

Challenges of Contemporary Mission : A Reflection from India

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'Mission' has become a popular word. During the colonial era, 'mission' was predominantly taken as the work of the Christian missionaries in the mission fields. When the second half of the twentieth century ushered in a new world order, the Christian monopoly of the word 'mission' was shattered. The task assigned to a spy or a criminal investigation officer is referred to as his or her 'mission' to their society. In this sense, person such as Gandhiji, Mandela and Teresa had their distinct mission of independence, liberation and service. Religions have each come up with their mission agendas, as seen in the Ramakrishna Mission, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Islamic missions attempts, Bahai centres propagating faith, Buddhist expansion in the Western world and many more. What were once the methodology and motivation of the Christian missions are now efficiently imitated by the mission attempts of most non-Christian religions. Many business enterprises such as Coca Cola, Pepsi or Amway are out to get the world market with a missionary zeal!

Crowded amidst the multi-various concepts of mission, challenged by the claims of every faith to their own authenticity, called to defend the distinct identity of the church over against the atrocities of the colonial exploits, today, the church around the world stands in need of clarity as to her identity and her mission. Attempts were many to interpret and reinterpret this identity and mission. Such attempts have resulted in a proliferation of many theologies. Post-colonial mission theology has many challenges to face.

The Emphasis of Contemporary Mission Theology

This is often seen as 'the emerging trends' in missiology. Despite the dividedness of the church around the world, it is to be acknowledged that the church around the world has moved forward learning from its various factions and increasingly working together. The Roman Catholics - particularly from the Latin American situation - have led the way in raising the question of relevance, conscientization, out of which a move to reshape theological education on contemporary lines took centre stage in the work style of the theologians.¹ Ecumenical structures such as the World Council of Churches (WCC)² and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)³ have brought to fore the question of

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the Southern hemisphere, the third world, the marginalised⁴, the subaltern people groups⁵, etc. Whereas this took multiple patterns of theology-making, the end result in India seems the cry for 'doing' theology in context' from the perspectives of the Women, Tribals and Dalits. Thus, during the last decade, the Senate of Serampore has seen many theses at Master of Theology and Doctor of Theology levels addressing the questions of Dalit liberation, Tribal awakening and Feminist theological perspectives.⁶

The tenacious hold of caste on the church in India appears still a reality.⁷ If what is said is true, 60% of Indian Christians are in the main land India (mostly in South India), and a vast majority of them hail from old ancestral untouchable people groups. To them, their identity as liberated people has to provide a sense of mission to liberate themselves and their kind from continuing atrocities of caste dominance. The social, economic and political implications of the liberation in Christ has got to be thought out and systematised in terms of Dalit Theology and in turn it should develop its own missiology to spell out their continuing mission to the oppressed of the world.

Similarly, the tribal Christian (who form approximately 30% of the Indian Christian number) need a clear self understanding of their identity as redeemed and enlightened persons in Christ and should discover an ensuing sense of their mission to tribal peoples' uplift. A serious question faced by the tribal Christian in North East India is to interpret their own Indian identity in the context where there are underground movements disclaiming their belongingness to India.⁸ A recent thesis attempts to identify the political implication of the continuing mission of the church in North East India.⁹

Since half the Christian population anywhere is female, the concerns of the church in mission invariably has to deal with the question of women's liberation, equal rights, employment opportunities, ordination and employment in the church and the challenges of Christian gospel in a patriarchal setting. An increasing number of women have begun to study theology and to seek opportunities to serve in and through the church. Structures of the church in terms of its committees, its leadership, its employment, ordination and such are being studied with relevant openness as part of the emerging trend. A clarity is being sought on the meaning and implication of what is it to be an emancipated woman in Christ. From this should emerge the clarity of the role or mission of women. The mission to women as well as the mission of women (both to women and men; church and society) are part of what needs to be developed as the theology for women in India. Unless done with care to suit the Indian cultural ethos of family values, an overt westernization through the influences of western radical feminist ideology can hurt the women and their families.

Centres have emerged to address these quests through the Women Studies Departments, Tribal Study Centres, Department of Dalit Studies at various colleges, churches centres of learning and associations to address these issues.¹⁰ For instance, the National Council of Churches and the Synod of the Church of South India have opened a department of Dalit and Tribal Concern and have appointed qualified persons to lead the churches into viable future.¹¹ Department for Women concerns had preceded them. Theological colleges and the churches are making a move in the right direction to enable the church in her mission in the contemporary society. Such ecumenical ventures have found empathetic acceptance within all factions of the church.

