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The Relationship Between Ideology and Doing Theology from the Perspective of the Marginalised in Asia

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Introduction

Asia is vast, complex and highly differentiated. Plurality of religions, cultures, ideologies and theologies marks the character and composition of Asia. Kyoto to Calcutta is a long distance. India and Indonesia are certainly not the same. Therefore in attempting to relate theology to ideology within the diversity is difficult and challenging. But the task is important and necessary for thinking and action in Asia. In spite of our present differences as Asians we have certain commonalities in terms of our history and heritage, in terms of our religions and cultures. Our experiences in the recent past have been similar if not the same. Therefore there are definitive convergences in spite of our respective complexities. My task is made little easier as I am called upon to develop the theme from the perspective of the poor and the marginalised. I will highlight the Indian reality as she is the best paradigm of the poor in Asia.

Ideological Shift in the World—in Asia

Increasingly, Asia in general and certain nations in particular are turning to the Right and becoming blatantly and deliberately capitalistic-oriented. This significant shift in Asia has become more perceptible and openly visible in last five years. The fall of the Berlin wall, unification of Germanys, elimination of the U.S.S.R. and the opening up of the East

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European countries have accelerated the process in Asia. The Cold war seemed to have ended and the ideological confrontation since 1918 seem to be over at the global level. The American ideology has conquered and we are all living in a unipolar world which basically means a capitalistic world. People like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl had taken the initiatives to build such a world.

Such a radical ideological shift to the Right has significantly affected or affecting many newly-born nations of Asia including China, paving the way to economic growth. There is euphoria and excitement in the West as nations in Asia become 'open', 'liberalised' and privatised. I had written in 1991,

So-called liberalisation cannot bring liberation for the many millions in the world. Liberalisation basically means freedom of the few against the many millions of poor people particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America This ideology cannot promote the theology of involvement and engagement but of isolationism and escape from the fundamental problems of poverty and liberation.¹

Today, after five years, those words are more true. The poor have become poorer and simultaneously the rich have become richer. Thus the *GAP* has become more than ever before more pronounced and visible. The hegemony of the West is well entrenched.

Such an ideological shift calls for sober reflection and critical analysis. What kind of issues are crystallising and what kind of conclusions are we to draw from it? What kind of a shift has been made—to whose benefit and at what cost? On the one hand we rejoice and express solidarity with those millions for overthrowing dictatorship of the Left and authoritarianism of the Right and moving meaningfully to a measure of social freedom and democracy. But precisely at that point they have to work out critically and painfully the nature and scope of this new-found freedom. It is important and necessary to maximise freedom for all people in economic, social and political terms. Does the sovereignty lie with the people? Therefore it is essential to realise that this is not a moment of triumph of Adam Smith over Karl Marx. On the contrary, John Galbraith has rightly written that this is an opportunity and a challenge

to re-read both Adam Smith and Karl Marx and redefine ideology in the modern time. It would be a tragedy if in Asia we make a complete shift from socialism to capitalism; from State control to private (market) control; from a communal world to a privatised, individualistic world that does not take cognizance of the plurality of reality particularly in Asia.

Now after about five or six years it is necessary to raise fundamental questions about the value and validity of privatisation, market economy, concentration of wealth and consequent power which are all perceived as 'liberalisation'. We must realise that we live in a broken, divided world—rich North and poor South. More important such an ideology has and will continue to manipulate the minds and hearts of people. What is happening to our traditional cultures, religions and societies? What is happening to our traditional values under the impact of such an ideological shift? Have we lost our independence, identity and integrity? Shall we continue cloning, imitating the West, losing our initiative, imagination and the power of innovation? Commodification and market will henceforth determine our existence. Both the rich and the poor in Asia will have to ask themselves these and other hard questions.

The ideological shift of our time is another form of totalitarianism, strengthening and reinforcing the totalitarianism practised in countries like China, Burma, Indonesia and till recently Taiwan. Totalitarian ideology of the Right is equally bad if not worse than the totalitarian ideology of the Left. One form cannot be replaced by another form which is more subtle and pernicious. State collectivism should not or ought not to be substituted by a shallow, unhealthy and unequal competition and rugged individualism.² Globalisation of Asia is at the cost of localisation or contextualisation. In the name of freedom or free enterprise both the rich nations and the poor nations in Asia are experiencing new bondages, more subtle and diabolical than immediate, direct and visible colonialism. Thus slavery may be over in some countries of Asia but slavish mentality or mind-set is our lot.

