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The Open Well as Symbol of the Meeting of Heaven and Earth

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Abstract: As an Indian artist working in the field of cross-cultural visual theology, I have taken the open well as a common feature of the landscape where I live as a motif that I can connect with the biblical story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well. This leads to a discussion around the symbolic significance of the water of life. The landscape provides natural elements that are both particular and local but also universal in their cultural significance. The meeting between the thirsty traveler, who is Christ the teacher, and a socially marginalized woman who comes to draw water in the midday heat provides the occasion for a dialogue in the context of asking for water. There is a similar story in the Buddhist tradition where Ananda, the disciple of Buddha, meets with an 'outcaste' woman at a well. Water, which is always found at a lowly place, becomes a symbol for the socially depressed. What is below must be lifted if the living water is to renew and transform the searcher. The encounter at the well can become the basis for a dialogue between religions concerning the need for social inclusion.

Keywords: symbol of water; heaven meeting earth; interreligious dialogue; social transformation; cross-cultural narratives; visual theology

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1. Introduction: A Cultural Approach to the Meeting at the Well

1.1. The Sacred in the Landscape

When my family and I settled in a village north of Bengaluru in South Karnataka, I was keen to study the rural culture which I observed in the countryside around me. This study indicated a sense of the sacred in nature which was common to all vernacular cultures that are close to the earth. It was also linked to sketches that I made of the landscape. The sketches and paintings I discuss in this article can be viewed through the links in the endnote 1 (Sahi 2021)[1].

I have always been very interested in representing the landscape, not just because of an attraction to the scenic or picturesque but because I feel that religious art draws its deepest inspiration from a sense of the sacred in the visible creation which we see around us. The landscape that I viewed around the piece of land on which we had chosen to build our home had become for me an extension of that place. It provided a feeling of a "lived" landscape, both an objective countryside but also a subjective inner world created through a sense of belonging. The poet–priest Gerard Manley Hopkins had envisioned, through his poetic imagination, what he called an "inscape" (Gardiner 1967). This meant an inner world of meaning and significance, which was both an objective way of seeing the world around him and an awareness of how that world touched his emotions that were the way to a spiritual world.

What immediately drew my attention was the way that village life centered around water sources. In the South Karnataka landscape of the Deccan Plateau, there are no big rivers nearby, though small streams originating in the stony outcrops of hills that surround the city of Bengaluru define the watershed pattern of flowing streams created by rainfall that irrigates the earth, which has a rich red color. Village settlements have been formed adjacent to ponds, or village "tanks", created by low dikes in places where water has been found to accumulate. These artificially engineered agricultural tanks are known by the term *kere* and are common lands where animals are brought to drink and graze in the tank bed. The fine clay washed down from the surrounding fields accumulates, creating a rich

source of material used not only to fertilize fields but also for the village potter to make artifacts and a local industry of brick making.

Often near the *kere*, but more a part of the village, is a well or group of wells that have been made to resource the underground aquifers that are fed by the harvested water in the nearby open *kere*. However, there are also many large stone open wells that even have stone steps embedded in the wall of the well so that they become step-wells leading down to the water table below the surface of the land. Here, stone pillars were erected into which a pulley system was constructed, allowing for different ways of lifting the water up by vessels that can then be poured into irrigation channels. When we first settled in the village more than forty years ago, there were different systems in place to lift water for household use, giving water to thirsty animals, and channeling a stream of water to a nearby market garden (or small plantation) which was also believed to be a sacred domain. I recall that on entering an enclosed space in which trees and vines had been planted, we were required to take off our shoes as the garden enclosure was thought to be holy.

The various ways in which water was being harvested and used for agriculture were tied in with a system of folk beliefs. Granite slabs erected near the *bunds*, or village dikes, that contained the harvested water had relief carvings of snake deities or Mother goddesses. A village shrine would also often be found near to these sources of water in which the termite hill would be venerated as a symbol of elemental energy. Such shrines would be called *kshetra pala* or keepers of the fields. On certain days of the festival, processions from the village would come to a sacred cluster of trees near the *kere*, and rituals would be performed to the presence of spirits on whose guardianship the agricultural life of the community depended.

In sketching the countryside around our home, I was also discovering how this landscape was rendered holy by a pattern of water sources closely associated with village life. My first painting of the "Woman at the Well" (John 4:5–26) was painted soon after we came to live near a village where a small well had been constructed at the center of a group of houses, surrounded by a plinth which also served as a meeting place. Nearby was a sacred *mahua* tree which commemorated the spirit of a village ancestor (see Sahi 2021, pp. 1–3).

