

A New Consciousness for Selfhood in the Asian Scenario : Towards 21st Century Theology

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Introduction:

‘Consciousness’ and ‘selfhood’ are complex phenomena. They are in fact a psycho-philosophical concept — very subtle, internal reality. But in this paper, I will be dealing with their visible, tangible dimension. It is very difficult to define or determine this ‘consciousness’ or ‘selfhood’. But we have realised that they are shaped and formed by the culture, society and religion to which one belongs. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the subject in terms of Asian cultures, societies and religions. It becomes rather vast in scope and character. For this reason in this paper, I will attempt to highlight their salient features.

Crisis of Consciousness and Selfhood in Asia/India:

I believe Asia is confronted with a crisis of consciousness — selfhood in struggle or struggling selfhood. This struggle or crisis is to be understood in terms of the contradiction between tradition and modernity; between globalisation and contextualisation; between fundamentalism and pluralism; between old and the new in Asia/India. If this contradiction is conceived in terms of tension it is to be welcomed. Some amount of tension is good, positive and necessary for growth and development of consciousness and selfhood. But it is involved in manipulation and exploitation of our consciousness — our very selfhood in terms of our identity. We have our own cultures, religions and societies. These together and cumulatively shape our consciousness and selfhood. That is

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not happening. On the contrary, in a very subtle, surreptitious ways, our minds are being moulded to deny our own self. This crisis is leading to confusion. We need clarity and credibility in our affirmations and actions. This will give a sound foundation to our solidarity in Asia/India with their own unique socio-cultural-religious matrix.

The Advent of New Consciousness in Asia/India:

Thirty-three years ago, M.M. Thomas had delivered the Duff Lectures, published later as *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*. In that lecture Thomas had mentioned about nationalism as the search for unique Asian selfhood¹ or Asian personality. He conceived of the selfhood in terms of individuality, equality and vocation in history. Greater human dignity, enhanced human creativity and maturer human living will bring about this rising new consciousness in Asia. He gave a clarion call for the struggle to build a new society on the basis of our spiritual and secular heritage. That struggle began with new urgency at least fifty years ago. India has celebrated her golden jubilee as an independent, political entity (1947-1997).

Social Scenario in India/Asia:

Our societies remain badly divided and fragmented. Fundamentalism, regionalism, casteism and communalism have aggravated our divisions. We are not able to put together the local and the global; contextual and the universal; the regional and the national. "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Matt. 12:25), holds good for any society. We have to celebrate and strengthen our tremendous diversity in India/Asia. But regional/local interests are becoming very petty and parochial, thwarting our larger vision—our broader consciousness. There is a greater caste consciousness among all sections of the Indian society particularly among the *dalits*. Some of it is negative and nihilistic, negating life and reality as a whole. Some of it is so politicised and personalised that it is detrimental to the development of our society. Some regions, castes and communities are eager to dominate,

monopolise and consequently marginalise completely other regions, castes and communities. That cannot be conducive towards a better, a more just society. We rejoice and welcome the new consciousness among the non-Brahmins, the tribals and the women. But it should not prove to be counter-productive due to internal squabbles or bickerings. The Indian delegation at the Women's Summit in Beijing in 1995 bear eloquent testimony to this problem. It is important to work together for the common good and thereby realise authentic justice. The Mayawati episode in the U.P. is both a symbol of hope and despair — hope for the *dalits* but despair for the movement as a whole.²

Added to the above problems, the revelation about the corruption scandals is symptomatic of the disease in our societies — in Japan, South Korea and now in India. *Satta*, *hawala* and scam are part of our vocabulary. We do not know exactly what they mean or the extent of their practise but they are indicative of our sickness in our society. They cannot be congenial for the emergence of a just and transparent society. They only reinforce our alienated consciousness. The social scenario presents a dismal picture with very few exceptions like Medha Patkar, Kiran Bedi, T.N. Shesan, R. Khairnar and others. Some amount of integrity and honesty are required of any social movement to give it credibility. Over the last fifty years we have managed to develop a “hawala culture” in terms of money, property and power. Consequently there is a rising new consciousness of the rights and privileges of the *dalits*, tribals and women and also a rising frustrations because of the abuse or misuse (corruption) of power, property and money by the very people who want to establish justice. This is the crisis of consciousness.

