

Confessing Christ in the Struggles for Life in India Today— A Christian Response

RAJENDRA K. SAIL*

The theme is like singing old songs with modern music. Which may be good as it may help us see new meaning in the old songs. I would like to reflect on the theme from the point of view of the Christian Action Groups. From that point, it would better serve our purpose if we reword the theme as: Confessing Christ in the struggles of the people for a just and participatory society. This then is a political statement, and not a theological statement. For I believe that without an adequate political ideology one cannot develop a relevant theology. In other words, a relevant theology can only be worked out through authentic political involvement in society.

The brokenness of life today

The brokenness of life today is characterised by the system of exploitation, the structures of oppression, and institutional violence; the forces that dehumanize and marginalise the majority of human beings in all areas of life—political, economic, social and cultural; the situation in which twenty per cent of the world's population controls and enjoys more than eighty per cent of the world's resources; in which a few possess all the instruments of production and control its process, while the masses are dispossessed even of the fruits of their labour; in which the gap between the haves and have nots, the affluent and the wretched, the powerful and the helpless, between the city and the village, continues to widen; in which vast masses of men, women and children suffer from chronic unemployment, insecurity, illiteracy, hunger, humiliation and diseases; where people

* Mr Sail was, until June 1982, General Secretary, Raipur Churches Development and Relief Committee, M. P.

are systematically deprived of their rights and kept down through subtly devised or openly used repressive measures. Luxury goods, elite educational institutions multiply, but basic essentials and education are made scarce for almost eighty per cent of the population. The above structural analysis brings home very vividly the brokenness of life that exists in our society and its adverse effect on the creation of a genuine and authentic life. Among several of its manifestations is growing alienation between human beings, between human beings and nature, between families, communities, societies and nations.

Creation of an authentic life

An authentic life must have as its ultimate goal the creation of a socialist society—a society in which people will have complete control over the condition of their life; over the system of the production, distribution and consumption of material goods; over the process of decision-making and implementation in matters of common interest; and over the production and dissemination of ideas. Socialism means not only freedom from exploitation and alienation, but also freedom for the realisation of an authentic human life and creativity. The search for an authentic human life is a social phenomenon in history which poses challenges to the existing structures in society. It concerns the life as a whole life of human beings, structures, systems and institutions that govern the life of human beings. It is the life of the people in relation to nature. This authentic life is created by collective action of the people as they assert themselves as subjects of history. An authentic life is life where togetherness of life is restored between human beings, between human beings and nature.

Struggles for life

In the midst of the picture of growing doom, hopelessness, despair, defeat and frustration, we find signs of hope, victories, achievements, laughter and joy.

In India, we have a situation where people are rising up, both spontaneously and organised. Events after events are telling us that the sleeping giant is not at all in a mood to take it lying down. The scene is marked by people's uprisings and militant struggles.

Tribals are awakening to perceive their oppression and fighting back to regain their dignity, selfhood and identity. Atrocities on harijans and naked violence on them to crush their morale is the upper caste brutal response to their resolve to fight for their life. Women are gaining new consciousness about their role and place in society. They are getting organized to assert their dignity and equality. Unorganized sections of society are getting organized to protect against basic violation of human rights ranging from discrimination in wages and denial of working conditions to dowry deaths, rape, and lack of basic amenities in villages and slums. Workers all over the country—whether in organized or unorganized sectors—are getting mobilized for preserving and promoting their democratic rights. Regional movements inspired by a search for ethnic and cultural identity have taken the forms of demands for separate states or even separate nations. Conversions, especially of the harijans and tribals, are the manifestation of a rejection of living a dehumanized life and the attempt to regain a new life of dignity, justice and freedom.

But these struggles for life are not without any attempt by the ruling classes to suppress brutally the people's uprisings. The politics of the establishment is becoming more and more repressive and manipulative, stifling the functions of the democratic institutions.

A Christian response

Christian Action Groups came into being as a result of a response to particular local situations of poverty, exploitation, injustice and corruption both within the Church and society. These individuals and groups did not emerge out of nowhere. They had very definite backgrounds. The linkage with the "ideological revolution" of the sixties both on the campuses and in the ecumenical movements has played a definite role in their commitment to social change. Concepts like "development" and "revolution" were debated against the backdrop of the Vietnam situation and crumbling down of the "nation building" policies. Quite a number of those groups in India owe their origin to the student movements like the SCM and AICUF and to the continuation of urban-rural mission groups, with a changed focus.