1.2. Jesus on the Indian Road

I have tried to imagine Jesus in the Indian landscape. This has been an aspect of my approach, as an artist, to the idea behind contextualizing the Gospel in the Indian cultural context.

E. Stanley Jones wrote an important series of reflections on his life as a missionary in India, profoundly influenced by the spiritual quest of Mahatma Gandhi (Jones 1925). In this book, Stanley Jones imagined Jesus walking like Gandhi along the dusty roads of the Indian subcontinent, engaged in what the *Sarvodaya* movement of Gandhi was calling *padayatra* or a pilgrimage by foot. I put together some of my thoughts on what was called "inculturation" as "The Jesus of the Indian Way". I painted two large paintings for a center in Patna on the theme of the Road to Emmaus[2]. I represented the Risen Christ walking beside a sacred grove that I sketched many times near our home, talking to the two disciples.The Indian Christian artist Angelo da Fonseca has painted this scene several times. In one of his paintings, which I saw in Pune, he had shown the two disciples on the way as being Tagore and Gandhi.

In my work, I have been influenced by Indian painters who have depicted biblical scenes set in the Indian landscape but also reflected Indian cultural traditions. For example, another artist coming from Goa, called Angela Trinidade, has shown the theme of Jesus by the well in an Indian way, using the Indian style of painting to be found in the art of Ajanta and later the Bengal School of Art style.

For me, the important aspect of representing Jesus in a landscape very different to the one which he walked through around Judea was the commission that the Risen Lord gave to his disciples as recorded in the Book of Acts.

> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth". (Acts 1:7–8)

This commission to go to the "end of the earth" was understood as a journey that the disciples would make in the company of Jesus as the two disciples walked with Jesus to Emmaus. It is not only the disciples who now become pilgrims, but Jesus too.

The great Indian mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, had a vision on the ghats of Kolkata in which he saw a saffron-clothed *sannyasi* approaching him. Swami Nichilananda has described this vision of Sri Ramakrishna which took place in November 1874:

> . . . as he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw coming towards him a person with beautiful large eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice rang out in the depths of Sri Ramakrishna's soul: "Behold the Christ who shed His heart's blood for the redemption of the world, who suffered a sea of anguish for love of men. It is He, the master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, love incarnate." The Son of Man embraced the Son of the divine Mother and merged in him. (Nikhilananda 1974, p. 56)

Richard W. Taylor also refers to this vision of Sri Ramakrishna in his book *Jesus in Indian Paintings*. He says that the important South Indian painter K.C.S. Paniker spoke of the way in which Sri Ramakrishna (in one account of his vision) remarked on the Semitic nose of Jesus, whom he saw. According to Taylor, this feature of Jesus in India is represented in several of Paniker's paintings of Jesus in Indian garb (Taylor 1975, p. 74).

In my own efforts to represent Jesus in the Indian cultural context, I have been very much influenced by the book by the Brahmo P.C. Mazoomdar entitled *The Oriental Christ*. Mazoomdar, who was a close associate of Keshab Chander Sen, writes in his introduction to a series of meditations on the life of Jesus in an Indian cultural context that in 1867 (even before the Vision of Sri Ramakrishna), he had a personal experience of Jesus:

> Suddenly, it seemed to me, let me own it was revealed to me, that close to me there was a holier, more blessed, most loving personality upon which (sic) I might repose my troubled head. Jesus lay discovered in my heart as a strange, human, kindred love, as a repose (sic), a sympathetic consolation, an unpurchased treasure to which I was invited. (Mazoomdar 1898, p. 11)

Interestingly, Mazoomdar begins by discussing Jesus bathing. He begins his meditation on Christ and water by remarking, "Water to the Oriental means perpetual blessedness, the rain which fertilizes is God's grace, inspiration. We in India, at various times have worshipped the God of rain" (Mazoomdar 1898, p. 47).

There has been a tension between "translating" the Gospel into an Indian culture (through Indian languages and images) and seeing the difference between the Gospel tradition and its biblical origins from an Indian traditional cultural viewpoint. The Gospel does offer a new way of seeing what is universal.

