The terms that we have explained which represent the orientation of the thesis will be used for the achievement of the objective of the thesis. The basic method we follow in our thesis is Hermeneutical study. Hermeneutics too points to further objective of the study. It leads to reader-response method which is the ultimate approach. Reader-Response presupposes hermeneutics. Reader is subaltern himself or one who represents the subaltern peoples.