The leading mission thinkers and writers of these factions - the catholic, the ecumenical and the evangelical - come together once every four years under the International Association for Mission Studies. In the last gathering at Pretoria, South Africa, they considered "Reflecting Jesus Christ: Crucified and Living in a Broken World".¹² There could have been no better place in the world for such a gathering of missiologists to consider such a topic. Thus, the emerging emphasis in mission theology is taking the church around the world to reflect on the actual situation of the brokenness of the world to identify the sources of the brokenness, the affects, the alternates, the solution and the way forward.

Challenges to Contemporary Mission Theology

Mission relates to God's salvific involvement in creation. The created order - both nature and humanity - had been affected. Christian mission implies the educating of the membership of the church to responsibly involve in the oikos (world order) along with God as His agents in the process of new creation in Christ. Not only the act of faith formation in the individuals, but the act of laity formation in terms of equipping the saints for their mission in the world is the need of the hour. Some denominations only major in faith formation of an individualistic sort. But to equip the whole church for mission through teaching and training and theological perception about the purpose and role of the church is what we need to provide in our church - and I believe, we in the Church of South India are Committed to such holism. When we talk of such involvement in the world, we are reminded that our leaders have provided us the needed input already. Professor D A Thangasamy wrote on this in his *Towards Involvement*.¹³

One area that challenges us is the increasing divide between the rich and the poor in the world. This roots itself in the lack of equal distribution of the goods of the world. Some people take a larger share of the resources of the earth and let others suffer want. Social evils of the past emerging from traditional systems such as caste and race still divide people and curb certain sectors of the society from qualifying to share earth's resources. Societal norms have prohibited rights in the past and they have now become legislated into the governing systems. Thus a landless Dalit family remains landless, working as bonded labour force in the land of the landed high-caste-rich for petty amounts. Revision of this situation will demand many steps including conscientization economic and social transformation through political action.¹⁴

This rich and poor dilemma is enhanced by the way the market economy works with us multinational corporation employing third world cheap labour to benefit the rich Inequality in terms of human rights for equal share of the profit and justice for all are part of the concerns of contemporary theology.

The quest for justice roots itself in the basic provision of equal rights for all. Human Rights movements have sprung up in different settings. The christian concern for justice links with the quest for peace and reverberates with the biblical cry for shalom.¹⁵

The lack of planning to preserve the balance in the natural order and the irresponsible overuse of the natural resources have brought about an ecological crisis and a resultant eco-consciousness in human community. Eco-theology and Eco-mission have become part of the contemporary theological pursuits.¹⁶

The above two areas blended in the recent ecumenical emphasis in the WCC and CWME gathering where the theme “justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation” became the major missiological theme to study and apply to the church’s mission agenda around the world.¹⁷

Challenges to Mission from the Indian Situation:

‘Corruption is seen as common and sweet as Ladoos in India’ said a reporter in a popular magazine. Mission to clean up is a challenge - but one hears the question: ‘how can the church help clean up a nation when there is enough corruption within its rank and file?’. Inner reformation to ‘let the church be the church’ is urgent.

‘Poverty is the first issue to tackle in India by any mission enterprise’.¹⁸ Poverty and Development is hence a popular theme of study.¹⁹ Explorations to discover means of alleviating poverty have become top priority in the mission focus of the many relief and development agencies. As an undercurrent, there is the cry for ‘justice’ and ‘human rights’ emerging as mission themes in India. Christ is the model setter and Christian Gospel has the potential for social transformation. But the confidence to so believe and to so take a stand to practice and propagate this Gospel needs to be rekindled within the church. There has grown much pessimism within the believing community and, if any one finds what appears a very hesitant evangelism’.²⁰

The Issue of “Conversion” perhaps is a dominant theme in the Indian situation today when we talk of christian mission.²¹ When christian mission arrived in instalments to the different places in India, the responses of peoples varied through the ages. The claim of St. Thomas’ arrival in the first century has left a church in Kerala which stagnated there for long without a missionary zeal to expand gospel affect on the then known India. The arrivals of the Syrian Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, the German Lutheran, the British Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Reformed and Congregational and the American many new groupings produced the multiple denominations which grew rather in a slow process, except during the colonial era when mass movements rose on account of famine, caste atrocities and the desire for upward social mobility.²² Despite all the reactions against the christian church from militant and fanatic Hindu sects, as converting the Hindus into christian faith in large numbers, it has never reached beyond the 3% level to become a threat to the majority hindu community. In places such as the North literacy and a rapid transformation of their lifestyle.²³ As more and more of these christian tribals embrace higher education and modern lifestyle and migrate into all parts of India, a fear has gripped fanatic hindus that they react against conversion to christianity. The fear psychosis is fanned with ideological fanaticism and militant intolerance. With the combined effect of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, Hindu Maha Sabha, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal and Bharatiya Janata Party, a national mood has been created to insist on Hindutva. It has become normal to oppose conversion out of hinduism but to promote reconversion back into hinduism as suddhi. At the root of this is ‘the quest for identity’ of the people over against the religious and ethnic dominance of the neighbouring Islamic nations and the far off dominant cultures of the so called christian west which still influence and dominate through their neocolonial enterprises.