In this essay, I will explore the significance of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman by Jacob's Well as a meeting of Jesus, the practicing Jew, with a person of another religious tradition. This meeting with the "Other," who is of a different culture and another religious faith, is an important aspect of the encounter that Christians have had in India and other Asian countries with people of other faiths. It is interesting to note that it is often in this creative and open domain of the imagination that such a meeting can take place as an open and sincere dialogue. It is remarkable that many non-Christians have been attracted to the Gospel, precisely because it offers a different approach to spirituality, which they have been able to integrate with their own.

2. A Spiritual Approach to Dialogue with the Woman at the Well

Reading the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman by the well, I am made increasingly aware of its multi-layered spiritual dimension. The effort to represent Jesus in

an Indian context, which includes the Indian landscape, and to consider the way that the physical environment has shaped a cultural identity, has led me to take into account the spiritual experience that defines a community. Spiritual culture is indebted to its geographic setting, which includes features of the landscape like mountains, patterns of agriculture, and the presence of water. Spiritual life is embodied through the natural environment.

The medieval Indian mystic and philosopher Sri Ramanuja Acharya spoke of the world as the body of God. The spirituality that we find in the Gospel of John is also an embodied mysticism in that it does not reject the body, but gives the body a deep spiritual meaning. This is the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystical body of Christ, and a belief in the transforming reality of the Resurrection. In light of this combination of spirituality with an experience of the sacred in nature, the story of Jesus' teaching to the Samaritan woman has a cosmic dimension that she was able to understand intuitively as she belonged to a spiritual tradition that had a sense of the sacred in creation. Because of this awareness, she was able to confess to Jesus "I perceive you are a prophet" (John 4:19).

The Samaritan woman takes the request of Jesus for water very literally. She points out that he has no vessel and no rope to draw water from the depths. When he says that if she really knew the truth, she would be the one asking him for living water, she cannot understand what he means. The symbolic and the literal are linked, but the symbolic meaning of life is a layer below the literal understanding of texts. Jesus speaks of knowing in "spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). This challenge to go beyond our limited understanding of a local tradition or a religious belief system interrogates what we call "fundamentalism". Jesus is proposing a new way of understanding the meaning of life-giving water.

2.1. A Door into a New Way of Seeing

There is an old tradition that links the structure of the scaffolding, which is used in an open well to support the pulley that draws up water to the shape of a door frame[3]. This structure resembles the Greek letter π. It is a frame through which we look. The woman at the well looks through such a frame to see her reflection in the water of the well. The still surface of the water in a well is compared to a mirror. To gaze into the well is also to see oneself. The beginning of all wisdom is this self-knowledge. Jesus invites the Samaritan woman to know herself. In that sense, the human being, who comes to the well to satisfy a physical need, is called upon to discover an inner self knowledge.

In several of my paintings, I have tried to show that the woman at the well is in fact discovering herself. She is the rock that is being struck by the teacher. It is also from her own resources that she is invited to find that inner spring, which is the source of wisdom. Jesus said that the "kingdom of heaven is within you" (Luke 17:21). The well is a space, which, like the threshold to an inner world, is a liminal space. Jesus stands at the door, knocking. The opening of the well is like a window through which we are initiated into spiritual or contemplative consciousness. The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, speaks of water as the place that invites us to reverie—and by extension also to a deep reverence for life (Bachelard 1999). In a psychological sense, the groundwater of our human existence is the unconscious from which we draw on a living source a power that can transform our waking consciousness.

The Samaritan woman related the well to the ancestor Jacob. The well for her was the gift of a long spiritual tradition, which was also a cultural memory. She reminds Jesus, "Our Fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (John 4:20). The whole problem of where to worship is related to what Mircea Eliade terms as a hierophany. A particular place is experienced as having a spiritual energy. This may be on account of some event or meeting. The ford where Jacob wrestled with an angel was such a hierophany. The dream Jacob had at Bethel, of a ladder linking heaven and earth, was another hierophany (Eliade 1958, pp. 107–9). Such places connect with cultural memories. They often become places of pilgrimage, where a community goes to re-affirm a cultural identity.