Ideological Shift in India

India is the best example in Asia of this ideological shift in last five years and the results are now for all to see. Since 1991, the Government of India deliberately decided on what has come to be known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). This means that it is an official, institutional attempt to abandon Gandhian or Nehruvian socialism and openly embrace Western type of capitalism. This is an attempt to abandon completely controls, restrictions and limitations of all sorts. This is the meaning of deregulations, delicensing—negating permit-raj, opening the Indian economy or the Indian market to foreign investment including the non-resident Indian (NRI) investment and the multinationals (MNCs or the TNCs). The hegemony of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the GATT (present WTO) are openly recognised and acknowledged. This means that in last six years the Indian Government has been willing to subject itself to the philosophy, procedures, criteria and assessment of such Western Institutions. This is the way that the Indian economy has sought to absorb itself into the world economy. This is called globalisation. But in fact it is Western or capitalist ideology. Now after five or six years, the basic question is about its implications or results.

India is one of the poorest countries in the world—one of the poorest even within the nations of Asia in terms of Gross National Product (GNP, per capita income or the calorie intake per person per day). After fifty years of Independence, economic disparity and mass or massive poverty are increasing—the rich (about 200 million) are becoming richer and the poor (about 600 million) are becoming poorer. Thus Rajni Kothari asserts,

There are two Indias—one moving into the twenty-first century with aplomb, wanting to 'catch up' and the other deliberately left behind in the dustbin of history, held not in pity but in contempt, found dispensable—in many places eliminated.³

The vast majority of Indians do not have access to clean, drinking water while coca-cola and pepsi are easily made available for the rich and the middle class. Illiteracy and mass

unemployment stalk the nation. Health care facilities are deplorable in urban areas and non-existent in the rural areas. Civic Services in both towns and villages of India are grossly inadequate. Most of the big or the 'boom' cities suffer from power famine. The road network is underdeveloped; the railways are at a breaking point; infrastructure in general is 'primitive' and overstretched. Over population (reaching one billion) bedevil us. Ferocious assaults on the environment deplete our soil and displace millions. Colonial administrative structures oppress the people and defer justice. The judicial system does not ensure justice for the poor while *hawala*, *satta* and scam (corruption) are flourishing and all-pervasive, eating into the vitals of the nation. Obviously, there is a lack of transparency and accountability in our public life. In a way, the verdict of the recent General Election in India is the indictment of the electorate of all the political Parties particularly the Congress for its ambivalence on the Mandal (Reservation) and the *masjid* (Communalism and Fundamentalism) issues, failure to demonstrate the fruits of economic reforms and above all compromising with corruption widely prevalent in India. Thus it is a negative vote as no Party has come out with a clear majority. After fifty years of Independence, India needed a change—a real shift from the Congress culture. Therefore the Bharatiya Janata party received the highest number of votes. This is not a vote to bring about a real political-ideological shift but the people's verdict is a warning and a caution—enough is enough!! People's representatives in the Parliament do not want fundamentalism and communalism which is definitively good for the country and her future. But it is equally important to realise that the people themselves are sick and tired of politicians manipulating and exploiting the former in terms of money and power.

According to a study by the U.K.—based Oxfam, there is an alarming rise of poverty in India.⁴ In the last five years, rural poverty rose to 48.06 per cent and urban poverty rose to 33.87 per cent. C.T. Kurien is alarmed at the huge deficit, huge foreign debt, servicing of the debt.⁵ There is certainly growth in terms of many airlines being available, cellular phones, pagers, designer shirts, exotic perfumes, Kellogs, Kentucky

Fried Chicken and such others. But more important is what is happening to five hundred and fifty million poor people of this country. Therefore a social audit is imperative. We have to consider the plight of the poor in terms of food, clothing, shelter, health, education and employment. India's population below the poverty line has increased from 34.3 per cent in 1989-90 (before the shift in ideology) to 40.7 per cent in 1992-93. Even the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) has expressed apprehensions and reservations about so-called economic reforms of last five years. If the results were really good, the Congress Party of India should have won the General Election outright. The latest figures about the Indian trade are indicative of the problem. In April of 1996 the exports amounted to \$2805.09 million while imports amounted to \$2980.64 million. Thus the trade deficit in April, 1996 amounts to \$175.55 million. Related to the trade is the problem of external debt which increased from \$80.48 billion in 1993 to \$93.84 billion during the first six months of 1995-96. It is the highest increase among ten countries listed by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Thus India is on the threshold of a 'debt trap'. There is nothing like 'debt forgiveness' or waiving of the debt-servicing which has risen enormously. Such is the scenario after five years of vigorous attempt to 'globalise', 'liberalise' and privatise the Indian economy. Visible, explicit and an official ideological shift has in fact aggravated and accelerated the process of neo-colonialism. This is a sure process of the domestication of the poor people and the simultaneous domination of the rich and the powerful both inside and outside the country concerned. But the hopeless and the helpless poor people of Asia in general and of India in particular have a way to respond to such a scenario—not through the bullets but through the ballots. Over the years India has been able to develop a democratic culture or tradition. C.T. Kurien has rightly noted,

