

# **Towards Theologising in Context : Our Vision and Goal**

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**T**heology overflows from critical reflection of one's faith in God ; it overflows from a heart that is touched by 'God-experience' — in situations, in the other or in nature. Theology has been defined in the past by many western theologians as a systematic, organised discipline that meaningfully, coherently articulates one's faith. Today this definition seems not only incomplete but domineering. It is a definition that has not taken into account the unphilosophical (but real), unsystematic or unorganised (but clear) groans and cries of people and nature, in verbal and non-verbal form by the disabled, silenced, voiceless masses of the world. Perhaps because the silenced, dispossessed and voiceless are far too many in Asia than in the West.

Theology is not just a matter of what one thinks ; it reveals what one *is*. Theologising therefore is a dangerous task because it makes one transparent . . . it reveals what one's priorities are in life . . . the values and the goal that one sets in life. Theology is also a dangerous tool because it exposes the values/goals that the Church, government, an institution or society holds. If one is convinced of the prophetic task that he/she is involved in while theologising, the question that rattles within one's mind is 'how do I know whether my theology is relevant?'. One of the first questions that a theology student raises is : 'Why do we need so many theologies when there is only one God ? Can we not have a theology with universal significance? What do we mean by contextual theology ?' and many more.

## **Why Theology in Context ?**

The attempt in this paper is to spell out the need and relevance of theologising in context with Love and Justice as the vision and goal. In order to do this, I begin with the questions one raises in theology.

Theology by its very nature is pluralistic in form and content. If theology is understood as a critical reflection of one's faith

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in God, of one's God-experience, then it is self-implied that every human being who is uniquely different from another has varied God-experiences, varied ways to understand and to express the same. Every theology is an articulation of faith and is contextual too but the question is *whose* context ? Thus theologising in context is the attempt to re-root (route ?) a theology in one's own socio-political-economic-religio-cultural context in order that the articulation be closely relevant to the questions/issues in context.

### **What is context ?**

The word 'context' is conceptualised in many ways. Theologies that are born in context include essentially an element of *prioritising* the issues in context. For example, a woman who faces all kinds of sexual harassment and violence at home, workplace and society cannot prioritise as most burning issue, the issue of religious fundamentalism. A tribal who is on the verge of being displaced from his/her homeland for centuries cannot prioritise gender injustice as the major burning issue in society. When one issue is prioritised over another, it only brings to surface that issue and does not mean that other issues are either non-important, non-issues or non-existent ! The painful experiences, harrowing tales of woe, cries of poverty and oppression, etc. makes theology much more than a discipline of study. It becomes a spontaneous cry for life, a response that people of faith make with commitment to transform the cry into laughter and joy. Contextualising theology therefore is an act of faith, responding to the groans that come from different corners due to life-diminishing, life-denying powerful systems, unjust judicial structures, social orders etc.

### **Contextual realities : A global perspective :**

The world has certainly shrunk into a global village. The developments in science and technology has made it possible for one to reach across the world in seconds. Revolutionary changes in communication and mass media has made the word 'private' as non-existent. While the word 'private' has lost its meaning and significance, the word 'privatisation' has become the local word and norm ! The word globalisation (a word that was used for the first time in 1970 and interestingly at the WCC conference on *Faith, Science and Future* at MIT) is a common word with intense political-ecological-economic and social implications. After the collapse of Soviet Union, new

nations and cooperations for economic and other reasons emerged. The ASEAN, APEC, NAFTA are only examples. The current burning issue that has been in the news headlines since a week is whether an airstrike should be ordered by the UN on the Bosnian Serb seige around Sarajevo. While the U.S.A. (the world's hegemony today that twists the arms of poorer nations) leading the Nato allies are ready for the strike, Russia made an interesting remark a fortnight ago about the threatening power potential of Germany-Russia-India combined ! The several peace-treaties, peace-talks, economic and other cooperations are in jeopardy and the world can no longer sit idle and believe that countries can remain unaffected if they take a neutral stand. Globalisation forces every person on earth- irrespective of north-south, east-west polarities- to take a stand. India which is a developing country plays a vital role in global market, global development (or underdevelopment !) and global peace.