In many cases, Christian faith and its understanding in the context of the social realities was and still is the driving force in the lives

of these individuals and groups. In 1975, the report of the CISRS-WCSRC Joint Programme for Social Action and Reflection made a special mention of this motivation: "The groups have several things in common. The wider dimension of the gospel of Jesus plays a very significant role in the make-up of these groups, while some combine strong commitment to secular ideologies. The gospel has given a vision of the new humanity, thus providing yet new horizons of involvement and action:

1. The gospel takes into account the total man and the gospel of salvation is the work of liberation of man from all bondages that dehumanize him to fuller human existence and abundant life.
2. For liberation of man, Jesus chose the way of solidarity with the weaker sections of society in their protests and struggle for authentic humanhood.
3. For people's movement for liberation the gospel of Jesus is the revolutionary ferment.

The prophetic tradition of Christianity attracted them in their attempt to fulfil the demands of the Gospel. They are convinced that identifying with the poor, fighting for justice and working for the radical transformation of society are required in order to follow Jesus Christ. They recognize that the struggle to transform society needs the dynamism of vision, faith and hope. While they may get the tools for analysing society from Marx, they get spiritual nourishment from the biblical tradition. They are critical of the Church's lack of involvement in the struggles of the oppressed and many of them maintain a strained relationship with the Church, while others completely ignore it.

These groups have very definite links with secular ideologies: especially its leadership is strongly Marxist or Socialist in ideological position. To quote from one Christian activist's description of his experience: "The living exposure in the slum and reflection on it, complemented by serious reading of Marxism and liberation theology and the contact we had with friends in the ecumenical community, widened our understanding of both urban and rural society and helped us to evolve relevant patterns of actions to build up people's movements."

By nature these action groups are small, independent and, very often, rotating around one or two individual personalities. Financially, although some of them depend upon foreign money, the amount has been small and only for support of programmes and activists. No large structures or institutions have been formed. But this partial dependence on foreign money has not affected their independence or their actions. Simplicity in life style, hard work, abstaining from undue propaganda, flexibility with firmness, freedom with responsibility are some of the basic values these groups have consciously developed among the people who work for the movement.

Although there are varying shades of political ideologies among these action groups, by and large, they are left in their orientation and have three common factors: (i) *people*: they have faith in the people as the shapers of their own destinies; (ii) *power*: the question of power cannot be evaded, that is, the power structures and confrontation with them have to be taken seriously, while in the process people themselves regain power; (iii) *struggle*: they recognise that struggle is the only path for bringing about change from below through people's organizations.

Christian Action Groups have passed through various stages of experience in their involvement with the people:

- (i) responding spontaneously to situations—like caste atrocities, corruption, high-handedness by the establishment and other forms of injustice both within the Church and society;
- (ii) becoming conscious of the need for analysis of society;
- (iii) becoming aware of the need to search for an ideology—relating to other secular ideologies;
- (iv) gaining a definite understanding of the nature of state power. A beginning of this realization came as a result of the confrontation during the Emergency period and later on continued in the Janata era, and finally with the return of Mrs Indira Gandhi in 1980, subsequently resulting in the enactment of NSA, ESMA, etc;
- (v) realising the limitations of the local and isolated struggles and subsequently feeling the need for (a) organizational and (b) political strength. This led to a discussion of the political expression of the groups both individually and collectively;

- (vi) rethinking the role and place of Action Groups. It is more of a dilemma of the Action Groups:
- the problem of relating the local struggles to the national struggles;
 - the problem of understanding the relationship between the struggles in the region and national political development;
 - the tension between continuing as independent groups dealing with people's problems at the micro-level, on the one hand, and dealing with macro-questions on the lines of political parties on the other hand;
 - the problem of relationships with political parties and their consequences. The options before the Action Groups are: (a) merge with one of the left political parties; (b) create a political party of their own either in the regions or in the nation; (c) continue to maintain an independent status with a policy of critical collaboration with one or several of the left political parties;
 - the problem of co-ordination and linkage among themselves and with secular Action Groups;
 - the problem of delinking from foreign funds and the desire to develop self-reliant economic bases for operation.