2.2. Encounter as Cultural and Spiritual Dialogue

As noted earlier in this essay, an important aspect of the context of the Gospel story is that the Samaritans were regarded by orthodox Jews as a breakaway branch of the Abrahamic tradition. During the Assyrian invasion of Judea, around eighth century BCE, foreign groups settled in parts of the Northern Kingdom of Judea, bringing with them their own distinctive cultural traditions. For them, the mountain of Gerizim was the focus of their spiritual life, and they did not regard Jerusalem as the most important city. For Jews, Samaria was like a foreign land, and so the fact that Jesus went to preach the Kingdom of God in Samaria, and even encountered the Syrophoenician woman when he crossed over to the land of Tyre and Sidon, as reported in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 7:26), indicates that Jesus had already begun to spread his Gospel beyond the enclosed world of orthodox Jews. His mission was to encounter those who were thought of as "other" and in some way impure, and not chosen by God. This movement to include the Gentile "other" cultures within a wider understanding of God's Kingdom, which is open to all, initiates a new mission whose outreach encompasses the "ends of the Earth" (Acts 1:11).

Relating to Indian cultural traditions inevitably brought me into contact with the spirituality and diversity of religions of India. At first, my main concern was to think about the way that Indian Christians might respond to the insights to be found in the Vedic tradition and the wisdom of the Vedanta. Some Christians concerned with a contemplative spirituality spoke of the "perennial philosophy or tradition" to be found in all mystical insights (Armstrong 2007, pp. xx–xxi). An experience of the divine and the sacred in creation is a universal gift to the human consciousness. When I began to study the folk cultures of rural India, which led me on to Adivasi and Dalit traditions, I was aware that this perennial tradition can be found in all forms of spirituality. The creation myths, and also folk legends that characterize the folk cultures in India, have a deep underlying sense of the sacred in nature. This creation spirituality is profoundly respectful of the environment and cherishes all forms of life. Such an ecological worldview can be found not only in folk cultures but also underlying the spiritual experience of Hindu mystics and Buddhist sages.

The Christian faith over the centuries has also incorporated this primeval sense of the divine presence in creation. A natural step from a recognition of this experience of the holy, to see that what permeates the biblical belief in a divine will guiding all creatures, should be in harmony with a similar impulse found in all those cultures that are close to the land. Here, a symbolic world that celebrates holy mountains, rivers, rocks, or trees, can certainly be given a spiritual significance that is in harmony with the Christian faith.

One aspect of this meeting between an understanding of the Gospel message and the wisdom to be found in Indian spirituality is the recognition that all forms of spirituality lead to what might be termed an eco-theology. This was the concept behind the Assisi Declaration that recognized a shared vision between religions and conservation.[4]

A sense of environmental degradation became very apparent in the 1980s. In our own village environment, we noticed how the open wells, which were a common feature in the countryside where we lived, were running dry. The water table was sinking due to the over-exploitation of natural resources, including water. The depletion of fresh groundwater has become a constant concern, especially for the poor and marginalized in village communities, who do not own land and have no easy access to water being pumped up from ever deeper levels through bore wells controlled by landlords.

The ancient pattern of water harvesting related to wells and systems of lift irrigation, which respect the need to replenish water resources through the natural rhythm of seasonal rains, has been taken over by a growing crisis concerning the scarcity of freshwater all over the world. A farmer near us announced, after he had made a bore well on his property, that now he no longer had to depend on the rainy season but could draw water from the depths to feed his crops, irrespective of natural cycles that have determined agricultural work from ancient times. A social worker once remarked on the "disappearance of the threshing floor" in villages, as mechanization and modern techniques of agriculture have changed rural life through developmental programs. The same could be said of the "disappearance

of the open well". Both the threshing floor and the open well played an important role in bringing village people together. In a rural economy, which was as much concerned with community life and sharing the fruits of the earth as economic growth, the loss of these common spaces has destroyed a system of social exchange.

Technological advances, which were hailed as the future of a "green revolution," were engineered through the introduction of new machines that can move the earth, till the land, and explore for deep sources of water below the rock that is a characteristic feature of the Karnataka landscape. Tensions in the local community are increasingly politicized, with states fighting over water distribution as more are built to store water for distribution to the villagers who have political clout. It has been remarked that future wars will be over the just sharing of water resources. The encounter at the well is not only a coming together of persons who approach a well in order to collect water for drinking but is also an occasion for dialogue in the context of cultural exchange. Human beings exchange historical memories that are embedded in the fabric of the landscape, where events are situated and communities are located.

2.3. Water and Power

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman can be related to the need not only to address marginalized groups but also to think about the importance of water for the survival of such groups. Jesus claimed that he had the secret of life-giving water which would never dry up. The Samaritan woman then asked Jesus to give her this water, so she did not have to come all the time to fetch water from this deep well. The perennial stream of living water that Jesus was speaking about was not that groundwater, which bore wells access by breaking through layers of hard granite rock, but an inner source of wisdom that promises to sustain spiritual life.