### **Capitalism :**

Capitalism has become an alternate *Religion* of the world. The carcinogenic effect of capitalism is exposed in patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, labour-philosophy, economic policies of the governments etc. where it dehumanises the human, eating into the vitals of the earth and her children, counting nothing but the profit it can hoard ! Father Sebastian Kappen criticises capitalism thus :

What debases humans most is the fact that capital, though a product of human labour, sets itself up as master and Lord over the community of producers . . . The domination of capital is compounded by other forms of human alienations such as reduction of all human relations to monetary relations ; the culture of universal whoredom where money can be exchanged even for love, loyalty and the favour of God ; the pursuit of quantitative consumption to the neglect of quality of life . . .<sup>\*1</sup>

Capitalism is primarily a culture that has set into motion, the dehumanising, denaturising process from its genesis. The rampant culture of consumerism is only an effect of the system. In Kappen's words, "the real consumer is not us humans but capital. We humans are being consumed and digested by capital for its own growth and in the end, excreted"<sup>\*2</sup>

### **War and violence against people :**

The ongoing bloody struggles in many parts of the world

point out to two realities : a. that power over land and its resources is continuous with inner freedom even at the expense of lives and extensive damage to humanity and nature. b. that industries/countries selling arms and ammunition actually thrive on the prevalence of war and violence, insecurity and hatred between nations, within nations and even within states. The two issues when juxtaposed show how a country, society and individual are necessarily linked with each other in any other corner of the world.

There are nations in birthpangs, struggling for freedom. The Blacks in South Africa who had almost given up their hope of being counted as human beings in this generation are gearing up for the historic moment when they will cast a vote for the first time in more than 300 years ! Imagine waiting for centuries to be counted as *humans* ! Nelson Mandela's words "your freedom and mine cannot be separated. . ." or . . . "the sight of freedom looming large on the horizon should encourage us to redouble our efforts . . ." are songs of freedom amidst cries of liberation.

### **Contextual reality : An Asian perspective :**

#### **Globalisation :**

Globalisation has led to the opening up of countries to free market economy. Within Asia, huge disparities have developed. The economic 'miracle' that is taking place in the North-east and South-east Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hongkong and Malaysia is to be considered with one third of the poorest of the world within different pockets in Asia. Statistics show that 40% of the world's trade is happening in Asia-Pacific. About 50% of the world's production is in Asia-Pacific. Asia-Pacific is said to be growing at two billion dollars a day !

#### **Multi-religious context :**

Asia is the continent that gave birth to the major religions in the world today. The multi-religious, cultural, lingual and multi-traditional character of Asia is experienced in the Indian sub-continent everyday.

#### **Poverty :**

The reality of abject poverty magnified in various forms like

population growth, illiteracy, child-labour, low wages, is rampant in Asia. Most Asian countries except Thailand have been under colonial rule and the effect of colonialism, neo-colonialism are telling on these nations. The presence of countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan alongside with Japan, Hongkong and other affluent countries is a striking paradox! Uneven development, maldevelopment and underdevelopment of people in Asia is speeded up with the economic power shifting from Europe to Asia-Pacific rim making the poor more weak, inaudible and invisible.

### **Contextual reality : An Indian perspective :**

Eventhough the contextual realities of India are too many to be spelt out in detail, the major ones are listed below.

### **The unique face of India :**

India is one of the ten leading industrialised nations in the world, developed in Science and Technology. On the one hand, it contributes to global market economy, global peace while on the other, the world's poorest live here. The unfolding of the cover of governmental policies on economy and development reveal that the gap between the rich and the poor is ever widening. The IMF, World Bank, GATT controlled economic forces tighten the noose around the neck of the poor. While a monolithic global culture of capitalism and consumerism develops on one side, the poor either migrate in quest of unattainable aspirations or retreat into ethnic ghettos. Religious fundamentalism becomes more and more prominent as struggles for identity is confused with struggle for power and prominence.

### **Status of women :**

Patriarchy calls the tune in every aspect of the life of society. It is "the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influences and resources."<sup>3</sup>

India joins the countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh in the declining sex-ratio between male and female. Female infanticide, female foeticide has to be seen as continuous with gender related

issues like dowry, rape, discriminatory judiciary, and violence against women in varying degrees at all levels. Even though women's issues are global in nature, the intensity of oppression, marginalisation is visible in countries like India. Religion and culture has given its legitimisation to brutalities galore.

### **Ecological concern :**

The nature sheds tears over the violence done to it. The denuding of forests, increasing pollution of air, water and land raises doubts of survival in the generations to come. Poverty and oppression take a human face (more a child's face, a woman's face . . . ). On the one hand, the over populated country has to provide employment and food for its people and on the other, it struggles against policies related to industrialisation, development, etc.

### **Caste reality :**

India stands out as a unique country in the world with its intra-racial discrimination of caste. A struggle for identity coupled with a struggle for freedom, human dignity is manifested in this dimension of reality.