A few stories of struggles

Bombay Urban Industrial League for Development (BUILD) has been active in slums. It is an expression of committed young Christians who have come out of the Church as a result of disillusionment with the service patterns of ministry. Many of them live among the slum-dwellers and help organize them to become aware of their rights to be an integral part of the city and the right to adequate housing and facilities. It is this awareness that lies behind the brief history of struggles by slum dwellers in Bombay to resist eviction and fight unitedly for better housing and living conditions.

The history of the struggle by slum dwellers to resist eviction goes way back to 1975, when the Janata Colony slum dwellers at Trombay resisted eviction and filed a suit in the City Civil Court and obtained a stay order. As the case failed, the State Government made repeated attempts to evict by force. The final shifting of

70,000 people, to accommodate a few thousand so-called "scientists" of BARC, was carried out during the peak of the Emergency era. The Maharashtra Government came out with an Act under which demolitions were carried out irrespective of the resistance from the slum dwellers.

The urban labour force was unable to afford adequate housing, reside in any land available in and around the city. They mostly lived on uninhabitable land under sea water or on hilly sites. The need for housing and shelter brings them together in a slum. A small section of slum dwellers belongs to an organized sector which defends their rights and secures their demands through organized trade unions. Some labour legislation providing for service conditions, rights and wage structures is the direct result of their organized struggle. But this struggle is not often brought home to procure better housing and living conditions. The majority which resides in slums and works in an unorganized sector is even deprived of an established permanent service condition and wage structure. Historically, as the city grew with its industry and business, it took over the space occupied by the slum dwellers and evicted them from their homes. Such evictions displaced the working-class from their work site and home which they had built over the years and burdened them with new expenses. In a number of cases they lost their jobs. This disturbance in the stability gave birth to a new awareness about their rights. BUILD has now helped the slum-dwellers from the Bombay Slum Dwellers' United Front (BSDUF) which not only resists the black laws, but also fights for a better life, as they realize their role and place in society.

People's Education For Action and Liberation (PEAL), in Madurai, has mainly centred around the weaker sections: landless agricultural labourers, small farmers, fishermen, workers in small-scale and cottage industries, weavers, salt workers, artificial diamond workers, rural women and rural youth. They began in 1974, identifying themselves fully with the lower caste groups. The tragic incident which brought them close to harijans was the burning down of 300 huts of the harijans by the upper caste people in a village 40 miles from Madurai. On hearing the news, they rushed to the village and became fully involved with the harijans. They are involved in an action/reflection based educational process which enables the people

to understand critically the socio-political, cultural and economic patterns of society at both local and national levels and their exploitative nature. The rural poor are organized and are therefore able to assert their rights and fight for change.

The Chattisgarh Jangal Bachao Sangharsh Samiti in Madhya Pradesh, near Raipur, is an organization of the landless harijans and tribals struggling to save the forests, their ancestral abode of living and livelihood, from merciless deforestation for commercial purposes, planned forestation by the government with the help of international business interests in growing foreign plants like pine, eucalyptus, teak, and struggling for land and identity. The group lives in the forest area among the people, and some of the activists live in an ashram to practice community life. Their means of livelihood comes from meagre agriculture in the ashram. The tribals are being systematically evicted from their ancestral forests while the rich upper caste outsiders are being given their land and forests for commercial exploitation. Their culture is being destroyed. The government provides stringent laws in the name of protecting forests and tribal culture, which, in fact, destroy the tribal life and their forests. The Indian Forest Bill 1980, at present being debated in Parliament, is one such law which gives extraordinary powers to the forest officials in checking the lives of the tribals which are dependent on forests. The Forest Department pulls down the huts of tribals and harijans and drives them out of forests by declaring any forest as reserved forest. The people are being uprooted.

The Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan, a group of young Christian women, is concerned about the rights and status of women. Dowry deaths and rape are some of the issues. They take up a case to highlight the issue, mobilize public opinion, and organize marches against the culprits. Women in the unorganized sector are also being educated and organized.