Economic Scenario in India/Asia:

In economic terms our predicament is worse. For the last seven years, the Government of India has been experimenting with the “New Economic Policy” (NEP) explicitly and directly. Basically, it has to do with deregulation, delicensing, privatisation and above all liberalisation, has not led to the liberation of the vast majority of our people, wallowing in

massive, pervasive poverty. 50% to 60% of our population are below the poverty line in terms of per capita income, per capita calorie intake and access to health care, education and employment. It is a situation of utter misery and deprivation. In the meantime, the IMF-WB-WTO (former GATT) and the MNCs/TNCs are taking full advantage of the Indian/Asian predicament. Not the mass but the *market* is determining our needs and wants. India is heading for a balance-of-payment crisis. Foreign exchange reserves are down to \$16 billion. The trade deficit is up to \$4057 million, primarily because of the hefty import growth of 30.10%. Per capita GNP income was \$290 in 1993 while in Switzerland it is \$36,410. This means that while India is being pauperised, millionaires and billionaires in the First World are growing fast in terms of dollars and pounds. Such is the economic scenario. Globalisation has come to mean further domination and domestication. It is an explicit and direct form of neo-colonialism.

More than these economic factors, the non-economic factors are more dangerous and destructive. Satellite television has created an artificial atmosphere for the Indian people through fashion, design, cosmetics, fancy food and such others. Basic communitarian values are in jeopardy. Such a process is creating a false consciousness, negating the fullness of life.³ We seem to have lost our purpose and direction, living with wrong priorities and perspectives. Thus globalisation in the modern time is a process of subjugation of the mind, body and spirit of India/Asia. More than ever before we are utterly confused — conscious of our status and role in the modern world but conscious also of what we are losing in the process. Paul described this dilemma very well in his epistle to the Romans in terms of Sin,

...I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not know what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do... Wretched man that I am; Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:14b-24).

With few qualifications or corrections, these subjective statements of Paul could very well describe the objective consciousness of India/Asia. We are missing the mark or goal as a corporate body of people living under oppression and injustice. In the context of our socio-economic scenario the war is not between flesh and spirit, faith and works or even law and grace but against "principalities, and the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness..." (Eph.6:12b). Thus as Indians/Asians we have to experience a new liberation, a new salvation based on real social equality and economic justice.

Political Scenario in India/Asia:

The former Chief Justice of India, Mr. A.M. Ahmadi, delivered the Dr. Zakir Hussain Memorial Lectures. He had praised the success of India's Parliamentary democracy. According to him in spite of the low levels of income and literacy, a hierarchical social structure and multiple ethnic cleavages and caste divisions, the prospects of democracy are very bright in India. We cannot be as optimistic as the former Chief Justice as the political power, after fifty years of Independence, remains in the hands of the high caste and the rich. Politics in India remains a *rajniti* and not *lokniti* which will authentically empower and enable the people of India/Asia. Thus, "peopling" of the people has not happened. Military dictatorship is still a fact of our time — in Myanmar and Indonesia.⁴ Dictatorship of the Left and authoritarianism of the Right have not completely disappeared in Asia. Democracy must discover deeper roots in India/Asia. Emergency (1975 to 1977) was a post-Independent phenomenon. People have to become vigilant. There is a constant misuse or abuse of political power in terms of mismanagement if not misappropriation. In such a situation it is important to strengthen the participatory processes of the people at all levels. The minorities, the women, the *dalits* and the tribals have to enter this process and remain there.

Increasingly, we have become conscious of politician-police-criminal nexus, thwarting the purpose of power — the power to do good and work for the common welfare. Instead, mafia-hawala culture is afflicting the political power of our time.

Such a situation has been highlighted in the modern time. Several general elections have come and gone, many promises have been made and betrayed and the plight of our people have become worse. "The world's largest democracy" has to improve herself in terms of quality and character. There is a growing consciousness of freedom but it is necessary to build on it and reinforce its pillars. Otherwise, it will collapse and crumble.

Above all, our hard-earned freedom is endangered by the recent politics of the government of India. We are losing our self-respect, self-confidence and most important a sense of self-reliance. *Swaraj* we have in name but we have lost our *swadeshi* spirit.⁵ Conspicuous, compulsive consumerism has seized our consciousness. We seem to be a people without a culture and tradition, without a history and heritage. 1998 marks the 500 years of the coming of Vasco de Gama to Asia and Africa. Thus began the invasion and colonization of these continents. These were 500 years of plunder and exploitation of the Indian/Asian people — their religions and cultures, their resources and ways of life. The political process of decolonisation began about 50 years ago, India being one of the first countries to become politically independent. But in these twilight years of the twentieth century, we perceive the twilight of our consciousness. A process of recolonisation continues unabated. The twenty-first century will not herald a new consciousness. We are not able to liberate ourselves from our new captivity. We cannot experience the Jubilee joy and justice as advocated in Leviticus 25,

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you; you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

(Leviticus 25:10-12).