A great advantage of the democratic process that we have adopted is that once in five years at least the mass of the people have an opportunity to assert themselves over the craftiness of the learned and machinations of the powerful.⁶

This is exactly what has happened in the recent General Election in India. A new government has come to power with many new faces with the promise to control and check the economic development of the country. Thus from this perspective it is important and very necessary to express solidarity with the pro-democracy movements in Asia—in China, Myanmar, Nigeria and such other countries. Thus ideological shift has to be economic-political. Democratic polity demands checks and balances, monitoring and managing the market. It must be saved from manipulation and exploitation by the rich against the poor, the marginalised and the powerless. Therefore it is very important when we read the following statements of the noted economist, Raja J. Chelliah,

Leftist fears about reforms are irrelevant and anti-reform views of some people did not matter but it was the feudal interests which, posed the biggest challenge to economic change.⁷

It is good that the 'Raja' has raised the issue of feudal values in the Indian context. I believe it is equally true and valid for the rest of Asia. What kinds of values we want to promote and encourage through such ideological shift? He is absolutely right about "the deeply entrenched feudal mentality" which is basically slavish and submissive. We are experiencing new forms of bondages in Asia which are worse than Egyptian slavery and Babylonian captivity. This means that during the twilight years of this century, we have to experience a new exodus from dependence and domination. It is good that we make an ideological shift but it should promote, sustain and strengthen some of traditional values in India/Asia. It must hold and uphold self-reliance and holistic, wholesome development which will bring about authentic liberation and justice. For this we do not need to exaggerate and magnify the differences between *videshi* (foreign) and *swadeshi* (national) ideologies but we must certainly know the differences and the distinctive character or characteristics. As newly-constituted nations, it is necessary to maintain our independence with dignity and integrity.

Nature and content of Ideology in Asia

Feliciano Carino has described very well the nature and content of ideology. He traces the origin and roots of political thinking. In the evolution of politics it has been realised that history has to be shaped rather than left to drift. In this context, discontinuity and creative dislocation become imperative.⁸ Socialist dreams rejected the feudal society but accepted the industrial civilization with care and caution. The socialists began to imagine a perfect society—a utopian projection of a world of justice and perfection which is a historical and elitist in itself. In this context, ideology came into being as an “effort to infuse human rationality to the social and political process and to inject human purpose and vision to the conscious shaping of history.” It is a critical enquiry into the origin and growth of ideas, to get rid of certain inherited or created religious illusions in particular. Thus ideology took cognizance of the ideational foundations of society. It was Napoleon Bonaparte who called the ideologists as ‘doctrinaire’, ‘impractical’ and ‘unrealistic’. Karl Mannheim made this explicit by stating that “any idea in itself was not only futile but also not credible when it was not politically practicable.” He had stated,

This signifies that the politicians’s feeling for reality took precedence over and displaced the scholastic, contemplative modes of thought and of life. Hence forward the problem implicit in the term ideology—what is really real?—never disappeared from the horizon.⁹

Thus ideology uses social and political criteria to determine truth and reality—life and living.

According to Carino, Karl Marx used the concept of ideology in the following four ways:

1. Negatively describing the ideational and non-material aspects of social and political life. In this way, Marx destroyed the presumed autonomy and independence of ideas. “Social being” in this sense determines “social consciousness” and not the opposite.
2. Ideology describes the false consciousness of the ruling class and those who control the means of production. Thus ideology brings out the class character of all truths.

Consequently, those who control the means of production also control the means of thought.

3. Ideology abstracts, refracting reality and tries to universalize the partial and the fragmentary dimension of that reality.
4. Ideology functions as a social criticism, becomes the real bearer of social hope and an instrument of social warfare. In the process, utopia not only becomes historicized; it also becomes egalitarian. The mute, indifferent and defenseless people becomes the subjects of social hope, over-turning and unveiling the pretensions of the powers of the present social order.

From the above four points, it becomes clear that Marx's concept of ideology was the prophetic rebellion of the exploited and the enslaved, the estranged and the alienated from the fruit of their labour. It is the ideology of the dispossessed. Finally, Carino formulates four criteria for an ideological paradigm:

1. to look at society as a whole and discover the linkages.
2. the investigation of the practical implications and functions of thought and consequently, giving a dignified direction and complexion to social and political conduct.
3. it is a value-oriented rather than a value-free scientific outlook. From this point of view, commitment and devotion to the cause becomes important. Thus Carino says, "truth arises in action, and meaning is given to experience not by the contemplative but by the transforming moment."
4. final direction of political engagement—politics of maintenance or politics of change; a politics of reform or of revolution; a politics of pacification or of agitation.