Spiritual renewal is often related to drawing water from hidden springs. The image of Moses striking the rock in the desert and providing water for those who were dying of thirst in the desert has been interpreted at different levels. The symbol of the rock which was "opened up" by the staff of Moses to release the stream of life (Numbers 20) becomes an important metaphor in the Bible (see Psalm 105:41). The rock is the foundation for all that is permanent in nature. This rock, however, was rejected. A future spiritual order must use the rejected "coping stone" to build a new Jerusalem, constructed on the Rock which is believed to be Christ himself. This rock had to be pierced as Jesus died on the Cross in order that a new stream might flow from the side of the Lord. The image of the rejected and pierced rock recurs in the poetic thought of the early Christians (see Daniélou 1964; Murray 1975).

Though spiritual life can be found everywhere, access to that life must respect the hard realities of what is local and limited. God gives rain to water the earth, but it is for human beings to work and make storage places and wells that give access to that heavenly rain. The universal and the local are linked. This has also been an important insight when speaking of the need to respect the local sources of life in a community. Local cultures, like wells, are a means by which particular communities, with their own history and rootedness in the land, find the universal springs of wisdom that can feed their local spiritual traditions. The distribution of water as a source of life is enmeshed in the power politics of a community. The powerful lay claim on water sources, but the recognition of human need and the renewing and sustaining power of water itself means that access to water is itself empowering. The individual feels empowered when his or her need for water is recognized. The distribution of water is a means of acknowledging livelihoods, and human dignity.

2.4. Meeting the Spirit as Embodied in a Particular Place of Cultural Memory

Places that are believed to have spiritual power can also be associated with water and its life-giving presence in a particular landscape. A source of water is known in India as a *tirtha*, meaning a spring, or *sangam*, referring to where streams meet. In the epics, a whole

section of the Mahabharata relates to *tirthayatra*, a journey to visit a place associated with a source of wisdom, a holy wellspring (see Eck 2012, p. 70).

The prophets of the Jewish tradition waged a mighty struggle against the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18). The Baal tradition in Canaanite religious history was associated with deep sources of water (see Buber 1949, p. 72) and consequently with fertility cults. Jesus answers the woman, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (John 4:21). Jesus often discounts holy places that are just sites that commemorate religious history or ritual cults. He famously said of the Temple at Jerusalem, the holiest site for Jewish pilgrimage, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days" (John 2:19). But we are told that he was referring here to his own body, which was raised from the dead after three days. The human body is the true temple and not a particular place. This is an understanding of the real sacred space that we also find in the poetic utterances of the bhakti poets. The concept is essentially the same as Jesus speaking of the Kingdom of God being "within you".

When Christian missionaries first encountered the spiritual ideas of Adivasi communities, the reaction was that these aboriginal people were animists or pantheists. These terms are now being qualified by anthropologists. Do primal peoples really believe that a mountain, a river, or a particular rock or tree is a god? Or rather is their real intention to say that a divine or spiritual force is being manifested in such visual and tangible objects? The theologian Raimon Panikkar speaks of a "cosmo-theandric" experience, which is not just to be called pantheism but rather "pan-entheism," a doctrine that God is greater than the universe and includes and interpenetrates it. When Jesus said that living waters flowed from his body, he was referring to a cosmic understanding of the body which Panikkar also speaks of as a "Christophany" (Panikkar 1993, p. 152; 2006).

In my understanding of the spiritual insights in Adivasi traditions and folk religion generally, this dimension of the cosmic could be termed "pan-entheism". This sense of the holy comes nearest to an experience of that primal spirituality that is aniconic, not giving the divine an anthropomorphic form, but experiencing the holy in the elemental or the cosmic. This, I feel, is the basis for a creation theology that emerges from such fundamental symbols as we find in the Adivasi tradition. Above, I spoke of an embodied mysticism that does not separate bodily forms from a spiritual energy. The inner life animates the external body, and these become one in a vision of reality that does not separate inner from outer.

