

# Challenges and Opportunities for Theologically Trained Women in India

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**A** couple of years ago, I was invited to address the biennial assembly of the association of theologically trained women in India (ATTWI) that provided me some impetus to think aloud on the subjects which are so contextual in our situation, amidst the spurt of women's movements, interest in women issues and studies. Much has happened since then : the number of theologically trained women has increased, need for studies of women issues in depth has been recognised, more informations about the status of women in our society are being provided by our communication media, more women are claiming leadership slot, though some are successful others are not, in our male-dominated society ; yet not much seemed to have happened. Through this paper, I am taking an opportunity to share and reflect on some of the issues that has been my concerns as theologically-oriented person engaged in theological education. I am conscious of the fact, not being a woman, I may not have an empathetic perception of the issues and the problems of the women-kind, I do wish to assure my sympathetic open-ness to them.

I.2. Time is more opportunate now that we — man-kind (or *male-kind* ? ) be more conscious of women's perspectives upon all our existential experiences in order to have a whole-some view of human-kind. It will be a matter of great regret if we pass on from male-dominated structures to female-dominated structures and miss an opportunity to construct a whole-some structure of society and culture whose integral part we all are. Social analysts, activists, feminists of both genders, theoreticians, ideologues and theologians have to make concerted efforts to bring out the genuine and authentic women's perspectives on human predicaments with a view to liberate all concerned from every kind of dominations. There need not be any hesitation in accepting the fact that all kinds of dominations, and the structures that are created to sustain them, are the

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products of culture and religion. The call is urgent and genuine that we try to understand the authentic socio-religio-cultural base of society and carry on our efforts towards the formation of more harmonious human community, free from any kind of domination, discrimination and exploitation—gender or otherwise.

## II. Focus for theological education

In 1987, a group of theological teachers and professionals gathered to discuss the nature of theological programme through external studies. In their report, submitted to the Senate, they proposed the focus for theological formation which I would like to quote in detail. According to this focus,

- (i) *every member* of the Church *without distinction* is called to a life long process of growth to maturity in Jesus (Eph. 4:14–16; Col. 1:28) to be an agent of the continued liberating and reconciling ministry of Christ. The Church's ministry is to continue the mission of God in Christ. This involves the proclamation of the liberation and reconciliation in Christ for both, *individual* and society through word and action. The *people of God* may participate in their ministry in different ways such as,
  - (a) through witnessing to Christ by word and life in the world primarily through the secular profession and vocation they are involved in ;
  - (b) through participating in areas of social relationships to resolve tension and to create a new humanity free from oppression and rivalry ;
  - (c) through participating at various levels of decision making in the society ;
  - (d) through participation in the process of cultural expression and renewal and in any other way consistent with the demands of life in the Church and society.
- (ii) There is a need for the renewal of our understanding and practice of our ministry in India today and for development of new pattern that will more fully reflect the richness and diversity of the gifts of the Spirit given to the *whole Church*.<sup>1</sup>

## III. The Task

The training programme aimed at theological formation

for the whole people of God for the wider and diversified ministry in the world as conceived above has to be worked out, and initiated, by bodies like ATTWI. I do not mean that there are no programmes addressed to many areas of women's activities, but I do feel that our theological education system has not taken care to equip committed women-worker-minister for the specific task of their chosen vocation. The Senate has taken initiative to devise a course for Christian laity quite different than its traditional theological courses prepared to cater the pastoral needs of the church. For the first time, it has recognised the specific needs of 'ministers' in the secular profession and vocation and has tried to provide a theological foundation<sup>2</sup>. The introduction of a new degree, Bachelor of Christian Studies (B.C.S.) is a right step towards the fulfilment of only one of the demands for theological education to "*the whole people of God*" including women.

Yet it has not taken any concrete step to provide a suitable course or degree specially addressed to the women in profession and vocation. I have been hearing about incorporating a programme on women issues at postgraduate level, but nothing is being proposed at the foundational/grass-roots level. In the absence of a structure of a programme at under-graduate, and graduate level, any post-graduate programme will be without any support and real content.

III.2 There is no doubt that a women who wants to serve among the children with social stigma of any sort, finds nothing in our curriculum of ministerial formation to rely upon for preparation ; so also, those who would like to involve in more active protest movements for the radical change in the present social orders. The life, activities and initiation process of women orders — such as CSI order for women, Christ Prem Sava Samgha Ashram, Pune, Christ Panthi Ashram, Sihora, to mention a few find no introduction at Seminary levels, that may be one of the reasons for their inability to attract new members.

