

# Trends In The Church's Involvement In Social Service In The Past Twenty-Five Years

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This is not an easy paper to write for one who is at present involved in struggles in the city for social justice and this will no doubt be reflected in what is said. If an injustice is done to the splendid record of the Church in social service in India, the writer would wish to apologise at the beginning.

The Church in India has had a long history of serving in the name of Christ those who for one reason or another were the weak and the outcasts of society. In this service, through sheer sacrifice and hard work and a shining faith, Christians earned a name for which they were justly proud. In many areas they were truly pioneers. In others their compassion touched sections of society which were among the most neglected and downtrodden. Their quality of service and sincerity of purpose became a byword so that today earnest Government Officials talk easily of 'missionary zeal' as being the highest motivation possible to which they can aspire. There is, however, for us who have inherited this tradition and who have the same mission in this country, a mission in Christ, the need to analyse the overall effects of that service a little more carefully so that we may not perpetuate the unconscious follies of those who lived in another age and were governed by a different set of values and a different system.

When the British overlords left in 1947, just prior to the period under consideration, Christians felt no major sense of insecurity. In fact, for what now appears to be a false sense of conviction, they rejected a status as a minority community. (I say false because so many voices are now to be heard clamouring for special privileges as they try to swim in the mainstream of national life which does not look on them as creatures with distinctive claims.)

This conviction and security had grown not only out of a strong faith which could face the vagaries of fortune, but largely out of a blind sense of superiority and a reliance on institutions.

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**This reliance did three vital things:**

1. It gave the Church and Christians a sense of significance which was sometimes in proportion to the size of their buildings. Look what the mission has done for you became the proud cry of the Christian to his brother. The fact that Christians had achieved their institutional power and privileges largely through their association with the alien powers was forgotten by the Christians but not by the recipient of his charity. The devaluation by the Christians of the service to the nation by those who struggled for our national freedom was not easily forgiven by the latter when the final totalling was done.
2. Secondly, this institutional reliance left the Church with no alternative but to support the powers that be, their processes of decision making, their life styles and their hierarchies of values. The impotence of the Church was complete. It was a happy eunuch in a harem of opportunities: it could glimpse them but have no effective intercourse with them. In preserving its body it had effectively lost its soul.
3. Institutions are not neutral. They speak, they do more—they generate values and dictate life styles and are determinative factors in shaping the quality of life for a generation. Christian institutions by and large took on a character that was alien to the majority community. How alien can be seen when today they have become elitist societies serving those who are still able to pay for a way of life that is to be condemned. This is of course not true of all Christian endeavours, but it is true of those institutions of which we are proud.

I will be accused of overstating my case and of speaking with an arrogant hindsight. But to my accusers I would say that astonishingly the thinking of the Church has not yet changed: even more tragically, because of its institutions it cannot change. We still cling to this false sense of security as our actions clearly show—for where the carcass is there will the eagles be gathered.

- (a) I ask: How much money and manpower is still poured into the propping up of our institutions which cannot be supported locally even after a hundred years?
- (b) Have we the freedom to ask what role exactly our institutions are fulfilling today? Have we the freedom to let the secular authorities take on a responsibility that is rightly theirs? Would this be tolerated by the Christian Community?
- (c) What are the new areas of service that the Church is pioneering today? How much of its resources are available for this?
- (d) When we think of serving new functional areas do we immediately plan to institutionalise both the service and the thinking?
- (e) How many have emerged from the processes of education imported by us who are true fighters for man's liberty?

But perhaps more damaging than the above was the blindness with which we were struck as we surveyed the glory of our social service kingdoms and their powers. This blindness made it impossible for us to recognise the working of God the Holy Spirit through other agencies, religious and secular, struggling in the same field, perhaps with a clearer grasp of the fundamental issues involved, but with meagre resources. But we have found it impossible to regard their struggles and therefore their issues as real. *Our* service, *our* motivation, *our* mission is clearly dimmer. Theirs is at least human. We have written tonnes justifying how qualitatively different Christian service is. So we have developed our work in separation but have not missed the opportunities to point out where others have followed us. This has been our hall-mark for authenticating our work.

To my mind this more than anything else has stunted the growth of the Church's thinking in the field of so called social service—the basic lack of a theology which would have enabled us to enter into partnership with others. It is noteworthy that 'social service' in India has not added any real dimension to Indian Christian theology. This liberation in the field of theology is essential if the Church and its institutions are really to develop in the mainstream of the struggle for a better quality of life in India. Otherwise we may say the right things, never really believing in them, never willing to back them with passions, and almost inevitably we shall go on building institutions, if not in brick and mortar, then certainly in moral judgement, attitude and isolation.