2.5. Water and Compassion

In my images of Jesus teaching by Jacob's Well, the Samaritan woman is herself the stream that flows from his compassionate heart.[5] This quality of compassion, which is so central to the Buddhist tradition, is an empathy that is not just pity, but a real entering into the experience of the Other. Jesus reaches out to the otherness of the Samaritan woman by recognizing in some intuitive way, that though she is outside the traditional world of Jewish piety, she is capable of real faith. The same openness to a woman who is an outsider is found when the Syrophoenician woman approaches Jesus, asking him to cure her daughter (Mark 7:26). His first reaction is that his mission is primarily to the Jewish people; but when she says that even dogs can pick up the crumbs that fall from the table of the children of the house, Jesus is able to marvel at her faith, and in that compassionate acceptance of her as a searching and believing person, cures her daughter.

The mystery of water is related to the power of compassion. Water is understood in Taoist Buddhism of the Far East as having a strength that is greater even than the hardest and most resistant rock. Water, we are told, seeks the lowest place, but through its very humility can overcome the strong: "What is of all things most yielding (water) can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard (rock)" (Waley and Laozi 1934, p. 197). It is this giving-quality of water that reminds us of the statement of St. Paul that in his weakness, the strength of God is made manifest (2 Corinthians 12:9). From a Buddhist point of view, emptiness, which is also related to the open space within the earthen vessel, is potentially the fullness of a world infused by the sacred.

In the next section of this essay, I present the legend of the disciple of the Buddha called Ananda, who, on his daily round of begging for food in villages, comes upon Prakriti, who belongs to the outcaste (Dalit) Chandala community. Her name, Prakriti, means "of nature".[6] Ananda begs from her some water as he is thirsty. She is surprised and shocked that a high-born monk should approach her for water as the very touch of a Chandala is polluting. When he insists that all water is pure, he seems to also point to the purity in every human being, whatever their social background.

Here we come to ritual beliefs regarding purity and pollution. Water is associated with washing away dirt. The tradition of baptism to cleanse inner impurity relates to this universal aspect of water as a purifying agent in nature. However, water itself, in the very process of cleansing, becomes polluted (see Douglas 1966; Ricoeur 1967). In this sense, there is the belief that water, especially in a well, becomes polluted through contact with those considered ritually unclean. This is the idea behind untouchability in the Indian caste system. Outcastes are not allowed to draw water from the wells reserved for the ritually pure. However, in the story of Ananda and the Chandala young woman, Ananda compassionately says that all water is pure, independent of those who give the water.

Although the issue of purity comes up in the biblical texts concerning dietary laws and became an issue among early Christians, as discussed in the First Council of Jerusalem, this has not been an issue in Latin American countries where liberation theology was first understood as a key hermeneutical approach to the Bible. The implications of purity and pollution continue to be a burning issue in social relations between castes in India, to this day. For this reason, those concerned with a liberation theology meaningful for the Indian cultural and religious situation must deal with the problem of ritual purity.

3. Social Dimensions of Jesus Meeting the Samaritan at the Well

I first encountered this legend in a booklet entitled *The Face of the Buddha* (see Sahi 2010, p. 56). In that booklet I read:

> The Buddha taught his disciples to see the One Life in all and to respect the least among the lost. Ananda, passing one day by a well and seeing an "untouchable" girl drawing water, asks her for water to drink. She humbly says: "O thou of noble birth! I am an untouchable. How can I give you water to drink?" Ananda answers: "Caste matters nothing to me. I ask for water". (Mira Union 1957, p. 20)

Several Christian thinkers have made the connection between this biblical narrative and a Buddhist understanding of human dignity that transcends caste. This rendering of a Buddhist legend caught the imagination of other artists and writers in India in the twentieth century and was depicted in various art forms.

This Buddhist story appealed to Rabindranath Tagore, and his creative interpretation of the ancient legend in the form of a three-act dance drama, *Chandalika*, was written and staged in Bengali in 1938 and later translated into English (Tagore 1950). Tagore discovered this legend in a collection of ancient Buddhist texts from Nepal, which had been translated and edited by Rajendralala Mitra, a scholar linked to the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Mitra 1882, p. 223). Tagore reworked the story, found in the tale of Sardukarrna Abadam, in this collection of Sanskrit texts (Tagore 1950). In this text we find a long discourse in which the Buddha puts forward many logical arguments against the institution of caste, pointing out that all human beings are equal and that there is no difference between a Chandala and a Brahmin. The fundamental critique of the caste system, clearly articulated in this ancient Sanskrit work, shows that the Buddhist tradition rejected the Brahminical understanding of the caste system.