Whereas Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called for a national debate on conversion, part of the church has developed a contextual theology of a conversionless christian mission.

Dialogue to promote mutual edification, determination to disallow crossing of boundaries between religions, secularism and communal harmony leading to national integration have become the major themes of concern in Indian christian theologising, so much so that the act of evangelism, mission and witness had gone through a redefinition. A new hermeneutic and re-reading of scriptures are promoted to suit the situation.²⁴ There is an increase in the absence of conversion in the contemporary mission agenda which gets replaced with industrial mission, mercy mission, peace mission, eco-mission and many such variants. The Nazareth Manifesto is taken seriously, but mission of the Great Commission variety tends to diminish. The task of the theologians includes a careful safeguarding of the mission of the church. When professional theologians tend to hide in ivory tower abstract theologies, the lay forces of the church rise to challenge from life situations to demand the gospel to make sense. Since priesthood of all the believers is an ideal of importance in the protestant churches there is need for the laity to become active in shaping the mission of the church.²⁵ Most parachurch mission structures that have mushroomed in the second half of twentieth century in India are predominantly movements of the laity from the Church of South India. They have kept the flame of evangelism alive in the churches. The need of the hour is to develop proper teaching in the churches and to promote enlightened laity to get a clear sense of their mission in the world. The place of the clergy and the episcopacy as dominant and powerful needs to be revised with a genuine move towards their role as 'servant leaders' who major in the act of equipping the saints for their mission'. This is the sort of reformation which is urgently needed within the Church of India. Only when the laity are made biblically literate, theologically aware, sociologically conscientised, spiritually alive and collectively motivated for mission, the Church in India can have a continuing relevance and vibrancy.

Every generation has got to come to grips with the demands of the Gospel on them within their context and discover their mission to their generation. I recall how during my college days in the late sixties I was made alive in Christ through a spiritual experience of new birth and a spiritual hunger let me to learn scriptures and to share with student friends. Something of a revival spread within my generation leading to numerous of us entering christian ministry. We now have theological teachers, pastors, evangelists, church planters, missionaries both within and outside of India, administrators, ecumenical workers, social workers, managers of projects and all other kinds of servant leaders. I see great potential for us to combine our evangelical and ecumenical perspectives of mission and to promote mission with confidence in "bold humility" to its desired end of seeing the reign of God with justice and equity over all out people.²⁶ As told by William Carey, we should "expect Great Things from God and Attempt Great Things for God" in our generation facing all the challenges of mission in the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Spirit. The Twenty first century beckons us to a faithful obedience to the call of God to meet the challenges of our times.²⁷

NOTES

1. The affect of such development can be perceived in the work of the Theological Education Fund later the Programme for Theological Education and presently the Ecumenical Theological Education - of the World Council of Churches. For a concise account, see Christine Lienemann- Perrin, *Training for a Relevant ministry, A Study of the work of the theological Education Fund*, Madras: CLS for PTE/WCC, 1981, pp 252. Cf. Siga Arles, "The influence of the Theological Education Fund on Indian Theological Education"