There are about 150 Christian Action Groups, scattered all over the country. They are experiencing a new kind of hope and spirituality, a new kind of *koinonia*, outside with the people in their struggles for life. Their relationship with the Church is often strained. While many maintain a creative tension with the Church, others totally ignore it.

How, then do we confess Christ in the midst of the struggles for an authentic human life?

Confessing Christ

In a situation where these Christian Action Groups have become totally merged with the social phenomenon in the country, what Christian identity do they maintain? How do they acknowledge Christ? These are some of the questions that are often posed to us.

I can perhaps, give my testimony which might help some to understand the nature of the Christianity being practised by many Action Groups.

My Christ has got lost in the crowd of struggling people. He has mingled with the people, fused into the masses. He does not seek a separate identity, but we are the ones who are always trying to identify Christ among the masses of struggling people. Whenever any recognition attempt was made on Christ, to single Him out, to hold Him, out as a separate identity, He just vanished. Whenever people wanted to glorify Him, crown Him as a king, He ran away. The only place where He stands identified, where He stands out prominently, is on the Cross. Ironically, at that moment, most of the people who wanted to crown Him as king had left and vanished.

At times, I find myself confessing Christ without the use of words; in silent, low profile action. At times I am not even aware of confessing Christ. The same is true with the Action Groups. In their action they may be betraying Him or confessing Him. Basic honesty of discipleship expresses itself in bold and courageous actions and not in hiding away from the crisis situations.

A new kind of "spirituality of combat" is being experienced by the Groups. The significance of the "Cross" in their lives—both individually and collectively—has become a living experience. The Cross symbolizes betrayal by those who were, at times, close to you, insult and abuse by those in power, isolation and loneliness as the crowd leaves you or is turned against you, those in authority shirk their responsibility and adopt an indifferent attitude under public pressure; finally you feel so lonely that it seems as though God has left you.

The following of Christ on His road to the Cross is daily witnessed in the lives of the people and Action Groups.

Headload workers in Trichur are being exploited by the merchants. For 54 days they continued their strike with no visible result coming through negotiations by the trade unions and political parties. Bishop Poulse Mar Poulse intervenes and settles the dispute, openly taking sides with the oppressed headload workers. His day to day involvement and clear stand in favour of the poor and oppressed lead him into trouble with the Church hierarchy and the powers that be in the state. Systematic attacks on him and pressures in various forms like having his movements shadowed have become part and parcel of his daily life—a life of sharing the experience of the Cross. The Bishop is able to articulate his experiences in Christian vocabulary.

For Xavier Dias, working in Chaibasa among the mine workers and tribals, police lock-ups, court cases, jails, hidings, beatings and torture by police are becoming daily affairs. But he does not waver in his faith in the people and hope in the dawning of a new society through these efforts. Xavier does not want to talk about Christ. He laughs at the mention of these Christian terms that we are using here.

Amrit Lal Joshi in Raipur, who is a harijan youth from Raipur, is involved through Chattisgarh Youth Clubs in opposing the atrocities of the high-caste rich and exposing corruption by government officials. His friend Hom Lal was found murdered on 3rd March, 1981. Hom Lal and Amrit Lal had succeeded in exposing an embezzlement of Rs. 80,000/- in the construction of a village irrigation tank by the Panchayat and Block Development Office. They had succeeded in exposing the black-marketing of sugar meant for village people. A sense of frustration and fear prevails among the youth of the area. Such a heavy price to pay for such a small battle. Rich people file false complaints against these youth leaders with the police, who take prompt action. Most of the time, they have to visit city courts. Their organizational work suffers, while city lawyers rarely come out to their aid for want of money, and because of political pressures.

Gass Memorial Centre, a Christian institution run by the Church of North Indian in Raipur, has been exploiting its class four employees by not following any of the legislation governing their wage and

working conditions. The workers got unionized and pressed for their rights. The Christian management adopts an adamant attitude and condemns their joining the unions. The Church hierarchy takes steps against these union workers, but the scattered Christian community mobilizes itself to support the workers' struggles for four months. The end result is victory. There is rejoicing everywhere. After a brief moment of relief, again the Christian management begins its harrassment of the union leaders and adopts techniques to break the workers' union. It has succeeded. The workers are demoralized, defeated and directionless.