When visiting Sarnath, I found in the Mahabodhi Buddhist meditation hall a mural representing the story of Ananda meeting Prakriti. I was particularly interested to note how this image was also meaningful for the Dalit movement in India. Reflecting on this Buddhist dimension of the story of a meeting between a high-born monk and a marginalized and socially rejected young woman helped me to relate the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman by the well to a Dalit theology (cf. Grey 2005; Sadiq 2018).

It is this Buddhist critique of the caste system that also attracted Dr. Ambedkar to adopt a modern interpretation of the early Buddhist understanding of the equality of all human beings, to create a "Navayana" or "new vehicle" version of Buddhism and to invite Dalits to convert to this kind of neo-Buddhism. The mass conversion of Mahar Dalits took place in Nagpur in 1955, just prior to the time when the booklet, *The Face of Buddha*, was published.

Volker Küster (Küster 2010) discusses a painting by the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Hatigamanana Uttarananda entitled "The Woman at the Well". He quotes a poem from an early Buddhist Theravada tradition about a woman called Sunita, who like Prakriti, becomes a Buddhist nun even though she belongs to an outcaste sweeper community. In the poem, Sunita declares that she is from a poor and humble family whose "lowly" work was to "dispose of withered flowers". She relates how she was reviled and despised by all until the day when the Enlightened One enters the city of Magadhas. On that day she approaches "the great hero" to pay homage. She relates how "out of sympathy," he stood still and received her plea to be admitted to the order (see Kenneth Roy 2007).

The different narratives, relating to the meeting of an ascetic teacher and the woman at the well who has come to fetch drinking water, involve several questions. In the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we are made conscious of the meeting of two cultural traditions which have been opposed to each other; John's Gospel describes a Jewish rabbi in dialogue with a Samaritan woman of doubtful ethical standing. In the Buddhist story of Ananda meeting the Dalit woman, the challenge is of an ascetical monk meeting a young woman of a social group that is outside the caste hierarchy. The latter story raises the question of caste identity and the dignity of the human person.

In both narratives, the importance of a woman and her spiritual search are central. Ethnicity and gender equality are addressed by these narratives. Water plays a crucial role in the physical context of the dialogue. Because the elemental is the common basis for human life, the story carries ecological importance in today's context as well.

The Lowly Should Be Lifted Up

The idea of liberation, which is as important to the biblical tradition as a creation theology, is also found in the bhakti movement, which reached North India from the fourteenth century onwards. The fifteenth-century poet Kabir, who combined a Sufi tradition from his Weaver community in Varanasi with the bhakti mystical spirituality, also weaves into many of his poems a radical attack on the prevailing Hindu caste system.

I have been very inspired by the poetic imagery that informs the vision of Kabir, which brings together the prophetic tradition of the Judeo-Christian and Abrahamic monotheism with a radical humanism that attracted Rabindranath Tagore as well as M.K. Gandhi. There are various Dalit movements in the North of India that have drawn insights from the socially engaged songs of Kabir.

The poetic language of Kabir is composed of metaphors that are termed "upside-down" metaphors (*ulat bansi*) (see Linda and Singh 1983, pp. 136–61). This concept of a language that inverts what we assume to be normal (the right way up), creating a new way of seeing reality, is almost a surrealistic form of art. G.K. Chesterton suggests that sometimes by standing on one's head like the playful juggler or looking at the world in an upside-down way, one sees reality from a fresh perspective. This, he suggested, was the distinctive vision of St. Francis of Assisi, who was influenced by the spirituality of French troubadours (Chesterton 1924, pp. 73–75).

"The Waterwheel" is a story told of a Sufi sage called Malik Shah. He was sitting in a garden under a banyan tree, praying his rosary. So powerful was his practice of *zikr* that a Persian wheel in a well in the garden kept on turning all night. When the owner of the garden returned in the morning, he found that his garden was flooded with water, and believing that the Sufi sitting innocently under a tree was responsible, he asked him to leave. But when the Sufi sage left the garden, to the amazement of the gardener, the huge tree under which he was sitting uprooted itself and began to follow Malik Shah so that he

might not feel the heat of the sun. Then, the water wheel also disengaged itself from the well to follow the Sufi saint. After that, even the flowers in the garden began to hop after Malik Shah. Then, the gardener realized that the praying Sufi had become the life and soul of the garden (Chatterjee 1994, chp. XVI).

I have worked on an image of a "tree of fishes". The tree can be seen as an inverted well, in that the sap which comes from underground streams rises through the tree in the same way that the water wheel brings up what is below, to give life to what is above.