III.3 We often hear of Christian women action groups, working among the poor, exploited and dehumanized sections of our society. There are many who are raising their voices against the atrocities against women, providing legal aids to the socially discriminated, organizers of women forums for protest and solidarity. They are often ignored by the Church at large, and theological thinktank fail to provide them much needed theological support.

III.4 Women organizations have to do something positive that will provide a corrective to the systems under which we all operate. They have to stand on their own to develop academic disciplines most relevant to their needs and construct structures

that are best suited to their areas of activities and Christian service. The age of their being appendage to the man dominated structures has to come to an end. Women-dominated-autonomous-structures have to come into existence, so that the genuine human structures are evolved. It is heartening to note that many organizations and churches are alive to the challenges that are being posed in our context of more power for women. The recently inaugurated Church Women Centre by the UELCI in Madras is being looked upon to evolve a structure for training programmes on women issues, and equip the church with committed workers/ministers, irrespective of denominational affiliation.

#### **IV. Women in Theological Education and Ministry**

In March 1987, 120 participants comprising of leaders of the orthodox, Mar Thoma, and Protestant churches in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, teachers in theological institutions, theologically trained women, theological students and ecumenical partners from overseas issued a statement entitled "*Visions and Focus for Theological Education in India today.*" It has a section for women, which I would like to quote in full :

"The ministry of the church is not complete without the ministry of women. Women have special God-given gifts to bring to the ministry and therefore churches' ministry will not be wholesome if these gifts are not brought out. In the present situation of the churches, women who form more than half of the witnessing and worshipping community are not given equal opportunity in the varied ministries of the church. Special efforts will have to be made to equip them for the ministry so that they become equal partners in the calling for discipleship and ministry. In order to achieve this equal partnership the whole understanding of ministry needs to be re-considered."<sup>3</sup>

IV.2 This vision deeply altered the thinking of theological educators under the Senate of Serampore College and its programmes. Each and every one of its concerns — syllabi, admission policy, membership to its committees and boards, scholarships grants, priority lists had to take women factor into consideration and any neglect was met with loud and strong objection. The Senate and the Board, no longer overlooked the recommendation of Commission on priorities in Theological Education — 1985.<sup>4</sup> They make special attempts to train women to teach in theological colleges, not only by providing ear-marked

M.Th. and D.Th. scholarships for women, but also by scouting for talent to be trained. It was under such concern that the BTESSC agreed in 1988 that seminaries should launch events to celebrate the decade of women, encourage feminist theologies, and promote man-woman team teaching in the classes. It was further decided to educate at least 20 women at M.Th. level and 10 at D.Th. level during the next ten years. It may be premature at this level to have a critical review of our ultimate goal, but we do need to see how far we have advanced.

IV.3 It is not only women, but men too, are realising the injustice done to their counter parts in life for so long. It is not just out of the guilt feeling that the Master of Serampore College addressed the Convocation gathering in 1992 :

"Women's issue is one of the most prominent issues of today. Not only Women's studies in the theological education system but their leadership in decision making structures of the Charter, including the Serampore College Council, is deplorably missing. I hope we will make corrective measures without further loss of time. The Senate must have more women ; theological consultations must have more women ; seminary faculties must have more women. absence of qualified women teachers to train women should not be used as an excuse to perpetuate these lacunae."<sup>5</sup> Lofty ideas indeed, and yet not too difficult to achieve within a given frame work. What is needed is that whoever constitute these bodies or provide leadership must be women who are academically, administratively and otherwise qualified to occupy the positions and a conscious effort should be made to develop leadership of this nature to avoid the danger of filling up a place because there are no women in a situation. Women should qualify themselves to be in places of responsibility to lead and direct the affairs of the church or theological education or the life of the society. I may only add a word of caution that the "principle of repetition" — a group of individuals found at every forum which is so endemic to ecumenical circles, should be consciously avoided. It needs lot of courage, commitment and humility which is not so easily found among ordinary humans ! We are called to rise above all human limitations.

IV.4 There is a new catch word in theological word-book now, generally termed as "spirituality". The whole christian world looking with much expectation at the women to exhibit glimpses of their spirituality. The male dominated spirituality has never taken note of the spiritual experiences, language and discipline of the women, a grave mistake that has yet to be rectified. The male, often forget that "human spirituality in the christian mode is the response of a women and men to the mystery of Christ".