What about our jubilee (1947-1997) in India/Asia? What shall we proclaim and celebrate?

Theology of Impartiality:

Multi-religious multi-cultural and multi-ethnic character of India/Asia calls for celebration. The God whom we affirm in the Bible is a global (universal) God who is the Creator, Redeemer and re-creator of the whole wide world. At least for the last five hundred (500) years, India/Asia has been discriminated and dominated by the West. It is a long, sad saga of western partiality and prejudice — powerful against the powerless and white against the non-white. We have been discriminating from time immemorial among ourselves — Brahmins against the non-Brahmins particularly against the *dalits*, men against women.⁶

Today in our own time, prejudice and partiality are expressed in terms of regionalism, casteism, communalism and fundamentalism. In the process we ourselves are condemning our rich plurality or diversity. Stories of partiality in India/Asia are not well-documented. Some of them are hidden, ignored or underestimated. We exaggerate, magnify our own stories at the expense of other equally important stories of partiality. We know the stories of Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, Sister Rani Maria and a few others. But we need to know more of such stories. When we are totally convinced of such blatant partiality, precisely in that context we need to affirm the fundamental character or essence of God.

C.S. Song focuses on the centrality of the reign or the rule of God in Asia in terms of the Biblical narrative about the Great Banquet (Luke 14:16-24).⁷ For him the rule of God is the hermeneutical principle, ethical standard, the theological foundation and the eschatological vantage point. Song is fully aware of the many stories of discrimination and partiality in Asia.⁸ Precisely in the Asian context we have to talk about a God who goes *beyond*, *overcomes*, rises *above*. That is the meaning of transcendence. For this he examines the stories of the transition from partiality and prejudice to openness and freedom. — Peter in Joppa and Paul in Athens.⁹

According to the gospel writers, Peter was with Jesus at least for three years. He must have learnt more than fishing. He was to be the fisher of all kinds of people according to the command of Jesus (Mk. 1:17; repeated in Matt. 4:19). He was

to be the rock, *petros*, on which Jesus was to build the church (Matt. 16:18). He must have relished these ideas about himself. But later he must have realised that he had a long way to go — a lot of things to learn. This process of learning and unlearning took place definitively at Joppa (Act 10:1-34).

Peter was an itinerant preacher moving about all the time. In one of his several journeys he was staying with a tanner, a *dalit*, by the seaside. He was very hungry and began to see things as in a dream, a trance or a *darsana*. Obviously, he was dreaming about food — what else? A hungry person will dream about food — very material, very tangible. Nothing about the vision that is abstract or philosophical. He was not surprised — we should not be surprised. *But*, the great, pioneer Peter was not only surprised but utterly shocked at the *content*. Why should the very heavens do this to him? He wanted some good, 'clean' food. He was commanded to eat what he considered to be uncommon or unclean (14): Peter's partiality or prejudice is well established by himself. He was a staunch follower of Jesus but he was not saved from his entrenched, ingrained habits, customs and usages. He was yet to learn. God persists, willing to teach and inculcate in Peter a theological truth — "what *God* has cleansed, you must not call common" (15). This foundational theology was impressed on him through triple repetition. It was an unforgettable experience which left an indelible impression for the rest of his life and work (Acts 10:28; 11:5-11). This is an experience of New Being.¹⁰

Through this experience Peter becomes available to Cornelius, the centurion, a non-Jew. Peter had sufficient time to reflect or ponder (inwardly perplexed - 17) on this triple experience. He began to examine his relationships particularly with the non-Jews, the Gentiles. Peter had a very close encounter with such a person as Cornelius and makes a radical, revolutionary theological-ethical statement for the time in which he was living,

Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation *any one* who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34-35).

Earlier Jesus had said, "I tell you many will come from the East and West and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 8:11).

Similarly we read about Paul in Athens in his second missionary journey. He had arrived there by accident. Immediately he was struck by their art and culture, religion and faith. He spent quite an amount of time in that ancient, cultured city (Acts 17:17). Initially, he was negative but finally he was able to overcome, transcend his partiality and affirm, "People of Athens, I perceive in every way you are very religious." (22). In his Areopagus speech, Paul quoted from the sixth century poets of Rome and thus his Christological horizon was stretched by his theological horizon. C.S. Song rightly quotes,

Unlike our frontiers God's, frontiers may be crossed without a permit or passport. There is a frontier I may cross deep within my own heart. There is a frontier I may cross as I reach out in loving concern to another person's need. Always I live in the frontier.¹¹

Living on the frontier, crossing human-made boundaries and barriers will give us a new consciousness and a new selfhood. This consciousness has a personal, inter-personal, social-structural dimension. It must have a social, economic and political dimension particularly in India/Asia.¹² To be religious is to be inter-religious, inter-cultural and inter-ethnic. To be impartial means to de-absolutise our own race, caste, colour, creed and region.