One Hindu woman is burnt alive. It is a dowry death. A women's group conducts an enquiry, then mobilizes public opinion against the husband and parents-in-law. While the women's group is making desperate attempts to get the court and government authorities to move, the family succeeds in getting the boy remarried to another rich girl. The group is frustrated and crestfallen.

How do you discern the "life" given by God in today's struggles or coming to life as a result of God's action and involvement?

Where is Christ in all this? Sometimes activists would get angry and say, "There is no Christ. All this is nonsense."

The Church with all its pomp and glory is trapped in the syndrome of capitalist individualism. With its evangelistic, individualistic emphasis and forms of Christian life which seek the perfection of the individual, with apparent disregard for the environment in which he lives, the Indian Church has to go through a long process of learning what it means to confess Christ in the midst of struggles for authentic human life.

These are some of the very concrete experiences I wanted to share with you. After these years of struggles, victories, suffering, achievements and mistakes, laughter and joy, many Action Groups can truly say that God is the Lord of History, active in these small events among the lives of the people. The verbal acknowledgement and confessing is absent. But, actions of the people—transcending the strict religious beliefs and no beliefs—for a better life on the earth clearly give indications of Christ's involvement.

Findings of Group Discussions

GROUP I

1. Can the religio-cultural and socio-political foci complement and supplement each other—if so how?

The Group believes that, if Christian theology is to be meaningfully relevant in India, then it must take the Indian context seriously. The two foci of the Indian context are its rich religio-cultural heritage and dehumanising poverty shaped by socio-economic and political structures. A relevant Christian theology in India will take both of these foci seriously. The Group also believes that the two foci supplement and complement each other and need not polarize the theological scene in India. Certainly, poverty in India needs an urgent attention and theology has to address itself to this problem. But this does not mean that we can afford to neglect the religio-cultural focus of the Indian context. In Indian history, particularly in the modern period, religion and politics have gone hand in hand. Lokamanya Tilak was inspired by the *Karma Yoga* of the Gita for his political activism; and Gandhiji developed his technique of *Satyagraha* on the basis of the *Sthitaprajna* concept of the Gita. But religion has not always been a source of inspiration for political action. Sometimes it has helped create and promote poverty and social injustice. The Indian theologian, therefore, needs to perceive this interaction between religion, politics, society, and economics. Through his/her critical reflection on this context he/she will be better equipped to do the theological task in India.

2. What would be an appropriate mode of theologising today?

The Group felt happy with the phrase “mode of theologizing.” It considered this to be a more adequate expression than “method” or “methodology.” It was felt that, in the Indian context, the theologian must do theology in and through his/her life itself. In the last analysis the question of theologizing is the question of human life itself. The Group saw the inadequacy of the old style of doing theology in the sense that we thought of theology first and then the need to make it relevant for life. We now believe that theology should emerge in and through the living of human life. Some kind of physical involvement in people’s struggle, therefore, is a must for theologizing in India. If the theologian is not involving himself/

herself, then he/she must ask what factors are preventing him/her from such an involvement. The Group also feels that a definite bias in favour of the poor, the victimized and the oppressed should guide our theological task. The theologian needs to be as sensitive as the novelist or the poet to his/her social surrounding and, like a good novel or poetical work, theology too should reflect society.

GROUP II

3. What kinds of life-styles are necessary in the institutions, action groups and among individuals today?

The Group feels that the determining character of the life-style that is necessary today should be always in relation to our goal, our confession of Jesus Christ as the Life of the world. If we lose sight of this goal, then the life-style becomes a mere gimmick, a camouflage to cover a guilt complex, or may even dwindle down to self-aggrandisement. The goal must always be fullness of life for the whole creation.

Life-style is understood as, on the one hand, that which testifies to Jesus Christ as the Life of the world, and, on the other, as that which diminishes the degeneration of man. It is a style of life which constantly celebrates life. It is one in which Christian obedience, both personally and corporately, contributes to the making of the confession of Jesus Christ as the Life of the world meaningful. This style of life is that which makes life, produced through life giving; in other words, there is a sacrificial element in it.