Thus, the feminine experience of God is distinct though not separate from her counterpart. The bodily experience of a woman is intrinsic to understanding her response to the divine. Since, biologically, a woman is determined by her role as bearer and deliverer of life, the feminine spirituality therefore is said to be characterised by receptivity, affective response, waiting or attentiveness and the acceptance of pain as intrinsic to the bringing forth of life. Apart from the universal fact of biology, the social realities of particular Indian situation have shaped a distinct Indian women spirituality that needs to be unearthed even by the most staunch feminist theologians. The eternal dependent women, as Manu has destined them to be depended upon the parents in childhood, upon husband in youth and upon sons in old age,<sup>6</sup> and the one treated as par as domestic animals and slaves,<sup>7</sup> has a spirituality that is explosive enough to break down all hurdles on the path of union with the divine. This aspect of human spirituality has yet to be revealed. My eyes are anxiously waiting for that revelation in print and action.

IV.5 Let me not avoid the crucial question that women often ask, but very often, do not get a reply. It is the question of Women's ordination. Women quite rightly wonder at the continued refusal of male dominated/administered church to accept women as equal partners in the ministries of the church. Their bewilderment is greater due to the fact of some churches acceptance of women as priest, posing a contradictory world of church-polity. We may need to go into the roots of the problem and perhaps may find an answer for the universal church within the framework of our socio-religious context. The matriarchal family system in some of the Indian society may be helpful to look at the problem from different perspectives. So also the presence of women priestesses and diviners in many religious traditions in our society. If need be, an alternate autonomous order can be evolved to meet the specific needs of women-kind.

IV.6 There is a greater need now than ever to define the nature and role of theologically trained women in India. It can no longer be overlooked that the world is wider than the closed walls of the Churches, Christian organizations and Institutions, and she has to play a more active and positive role in the affairs of the world and community. The religious and ideological plural world, such as ours, is burdened with explosive problems, that often threaten to destroy the very fabric of human-communality. She is expected to be leaven, permeating every section of human life and affairs. A woman at the helm of affairs may be more successful in solving manmade problems with much ease and elan. Moreover, her sharing, in the sense of empathetic and sympathetic understanding, of human affairs

will be able to evolve an alternate structure of reconciliation and reconstruction of human society. Who can forget the contribution of Ms Petra Kelly for her contribution in designing an anti-party political party, the Greens, in the West Germany of 1979 from a grab-bag of feminist, leftist, pacifist and environmental activists. She went on to inspire Europe's most powerful environmental movement which led to a world wide proliferation of similar groups whose supporters today number in the millions. She and her movement pushed established political parties to pay attention to such issues as ozone depletion and global warming, the world's rain forests, air and water pollution, nuclear safety and recycling.<sup>8</sup> In the fast dividing world of society and individuals — dividing within and without — the role of counsellors are immensely felt and the need is great, both in depth and dimension. "Who are there to be sent", and I can not think of any other than so many of our theologically trained women. It is an irony that the interest in Religious Education and Master of Religious Education Degree Courses has dwindled as the need of professionals increased. There are not many women who opt for Master of Theology in Counselling.

IV.7 Theologically trained women in India, looking for new areas of ministry and action, will not find these fields barren, unproductive and un-satisfying. The strong desire to break new grounds, tread barren paths and do something different in the direction of building a new human-community, will surely liberate them from the clutches of man-made structures of activities, *Lakshman Rekha*<sup>9</sup>, an obstacle in realizing true women-kind as God wants them to be.

IV.8 We greatly appreciate the presence of women organizations such as ATTWI. They have made tremendous efforts to unite women for common concern and task, and have made others to listen to their protest. In a state of affairs where atrocities against women are even being committed by the political leaders and protection forces, they have a positive role to play in order to heal the wounds and make the society worth living.

ATTWI has some personal task to perform. It has to gear its activities in such a way that it can play a role of a liaison between churches, Theological institutions and women, to coordinate matters that concerns them. It will be helpful if ATTWI identifies churches' programmes for women and actively participates in carrying them with much vigour and enthusiasm. A critical evaluation and sympathetic analysis of Christian programmes for women will help many to see their efforts from proper perspectives.

The Church leaders, head of Christian organizations and

people-at-large, need to be properly educated and made more sensitive to the women problems and issues that concern them most. I am not aware of any such effort being undertaken by this body. It may be requested to take some concrete steps in this direction, without being too militant in approach and communication. Modern phenomenal theologies seem to be more active, militant and combative in nature and content. There are some positive contributions that have so far been made ; but a great many of them have bruised and alienated a large number of intellectuals and common people. This counter-product has been safe-guarded, and the feminine touch of healing, compassion and loving concern should not be withdrawn.