God is impartial as demonstrated in the life and work of Jesus. He sought out the least and the lost. His encounters with the woman of Samaria (Jn. 4:4-26); the Canaanite woman or the Syrophenician woman (Mk. 7:24-30 and Matt. 15:21-28); the Samaritan man in his parable (Luke 10:25-37) and the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10) and such other Gentiles testify to Jesus' keen desire to open up and transcend his Jewish limitations. This spirit of impartiality was very well imbibed by the early Church and the pioneer, ancient apostles (Col. 3:25). Again and again they repeat and remind the people that God is impartial (Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9; Romans 2:9-11). On the basis of this theological-ethical affirmation, James categorically states, "If you show partiality, *you commit sin*" (James 2:9). Thus we are summoned to do nothing on the basis of partiality (I Tim. 5:21). In India/Asia we are yet to learn this gospel truth.

We are confronted with a double problem — discrimination and monopolistic tendencies from abroad and from within India/Asia. We have to be liberated and saved in the light of the gospel and the behaviour and conduct of the early Church. Song has put it very well,

The confusion is cleared, the mist is lifted, and a new reality disclosed. Peter crossed the frontier of his Jewish background and ventured into the frontier of God... No more those religious conditions of salvation stipulated by his own religion... Spirit of God enabled Jesus, and Peter and Paul to cross into other territories full of surprises...¹³

We have to break barriers, build bridges and reach new frontiers of relationships of India/Asia—beyond our own parochial, 'political' groupings. That is the experience of Transcendence — the experience of God in India/Asia. It is only in this way we can expand or enlarge the consciousness or the selfhood of India/Asia. Basically this means that we should not indulge in reductionism or dualism in the Name of this impartial God revealed in the Old Testament and the New Testament — in the gospels and the epistles.

Reign of God through the Power of the Spirit:

Taking cognizance of the Indian/Asian scenario, it is imperative to sight, identify or discern the rule of God, where the power of the Spirit is recognized and acknowledged. There are people and forces working for justice and peace, freedom and liberation — Sundarlal Bahuguna, Medha Patkar, Kiran Bedi, T.N. Sheshan, Mother Teresa, Auung Sung Su Kyi and many other unknown martyrs who are willing to stand up, not compromise and be counted for the higher consciousness and bigger selfhood — bigger than themselves or their own region or caste. It is for us to express solidarity with such people and forces in India/Asia. For us in India/Asia this specifically and concretely means those who are really working for the poor, the *dalits*, the women, the tribals, other indigenous people and those who are working to save their environment from degradation and destruction. People like Tissa Balasuriya, C.S. Song, Kosuke Koyama and others have helped us to think and act in this direction. Balasuriya had written about the

dynamic role of Mary in terms of the Magnificat and during certain moments when she became explicitly liberative¹⁴ More recently he has elaborately dwelt on Mariology. He has openly criticised certain traditional Marian doctrines, liberating them from superstitions and ritualism. In the process Mary becomes a definitive model or paradigm for liberation and justice. She is liberated from patriarchy, hierarchy and denomination.¹⁵ Thus it is important that we discover new Marys in our time in India/Asia on the basis of Mary, the mother of Jesus, through such people the reign of God is at work in India/Asia.

Andrew Sung Park has questioned the traditional Christian doctrine of Sin from a Korean/Asian perspective. The classical notions of sin inculcates in the 'believer' a negative sense of guilt and shame. He/She becomes passive and submissive — considers himself/herself as of no value, no worth. It takes away completely self-respect or selfhood. It is a loss of self. Thus the people of Asia are not only the sinners but the victims of structural, systemic sins — the sinned against. He understands this in terms of capitalist global economy, patriarchy, racial and cultural discrimination. In the Korean language this is *han* which means "the collapsed feeling of pain", wound, frustrated hope, resentful bitterness because of oppression and injustice. It is in this context he goes on to state,

The doctrine of repentance, which has focussed on the sinner/oppressor, will be complemented with the doctrine of *forgiveness* which is for the victim/oppressed. The doctrine of *justification* for the oppressor will be underpinned by the doctrine of justice for the oppressed. The doctrine of *salvation* for sinners will be complemented by the doctrine of the resolution of *han* for the victims of sin.¹⁶

Therefore, Christianity particularly in Asia needs to enlarge the scope of the doctrine of sin if it wants to bring about a new consciousness and a selfhood with respect, reliance and dignity. This means that we must be prepared to confess together the sin against women, the poor, the *dalits*, the tribals and such other groups of people who are crying for justice and liberation.