The relation of the tree to the well represents a kind of ecological cycle. The image of the banyan tree is found in the Bhagavad Gita (15.1–3) and the Katha Upanishad (Sixth Valli), as the upside-down tree that has its roots above and its branches below (see Coomaraswamy 1997). In a sense, this represents the grace that comes down from above, in the same way that rain or snow falls on the mountains from above to give life to the earth.

> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
>
> And return not thither but water the earth,
>
> Making it bring forth and sprout
>
> Giving seed to the sower, and bread to the eater,
>
> So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. (Isaiah 55:10)

I have used the image of the banyan tree, whose aerial roots come down from above to represent the way that spiritual life descends to unite the earth to the heavens.[7]

In the same way, what is below arises, and the leaves of a tree are like the fishes in the streams below. The image of the well can represent a social revolution, through which what is considered lowly can become a source of life and beauty when brought up into the light of day.

Water plays an important part in the poetic works of Kabir. Naturally, he spent his whole life on the banks of the River Ganges, and water was an essential component of his work with dyed cloth, whose fiber is stained with colors mixed with water. This color can be seen as giving beauty, but there is also the idea of pollution—dirty clothes must be continually washed, and Kabir reminds us that no cloth lasts forever. The very fabric that the weaver creates, like the human body, is in one sense a "robe of glory," but in another sense, is doomed to tear apart and die.

4. Conclusions

In my work as an artist trying to relate the Christian tradition to the culture and ways of creative expression that we find in Indian culture, the image of the well and the kind of dialogue that takes place between men and women who come to the well has been an important metaphor.

The sacred landscape reveals the meeting of heaven and earth. The symbol of the open well demonstrates the grace that the waters of life give by descending as rain from above. The scaffolding around the well simulates the ladder that is also a way of ascent, drawing what is below up, so as to quench the spiritual thirst of the earth-born.

I began my journey as an artist by looking at the landscape around where I live and trying to imagine how Jesus might be represented as walking through the Indian landscape as the eternal pilgrim. How would this pilgrim Christ view the world around him?

This journey has led me to reflect on an encounter with other faith traditions and to explore the way that the Christian tradition might dialogue with other cultures and spiritual expressions that are embodied in the different faiths that comprise the diversity of religions in our world today.

However, this dialogue cannot be indifferent to the grave forms of injustice that we find in all cultural and religious forms because of human weakness and limited understanding of the truth. The encounter between faiths must be both accepting and interrogating. We constantly must ask ourselves what the truth is. That is why being bearers of the Gospel truth demands that we also look into ourselves and understand our own weaknesses.

I believe that art forms offer a unique possibility for such a search and process of dialogue to take place, which is both compassionate and prophetic. If the misuse of water resources spells the possibility of conflicts and destruction of our natural habitat, the lack of understanding and respect between cultural and religious traditions also threatens to break apart communities and lead to ever-widening cycles of war and destruction. Art is a way to dialogue, but it is also a deeply human longing for peace.

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Notes

[1] To view the images referenced in this article, follow the link: Sahi, Jyoti. 2021. The Meeting at the Open Well. Available online: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mcGlj8SRSk6qxq2UB-nKKm_M3EGfsK2op0LvbtB4ovU/edit?usp=sharing (accessed on 2 January 2022).

[2] I painted these on plyboard for the Jeevan Jyoti Catechetical Centre in Patna in 1974.

[3] View "A New Way of Seeing the Outsider" at (Sahi 2021, p. 4).

[4] The Assisi Declaration gave messages on humanity and nature from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. This Declaration was formulated in Assisi when leaders of different faith traditions met in 1986.

[5] The woman at the well herself becomes the stream of water flowing from the compassionate heart of Jesus. The reader may view "The Stream of Life" and "The Way of the Woman at the Well", linked at (Sahi 2021, pp. 5–6).

[6] The term "Prakrit" is contrasted to "Samskrit" and is also understood as a vernacular idiom. In the Tantric tradition Purusha (spiritual force) is contrasted with "Prakriti". The legend of Ananda and Prikriti has Tantric overtones.

[7] See "The Milk of Compassion" at (Sahi 2021, p. 8). The aerial roots of the banyan tree reach from above to touch the earth, and in this way symbolize what is heavenly reaching down to the ground. In this way, the banyan tree (*ficus indica*) is understood as providing shade and protection, and the "grace of the guru" who is seated on a platform under this tree. The reader may view images related to the well in Kabir's poetic imagery" at (Sahi 2021, p. 9).

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