## V. Concluding Remarks

I have tried to present, within the limitation of time and space, a few of the opportunities and challenges, that beckon theologically trained women to face and react in faith and commitment. I consider my role as a midwife, in the spirit of Socrates, helping to deliver something that can show light and direction to those who needed them most. I had no intention to provide answers to the problems ; I may not even be aware of most important feminine problems.

V.2 I am looking forward for a genuine and authentic Indian feminist theology coming out, if not in immediate than in distant future. ATTWI has a task to perform, even if it means facing wrath of the established institutions and theologians, even if it amounts to heresies ; even if it means proscription. In the name of globalism, universalism and transcendentalism, the authenticity should not be sacrificed. The western "feminism" should not be accepted without critical analysis, tools of which can only be provided by the local religio-socio-cultural context of Indian women. It is imperative in any attempt towards a truly-genuine-authentic feminist theology to recognise the difference of perspectives and aspirations between the Eastern and Western women-hood. By being so, and doing so, the Indian feminism will be able to provide a corrective to the Western feminism and will help to construct a full view of Christian feminism.

V.3 Human kind everywhere is passing through an identity crisis which is quite evident from the politico-socio-religious movements around us. Women are no exception to this crisis: so also the women organizations. It seems to me that the *KAIROS* has come for them to assert their self-identity through the visual



signs of organized works, associations and institutions. It may not be inappropriate to have an autonomous institutions of some sort, even theological, on the Lincolnian principle "only of the women, for the women and by the women". There is not a single theological College of this sort anywhere in India, and its inauguration may be an important step in the realized-women-selfhood in Indian context.

V.4 Associated with the problem of identity crisis, is the problem of lack of leadership. Most of the christian leadership, as it is often seen, revolves round a single person, who is jack of all trades and omni-present at all forums of christian activities and committees. This has helped to sustain the old exploitative and dehumanizing organizational structures founded on self-grandizement and self-interest. We need to be sensitive to *women-hood* — of all women, leadership of all women, in the same Pauline spirit of "Priest-hood of all believers". It will be a set back if the process of self-identity-lead to a situation of self-destruction.

V.5 A last para for caution !! Being a subscriber to Indian Advaitism,<sup>10</sup> I can not suggest anykind of exclusivism for the feminist movement in the sense of isolationism. Human-kind, by very nature, is inclusive of two biological-psychological-physical realities — Man-kind and Women-kind. They are to be the counter part to each other at every point of phenomenal, not illusory, existence. Man-kind is potentially *Ardha-nari*<sup>11</sup> in the same manner as women-kind is *Ardha-purusha*. This mutuality at every aspect of their being in life and action has to be creatively asserted for the attainment of perfect Human-kind as true, authentic and genuine children of God.

## References

1. Report of the Review Committee of the B.Th / B.D. external students under the Senate of Serampore College : Aug. 3-4, 1987 (unpublished).
2. See, Regulations relating to the Bachelor of Christian Studies (B.C.S) degree course : *Objectives*.
3. Senate of Serampore College : *Proceedings of the Theological Senate and its Committees*, Book IX, Vol. VII, 1988. p.831.
4. See, Report on priorities in theological education to the Senate of Serampore College, 1985 (unpublished document).
5. Address of the Master of the Serampore College to the Sixty-first annual convocation, Allahabad, 1992. p.3
6. Manu-Smrti, 9 : 3.
7. Tulsi Das : *Rama-caritra-manas*, Sundara kanda : 59 : 6.
8. See, Obituary reference to Petra Kelly, *Telegraph* (Calcutta) October, 23, 1992.

9. In the epic, *Ramayana*, Lakshmana draws a line on the ground and instructs his sister-in-law, Sita, not to cross over till he returns. The phrase now denotes the restrictions imposed upon the women in society.
10. The philosophy propounds the non-dual nature of the Ultimate Reality and emphasizes the transcendent unity of all diversities.
11. In the classical Shaivism, the physical body of Shiva is depicted of having one-half body of each — male and female, hence known as the God with body, one-half of which is female's, *Ardha-nari*. The complimentary idea refering to goddess Parvati, his wife, is not used, which I wish to propose for her, and consequently to women-kind, as the one whose other half of the body is man's, hence *Ardha-purusha*.

*Purusha* is the term used for the Ultimate Reality in the philosophical Upanishads. The concept, *ardha-nari*, needs further elaboration in the context of women's perspectives on theological issues and its theological implications are to be worked out.

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