Carino ends by challenging,

... he or she must examine critically the social condition of the time and make, not avoid, ideological choices. Not to do so is not being non-ideological, it is simply being sucked into the ideology of the prevailing powers.¹⁰

I have attempted to indicate the nature and content of ideology particularly in Asia. In the post-Gorbachev, post-Cold War era, we cannot take a doctrinaire approach to ideology.

We cannot be absolutist either about Adam Smith or about Karl Marx. We have to be open, free and undetermined about ideologies as far as possible. But that does not mean that we forget the marginalised who are in the majority in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This also means that we have to make a concerted effort to directly and explicitly relate ideology to economics. We have to be clear about our perspective and priority. This is the struggle going on in India for last fifty years. We have talked about the poor and the marginalised but the official policy endorses and encourages an ideology *of* and *for* the rich and powerful. This brings me to the final section of the paper.

Doing Theology—Relating it to Ideology

Christian theology for a long time was thought to be neutral and ideologically-free. As it was preoccupied with the understanding of God, it was busy making universal claims and counter-claims. It did not realise its hidden presuppositions and prejudices. Slowly but surely it began to dawn on scholars that theology, being a human enterprise, shared the fallenness and finitude of the humans. Gradually, it was realised that for a long time Christian theology suffered from myopia—from one-sided view of life and reality. As a result it was discovered to be anti-women or to be patriarchal; anti-ecology or to be anthropocentric; anti-poor or reactionary. As a result only in last twenty-five years (1970-1995), there has been the development of Liberation, Black, Feminist, Eco, dalits, tribal and such other theologies. These theologies in particular have made explicit, the contextual and ideological character of all theologies. Long ago Reinhold Neibuhr had perceived the problem clearly. He wrote,

All human knowledge is tainted with an ideological taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge.¹¹

Father Tissa Balasuriya has noted,

The Catholic Church which has exercised both spiritual and political power for centuries over whole civilizations can therefore be particularly susceptible to making its

theology an ideology, i.e, making its religious teachings suit the interests of the power-holders in the Church.¹²

More recently, Peter Scott has stated,

...theology is an intellectual practice like others. As such, it has the same 'character' as other disciplines: the capacity to be ideological but also the capacity to be liberative (to be the criticism of forms of expression and mystification).¹³

In attempting to grapple with the issue of theology and ideology, Peter Scott has raised certain pertinent questions like, is Christian theology ideological? Is it possible to conceive of a Christian theology that is not ideological? And can the incorporation of theology as ideological discourse be avoided?

In trying to answer these and many other crucial questions, he comes to the conclusion that theology to be theology must maintain closeness and distance with ideology. Obviously, it has become quite clear that Christian theology for a very long time has functioned as an ideological tool in the hands of the powerful and the privileged. In the past, theology endorsed and even encouraged directly and explicitly colonialism, racism (apartheid), slavery and such other dehumanising systems or ideologies. From that point of view theology has been always ideological and consequently became reactionary and *status-quo* oriented. In the past and to some extent even in the present theology supports and sustains the ideology of the rich, of patriarchy and of the elite. Thus in many contexts it is very difficult to distinguish between theology and ideology because it is subtle and pernicious. Theology is used or exploited to hold and uphold such debilitating and death-dealing ideologies. For this reason, Christian theology has a double responsibility. Firstly, it is necessary to expose the nexus or the coalition between theology and such ideologies which are alienating, negates life and liberty for all. Secondly, it is necessary for Christian theology to become self-consciously ideological from the perspective of the poor and the marginalised. This means that we cannot or ought not to indulge neither in dualism nor reductionism of theology and ideology. Theology must self-consciously become a liberative ideology particularly in a continent like Asia. This means that ideology must shape and form or reform theology and theology

in turn must promote and strengthen ideology giving it a direction and meaning, purpose and perspective. Indeed it is a challenging task for the Church in Asia.