We have realised in our discussion so far that the cardinal, classical doctrines have been domesticated to suit the interests of the dominant. This means that we have to liberate the Christian doctrines from the clutches of the rich and the powerful. For too long we have allowed our doctrines of sin and salvation to remain remote and abstract, more philosophical or even theological but not ethical-sociological. We have to realise with Reinhold Niebuhr,

All human knowledge (including theological) is tainted with an 'ideological' taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge.¹⁷

This means that if we want a new consciousness in India/Asia to grow and flourish we have to wholeheartedly uphold and strengthen "a hermeneutics of suspicion". This will enable us to question and challenge power-equations or power-politics in our own situation where corruption is rampant — corruption with regard to money, power, property and position. We are losing our integrity and credibility because of these problems. A new consciousness presuppose a new being — a new relationship.

Conclusion:

Truth must be defined and determined not by exclusion or isolation but in relation — in contact. We must not identify the reign or the rule of God (Kingdom of God) with a territory, the feudal social system, monarchical structure of power. Truth must be pursued relentlessly in terms of people and forces working hard for the reign of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the beginning I have written about a crisis. Crisis is both a danger and an opportunity. There is the danger in India/Asia to put back the clock and go back to the static, Ptolemaic world with all its presuppositions and prejudices, as indicated during the solar eclipse or Ganesh drinking milk or the Domsday Cult, *Aum* in Japan. But as I have suggested that there are signs of hope every where in India/Asia. We have no reason to despair. There is an emerging new self-consciousness for selfhood in the Indian/Asian scenario.

References

1. M.M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), pp.17-19.
2. Mayawati decided to enter into an alliance with the B.J.P. to become the Chief Minister of U.P. This diluted the *dalit* cause and lost its focus as a mighty movement of the people.
3. See Herbert Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and life of the Spirit* (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1963), particularly Ch.5 on "Karma and the Inner World". This is an interdisciplinary study on the understanding of the self.
4. Indonesia is still in the process of working out its authentic democratic future. Removal of President Suharto is only the beginning. Military is well entrenched in that society and in the public consciousness.
5. B.J.P. Government at present is advocating *Swadeshi* in terms of Hindutva-Hindu, Hindi and Hindustani. This is inculcating false consciousness. Patriotism, nationalism and the concept of loyalty to one's own country are being distorted.
6. Fundamentalist, Rightist forces are rearing their ugly heads with the full support of the B.J.P. government. Discrimination and consequent marginalisation of the Muslims and Christians have become obvious in recent times in India. We may not have 'blasphemy' laws but the B.J.P. Government is partial about non-Hindus but very much Indians.
7. C.S. Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 3-38.
8. C.S. Song, *Reign of God*, pp. 80-113.
9. C.S. Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 80-98.
10. For Paul Tillich this is the experience of a New Being in Jesus. Tillich understood new being (new consciousness) in terms of love and freedom. See his *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), particularly Part I and II.
11. John S. Mbiti ed. *Confessing Christ in Different Cultures* (Geneva: Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, 1977), p. 63.
12. See Rajendra Sail and Ajit Muricken, ed. *Transcending Boundaries: Faith, Social Action and Solidarity* (Raipur: RCDRC, 1995) and *Transcending Boundaries for a True Ecumenism* (Raipur : RCDRC, 1998) part one, pp.1-20
13. Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, pp. 97-98.
14. Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 51-58.
15. Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation* in "Logos", Double Issue, Volume 29, No.1 and 2, March/July, 1990, Reprint July, 1994 (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1994), pp. 107 and 121. For this position Balasuriya was ex-communicated on 8th Dec., 1996 but wisdom prevailed, the Spirit of God was at work and the Vatican decided to forgive him for his 'heresy' and made a "Statement of Reconciliation on 15th January, 1998. See *Indian Journal of Theology*, Volume 39/No.1, 1997, pp. 67-74. See my book Review on Mary in *IJT*, Volume37/No.2, 1995, pp. 88-92.

See also Edward Schillebecckx and Catherine Halkes, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993), pp. 58-78.

16. Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p.13.
17. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p.194.