### **Shift in Paradigm :**

A paradigmatic shift is seen as necessary when the existing paradigm does not answer or evades basic questions in context. An anomaly in a current paradigm that shows "something is amiss" is what T. S. Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* writes that there is "something wrong", "a failure to fit", in the current paradigm. A shift in the paradigm is always resisted. He says that "the decision to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously a decision to accept another, and the judgement leading to that decision involves the comparison of both paradigms with nature and with each other."<sup>4</sup>

The paradigm shift in theologising already started in the 1960s and continued by courageous EATWOT theologians when they expressed clearly in the Final document of the First Assembly in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in 1976 :

"The theologies from Europe and North America are dominant today in our churches and represent one form of cultural domination . . . in order to be faithful to the gospel and to our peoples, we must reflect on the realities

of our own situations and interpret the Word of God in relation to these realities. We reject as irrelevant and academic type of theology that is divorced from action . . . We call for an active commitment to the promotion of justice and the prevention of exploitation, the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few racism, sexism and all other forms of oppression, discrimination and dehumanisation . . . The christian theological task in our countries is to be self-critical of the theologian's conditioning by the value system of their environment..."<sup>5</sup>

Theologies that do not answer the questions of reality in India like the economic-socio-political-gender-eco injustices cannot be accepted as either a relevant theology or methodology. A theological method that adopts a philosophical framework and studies *what* is poverty instead of attempting to understand *who* and *why* they are poor cannot be accepted as a relevant method for theologising. Theologising in context is not an *option* but *mandatory* where context gives priority to the underside of history, the "non-persons" who have never been counted as humans.

The paradigmatic shift is an act of faith that follows the vision and goal of love and justice for all of God's creation. The perspective of Love and Justice thus remains rooted at the centre, re-rooting (routing) theology in the soil and making it more relevant to the people.

### **A critique of theological methodologies in India :**

Theological methods in the Indian context in the past have extensively used philosophy as its backbone to formulate theological doctrines. The choice was made between western philosophies and the Indian philosophical systems. The Advaitic philosophy as well as the Visistadvaitic framework paid more attention to the context of the elite, educated masses and the minority but did not articulate the experiences of the poor and the victimised who are the downtrodden, forgotten majority of our country today. The Pramanas adopted by the Indian theologians in the past have helped in their articulation of faith to *understand* more about Hindu or Christian doctrines but they as a whole do not help in addressing the burning questions in context.

The question of perspective thus comes into focus. The choice of the perspective of *Love* and *Justice* becomes a matter of faith and commitment, an act that comes closer to the heart of God

who seeks healing and wholeness of a broken world. By accepting the perspectives of love and justice as the key to the heart of God, we shall see how it shapes our theological constructs.

**God :** God then is primarily seen as one who created the world out of love and in order where Peace and harmony become synonymous with Justice. God created man and woman in God's own image and instilled in them the ability to love justice, peace and harmony. A God who is only "Almighty" and not gracious and loving is an irrelevant God. We can say it with all boldness because the God of Biblical Revelation is not a power-loving, power-wielding God but one who is vulnerable, who is hurt by humans, who cries when humanity perish, who repents of the evil, who redeems and covenants with people, who compares the people of Isreal as the ones whom God brought forth out of love, for love, by and with love. The activity of the triune God is already manifested in the creating out of love, redeeming by love and sustaining with and for love. Love and Justice becomes the purpose, means and goal for God.

**The Bible :** The Bible speaks of the quintessence of God's love, not just for a select humanity (eventhough references of election of Israel may be often cited) but for all of God's creation. The strands of acts of justice by God for the people and nature, the whole of creation is rooted in Genesis 1 & 2. The Bible constantly calls people to turn from their ways of hatred and crime to love and justice. The prophets of the Old Testament bombard the people of God for acts of injustice and cunningness. The exhortation is love Justice and Righteousness so to flow as streams of water.

**Jesus Christ :** The thrust of the Bible, that God is a God of love and justice takes concrete form in the Incarnate Word, Jesus. The life and work of the incarnate son of God is the media and Cross is the message of love and justice wrought for all. Jesus spelt out the purpose of his coming as his love of serving God who loves justice. The Nazareth Manifesto embodies this message. The life and work of Jesus Christ makes one realise that it does not hinder anyone — of any faith, creed, young or old from coming to him. Women and men, young and old, rich and poor, mighty and weak — all find place in God in Jesus Christ when love and justice are internalised as the purpose of God.