There are factors which hinder or tend to distort this kind of a life-style. The inclination for investments and the tendency towards accumulation obstruct the real goal from being achieved. Huge institutions, wrong priorities, success-oriented projects, and power mongering prevent the emergence of a style of life which confesses Jesus Christ as the Life of the world. The Church, for example, has been accused of being "the biggest landlord in India today." The hierarchical structures within the institutionalised churches, with every possibility of power being abused or misused, again stunt every effort towards forming this life-style. When the style of life becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, it becomes self-defeating.

In this context we have to recognise the different life-styles—religious and secular—in the Indian tradition, especially remembering the rich contributions made by sadhus, ashrams and so forth towards making and keeping life human.

Above everything, this life-style draws its inspiration from the selfgiving life-style of our Lord, who came that men may have life and life more abundantly.

4. What kind of ecclesiology can strengthen Action Groups and what are the ecclesiological implications of Actions Groups?

Increasingly we discern the need for a basic community experience in the Action Groups and this is occasionally actualised in ashram experience. In this basic community experience the identity of the Action Groups depends on their mission.

The following character—*koinonia*—of the Action Groups is open ended, and this is because of their ideological commitment.

Wherever worship takes place it is primarily life and people oriented.

Another salient feature is that the Action Groups have an “event character”—they are movements.

The primary units of the Action Groups are the small cells, and therefore the primary unit of any Church must also be the small cell.

In the light of the Action Groups phenomenon the whole question of the relationship of the Church and Action Groups must be considered, recognising the living tensions which exist and the need for on-going dialogue. Action Groups and Church must mutually correct each other. Churches are yet to realise the potentialities of the Action Groups.

Action Groups must be accepted as catalysts for transforming the whole Church.

GROUP III

5. Identify the forces of death in the Church and society and list some appropriate symbols and images of life in India today.

We live in a society where we are overwhelmingly conscious of the forces of death. The choice of the term “death” is somewhat misleading in this context since it points to only one major dimension

of the forces that are at work in our society. It is the dimension of violence and killing that manifests itself in class and caste discrimination, economic and political exploitation, the dowry system, oppressive legislation, police atrocities and the like. In these areas the forces of death are powerful and they literally lead to the cutting short of human life.

But what society is seldom aware of is the forces of death that are covert. These covert forces are seldom violent but subtly encourage brokenness of life. These are forces that gradually stifle and suffocate life and thereby diminish or inhibit human potentiality. In other words these forces affect the spiritual dimension of life, they stifle the human spirit. To be reckoned among these forces are the societal attitudes toward women, forces that perpetuate human prejudices, undemocratic concentration of power in the hands of a few (especially true in our churches!), nepotism, and the prevailing attitudes of despair, indifference and cynicism that often overwhelm us.

Undergirding the two dimensions of death mentioned above is the element of "power." It is here that we need to explore the relationship between "death" and "power." It is the life destroying aspect of "power" (the demonic aspect) that needs to be exposed. We may need to articulate a Christian understanding of power in order to counteract the "forces" that promote brokenness of life.

As we turn to look for signs and instruments of life amidst forces of death, we are looking for signs and instruments which preserve, enhance, enrich and augment human life. But it is not easy to identify such symbols, signs and instruments. In a world of constant change the temptation is to identify new changes as signs of new life. Even positive changes that seem to provide a hope for a new life and a new creation contain within themselves seeds of death and destruction. Nevertheless, at this moment, signs and instruments of life may be discerned in Action Groups, in the emerging self-awareness of the oppressed, especially the Dalits, the growing courage of the Indian press and judiciary and in various movements that protest against injustice and oppression.

In identifying forces of death and emergent signs of life in the Indian context, we realise that we have not sufficiently struggled with the question of the inter-relation between death and life. In

other words, we need to explore how the forces of death contain within themselves seeds of emergent new life.

6. Define the quality of life which is distinctively Christian.

Christian life is a life which is inspired by Jesus Christ. Its goal is the coming Kingdom of God. Its vocation is to be the salt and the leaven for the world, which identify themselves with their environment, and at the same time to transform that with which they identify themselves.

The characteristic features of the Christian life are: affirmation of life as such, and looking for the new life in Jesus; affirming the solidarity of humanity and seeking to enhance it and deepen it; proclaiming and practising forgiving love; declaring hope and living in hope; understanding power in terms of self-giving love, and being an open community.