For a long time and even till today, Christian theology remains individualistic, other worldly and abstract, irrelevant and out of focus. It must become rooted and grounded in the soil of Asia, feeling its dust and heat, the pulse and perspective of the people, its sorrow and suffering. God of the Bible is relational and relevant, living and dynamic. God of the Bible participates in the suffering and sacrifices of the poor and the marginalised. Egyptian slavery and Babylonian captivity are indicative of the nature of God. The ancient apostles, the priests and prophets particularly of the eighth century witnessed to a God who is ideological. "Let my people go" is an ideological cry of God. Exodus and the Cross of Calvary are the symbols of God. Fundamentally, God is liberative and justice-oriented. There is no ambiguity about God's ideological perspective. There is no way to make or construct God as amoral and neutral. This means that Christian theology must become ideological—public-political, structural-social.¹⁴

Carl Sagan, an astrophysicist, in his recent book has mentioned about the "demon-haunted world" in which we live. For him one of the demons is poverty and malnutrition, the slaves and slavery, the unjust and the cruel world in which we live. Sagan has written,

The gears of poverty, ignorance, hopelessness, and low self-esteem mesh to create a kind of perpetual failure machine that grinds down dreams from generation to generation. We all bear the cost of keeping it running. Illiteracy is its linchpin.¹⁵

In this "encircling gloom", Sagan calls for education that will inculcate a scientific, rational temper. That will make us more critical, analytical and objective particularly the reality that we confront today. India has the dubious distinction of being one of the most illiterate nations of the world—of Asia.

In a recent study, Sukumari Bhattacharya, has clearly demonstrated that fatalism played a significant role in ancient India.¹⁶ Concepts like *daiva* (fatal); *niyati* (pre-ordained); *bhagya* (fate); *adrishta* (unseen) and *bhavitavya* (inevitable)

were widely prevalent. She has quoted profusely from the ancient Sanskrit texts to prove her point of view. The epics, the *Vedic* literature, *Jatakas* and the *Puranas* are replete with such ideas. Even till today in spite of all the changes that have taken place, Indians in particular and the Asians in general suffer from fatalism. Faith is reduced to fate. For this reason Christian theology has to wage a relentless battle against such demonic forces and give them hope. Belief in fate makes us captives or prisoners of the past, present and the future. We need freedom and liberation from ourselves and from others.

Both theology and ideology need each other. They have to be criticised and corrected. They must become creative, liberative and redemptive. Christian theology must inculcate in us a sense of transcendence, going beyond, rising above which gives us a distance and an objectivity to be self-critical. Ideology must make us aware of the dynamics of the society in which we live. Through such mutual interactions both are reconstructed or reformulated. There is a need for a compassionate confrontation. Andrew Sung Park has asserted,

Confrontation without understanding will cause unnecessary, hostile conflict. Compassion without confrontation will result in ineffective transformation. Confrontation with the heart of compassion for the oppressors will genuinely change their heart through creative tension.¹⁷

Compassionate confrontation is an imperative particularly in Asia because there are millions who are suffering from destitution. Poor in India/Asia means those who are without the minimum needs like food, clothing, shelter, education and employment. We cannot generalise or spiritualise poverty in Asia/India. C.S. Song in his study has demonstrated that by poor Jesus meant the materially poor, socially and politically downtrodden, and the religiously oppressed.¹⁸ In another book, Song affirms,

The culture of protest is then the culture of conscience. It has to be. You cannot read the words of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and not be overwhelmed by the power of their conscience. You cannot hear Jesus' message

of God's reign and not be gripped by his conscience in turmoil. If Jesus engages his opponents in controversy, his purpose is not to win the argument, but to arouse their conscience.¹⁹

Ideological theology or a theology based on an ideology of the poor and marginalised is inevitable and necessary in a continent like Asia. This cannot be the monopoly of the Marxist Ideology. Long before Karl Marx, Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung the Hebrew prophets and Jesus spoke out against oppression and injustice. We need to recover and reaffirm the Biblical message for the poor and the disinherited. In this way the Asian/Indian Church can recover her credibility and as the body of committed people uphold the broken body of Jesus who died so that the poor and the marginalised ones can live a full life. That is the promise of God.

Conclusion

A well-known Indian writer, Nirad Chaudhuri, wrote in 1953, more than forty years ago, that India (in fact Asia) will lose her sovereignty and succumb to the political-ideological pressures of the so-called first World.²⁰ We have lost our dignity and self-respect as a nation, as Asians. Gandhian principles of *swaraj* (self-rule), *swedeshi* (self-reliance) and *sarvodaya* (welfare or uplift of all) have been definitively and decisively abandoned in the name of capitalist or neo-capitalist ideology. In this context a warning is sounded,

The so-called global village, we ought to know by now, has evolved a caste system more rigid than the one devised by Manu ... Unequal exchange, humiliating credit conditionalities, hi-tech monopolies, indulgence towards proteges who export terrorism, highly selective concern for human rights and all too frequent threats of economic sanctions are integral parts of this system.

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