**Holy Spirit :** The Holy Spirit only confirms and strengthens the purpose of God. It works for humans/the whole of creation; it leads people to love justice and builds up the spirituality of the weak and the needy. Holy Spirit kindles in us a sense of remorse and shame in being unloving, selfish and unjust ; it leads us to beg God for a new life and moves us to be responsible



human beings called to love and serve God in the world. It works within every child of God.

**The Church and its mission :** The Church if it internalises love and justice as the key perspective cannot any longer imagine to be an exclusive community that denies Christ's presence and love for all people. The mission of the Church gains a new momentum. It becomes "no longer an activity which the churches carry on elsewhere but a key concept which relates to the presence of the Church in the world . . . instead of being a quantitative concept in which the main concern is the number of people who are reached by the message of the gospel, mission becomes a qualitative concept relating to the way in which the Church is present and take sides in specific social conditions. . . ."5 The witness of the Church as a Mission spoke volumes in the daily newspaper that the Church helped in creating a new ethos without corruption and malpractices in the last election.

**The Eucharist :** Eucharist can no longer be understood as a meal shared as a ritual in remembrance of the *day* of the Last Supper. It is rather a reminder for the partaker that it is only in the readiness to be broken for the sake of the other because of love for the *other* and to bring justice and peace with the broken world. The present Pope once said, 'if you want peace, then work for justice.' Eucharist becomes an act of pledge in faith to follow the way of Christ to the very end, where he was nailed outside the city gates.

**Humanity :** Human beings are called to realise the divine purpose in their existence — to love and serve one another whom God has graciously given to love. Imagine a world without families, ties, bonds — being a loner.

The Church cannot be preoccupied only with doctrinal/dogmatic questions of 'What is original sin ? What does Image of God mean ?' and so on. The act of sin/fall in human beings both individually and collectively is to love *oneself* more than the other, at the cost of another's life and blood.

Salvation which Jesus has taught and wrought for to hold humanity can be viewed as total expression of LOVE for God's creatures. The way one works to love, true love for *all* is to be aware of how love for the poor is obscured by injustices in law, rituals, religion, power and other systems. Love is goal of salvation and justice is the co-ordinate of love. They are not abstracts but take concrete shape in action. Salvation cannot be something one waits for after death but the experience here and now. The New Testament does speak about salvation as life after death (Lk. 16:22, 23:43), in Kingdom of God language, but salvation in the present as fulness of life for all stands out among others. According to Carlos H. Abesamis,

"Our feet firmly on Third world soil, we set our face more resolutely towards the new world where under the reign of God, new humankind individually and collectively will experience a new history, in which the blessings of definitive salvation will be the *fulness of life* that is, where the dead now will live a risen life, where the once-sorrowing will now have joy, where the once-hungry now eat, where the once-oppressed now have justice, where the once-humbled now possess the earth, where we experience divine filiation, where God is all in all"

*The Christian hope* : Amidst cries of injustice, hatred, violence and war, there are faint whispers of hope : where individuals, societies join together to form basic human communities to spread awareness of people's rights. Birthing of new nation, new communities with new life, hope and freedom also takes place alongside the powers of death and destruction. The fire of hope is kept alive when human beings would fan the ember of love within their heart and soul and look at the other, respecting his/her uniqueness and help the other to recognise and grow in that uniqueness which God has given as a gift.

### **Conclusion :**

Search for a perspective to do theology is not a search for an intellectual understanding of concepts of God, humanity and the world. The many existing methodologies of theology need to be critiqued for its euro-american, male-oriented, concept-oriented, academic oriented approaches. The paradigmatic shift called for is not because other methodologies are old. Rather it is an act of faith that is provoked when the critical eye of the heart is opened to recognise the need for theologising in context. A holistic theology in context is born when the cries of all at the periphery is made our own, and prioritised as the need to love the other, working for justice, peace and integrity of creation. When the tears that have dried up on the faces well up in our eyes, when the blood that cries from the ground of those massacred for their rights raises prophetic voices among us, when the spirit that is crushed in the weak blows into our hearts, the inevitable consequence will be a struggle against all powers that dehumanise, denaturise, debase life. The Bible, a tool for human rights to practice love and justice becomes a dangerous weapon. To cite an example, the Magnificat in Luke, the revolutionary song of Mary was banned in the 1980s by the government of one of the latin American countries because

it was realised that the people had discovered how dangerous the implications of the text was. Transformation can be foreseen here and now when individuals/societies, communities, church pledge to live the words of the Magnificat. It is the song of not a docile Mary, but the woman, the representative of the poor, weak and powerless today who is recognised as the revolutionary Mary. It is not a mere reversal of ideas but a humble recognition and acceptance in faith.

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