In the late fifties and early sixties we saw the growth of CASA as the national effort of the Churches in India. Was it a truly national effort? It suffices to say that even after 25 years of existence CASA is still struggling with the question, 'How can we get closer to the Churches in India?' It underlines a serious problem. The Churches are a minority group in India with even more minor resources. To make our presence nationally felt we went in for structures and programmes in CASA for which millions of dollars are needed. Certainly CASA has become a familiar name in India to those who matter, but in the process it has not only moved away from the Churches but from the people of the land. The little that the Indian Churches had to offer in the context of massive development programmes became so insignificant that it was not found worthwhile to tap the resource at all. Tragically, because development was looked upon as a physical process devolving from above, the vast resources of the poor of India went abegging. This mistake has been made not only by the Church but by the nation as well. And now we are paying for it. People have lost all value and can be openly mocked. The Church has been a partner, albeit a minor one, in this process.

But have these efforts of the Indian Church to impress the Indian Government (I make a distinction between Government and People) through its massive frontal attacks on poverty been successful? If it has done little for people, has it at least bought the Church time? Those of us who had to appear before the Parliamentary Commission of the Joint Houses of Parliament to give evidence on the Foreign Regulation

Bill can bear witness to the total lack of confidence of those to whom we have tried to be faithful. We have to be nationally accountable, but to whom, the powers that be or the people? On whom in honesty have we trained our eyes?

This betrayal of people whose development our social services should have served has arisen as much from a lack of theology as from selfish preoccupations. By and large the Indian Church has been content merely to accept the parable of the Good Samaritan as the basis of its understanding of the reason and goals of social service. It has been clever enough to substitute imported oil and a Jeep for the resources offered by the Samaritan.

But Indian thought, if it did not respond to the pressures of the changes in India—if it grossly neglected any analytical reflection on the changes in the economic and political spheres—did at least react to development of thinking in the West.

In the early sixties Industrial Mission became the key frontier word of the Church. We grabbed at it and with it accepted the role of being enablers, reconcilers, catalysts. We did this with the minimum of ground work, without any effort to study or give recognition to those who had been labouring for the rights of men in this field for decades. We brightly assumed that, since we had woken up to the world of industry, God the Holy Spirit had only just woken up as well and that prior to our entry there were no agents of the Kingdom in this vast and complicated field. But essentially this was a pioneering field *for the Church* and many useful lessons were learnt which the Church was happy to teach others but not to learn itself. After over a decade in this experimental field, Industrial Mission and Urban Mission continue to remain on the periphery without any real effects on the Church, its structures, values and attitudes. These so-called frontier ministries have the same functions as lipstick on the face of a woman—it adds to the glamour, looks good, but is basically of no real value and as changeable as the colour of a saree.

In conclusion we need to ask a vital question. Has the social service of the Church really been a vehicle for a people's movement? Has it ultimately led to the development of the poor, to a greater consciousness of their predicament and of the forces of oppression. Has the social service programme really helped the Church in India to take sides and if so whose side? Have we really even in a small way begun to be a voice of numbers? In the peculiar circumstances in which we find ourselves today in India, what is the main pre-occupation of our national and local social service agencies? The building of dams and roads, the digging of tube wells, minor irrigation schemes, institutions for the handicapped? Will these help God's poor who are being slaughtered all day long in the name of justice and peace, of freedom and stability?

In whose company are we doing social service? The company of the redeemed middle classes who from a safe position will continue to exalt their kind and justify their corrupt system at the expense of the

poor? What system are we helping to prop up? If a Church cannot challenge and is paralysed by fear, has it the right to be compassionate in the name of Christ? For those responsible for theological education, may we ask where is the theological boldness which equips its students to take risks? The Church to my mind has been false in seeking too easy answers for the Gospel of Transfiguration in Christ. It has bought its own safety at the cost of others' sufferings. Unless social service leads to encounter, unless it leads to conflict in the name of Christ, unless it helps us to see the signs of the Kingdom, unless it points to the strange agents of the Kingdom, unless it helps us to find the unique Christ of the Indian poor in their present crucifixion, it is of little worth. But there is always hope, for God has not left himself without witness and I take this opportunity to salute the little men in little places in India who are continuing to be faithful, continuing to take risks, continuing to seek. Blessed are those who thirst after justice, for they shall be filled.