- (Appendix No.7) in his *Theological Education for the Mission of the Church in India: 1947-1987*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991, pp430-435.
2. For the history, development and contributions of the World Council of Churches, see Nicholas Lossky, et.al., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1991.
 3. See Franklyn Balasundaram Jayakumar's doctoral dissertation wherein he traces the history, development and contribution of EATWoT as towards a *Relevant Theology*, Bangalore: ATC, 1995. Cf. James Armstrong, *From the Underside: Evangelism from a Third World Vantage Point*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981.
 4. The economically, racially and culturally exploited people groups such as the Dalits, Tribals and Women are often seen as the marginalised. A fresh rendering of the definition is seen in Mary Beasley's *Mission on the Margins*, Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1997, pp111.
 5. The term 'subaltern' has become increasingly popular as an identifier of those people groups which have been pushed down into a subsidiary status through historical currents. Major 'subaltern studies' are available on such people groups.
 6. Some samples of such studies are the doctoral theses of candidates under SATHRI (South Asia Theological Research Institute of the Senate of Serampore College) such as Dheenabandhu, Wati Longchar, Evangeline Rajkumar and others.
 7. See Duncan B. Forrestser, *Caste and Christianity*, London: Curzon Press, 1980. Cf. John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians - A History*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1992, pp 262; V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK for Gurukul, 1997, pp 501; Godwin Shiri, *The Plight of Christian Dalits - A South Indian Case Study*, Bangalore: ATC for CISRS, 1997, pp 270; Samuel Jeyakumar, *Dalits - Consciousness and Christian Conversion - Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1999, pp 433.
 8. See M.M. Thomas and Richard W. Taylor (eds.), *Tribal Awakening*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1965 & 1983. The BTESSC sponsored a recent seminar in Dimapur, Nagaland to reflect on the issue. See *Journal of Tribal Studies* (A Theological Reflection on the Culture and Social Life of Tribals in India), V:2 2001 and VI:1, 2002 for reports. Cf. A. Wati Longchar's *Tribal Theology - Issue, Method and Perspective*, and *No More Guns! People's Struggle for Justice: Focus on North East India*, Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, 2000; H.M. Rapphap, *Issues Facing the Christian Church Today (With Special Reference to North East India)*, Shillong: NEICC, 2000.
 9. From his Ao Naga Baptist Church background in Mokokchung, Nagaland, Pastor Temsu S wrote his MTh thesis dealing with this topic: "The Contemporary Naga Political Struggle: A Missiological Reflection", NIIPGTS, 2001, pp 141.
 10. Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, United Theological College and Eastern Theological College have opened such departments in the recent past.
 11. The Rev. Y. Moses at the NCCI and the Rev. Dr. Daniel Premkumar at the CSI Synod hold the responsibility for these desks; as does the Rev. Dheenabandhu at the World Council level. See Y. Moses, "Dalits and Reconstruction of India" Editorial in *National Council of Churches Review*, CXX:3, April 2000, pp 237-241.
 12. See the preparatory article by Dr. Klaus Schafer, "Reflecting Jesus Christ: Crucified and Living in a Broken World" in *Mission Studies*, 32, XVI:2, 1999, pp 176-193 and the report and presentations in the next volume.
 13. DA Thangasamy, *Towards Involvement: The Theory and Practice of Laity Education Madras*: CLS, Delhi: ISPCK, Lucknow: LPH, 1972, pp 184.
 14. A similar situation in South Africa has brought about the church in South Africa to respond to deal with the problem as revealed in David S. Gillan (ed.), *Church, Land and Poverty: Community Struggles, Land Reform and the policy Framework on Church Land*, Johannesburg: Progress Press for South African Council of Churches, 1998, pp 196 and Klaus Nurnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution: Managing the approaching Crisis*, London and New York: Zed Books, 1999, pp487.
 15. Cf. Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice - A Contemporary Perspective on Mission*, Grand Rapid, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 1980, pp318.
 16. See Anand Veeraraj, "God is Green"; "Biblical Imperatives on Environmental Mission"; "Christianity's

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Contribution Towards Global Eco-Theology"; "Protest against Protestants - An Ecological Reading of Reformation Tradition", Papers presented at the Golden Jubilee Seminar on "Christian and Ecological Concerns in Contemporary World" at South India Biblical Seminary, Bangarapet, 12-13 Feb.1988.

17. See D. Preman Niles' edited volumes *Resisting the Threats to Life*, Geneva: WCC, 1989 and *Between the Flood and the Rainbow*, Geneva: WCC, 1992.
18. Dr. Kunchala Rajaratnam, the Master of Serampore College Council and President emeritus of NCCI has often made this remark and he is not alone in thus stating that combating poverty is the number one task of the church in India.
19. See C. T. Kurien, *Poverty and Development*, Madras: CLS for CISRS Social Concern Series, No. 17, 1974, pp209.
20. Cf. Siga Arles, "Evangelism in the Changing Context of India" in *Indian Journal of Theology*, 40:1&2, 1998, pp58-70. The spelling errors in this print are regretted.
21. See Ebe Sunder Raj, *The Confusion called Conversion*, Delhi: TRACI, 1986, pp133. Cf. Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, pp306.
22. In the colonia period when the church grew through mass conversion, the then NCC studies covered its cause and effect as seen in Waskom J. Pickett's *Christian Mass Movements in India*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1933 Lucknow: LPH, 1934, pp 382. But such studies have not been undertaken in the recent past with all the commotion of anticoverision activism of the opponent forces.
23. The fact that Mizoram has reached to its peak of literacy in the nation is a result of christian impact. Numerous studies have been made on the social transformation of the North East Indian peoples by both theological and other researchers in their post graduate studies.
24. Such attempt at rereading the scriptures and redefining the faith with a post colonial hermeneutic has brought about new perspectives. Cf. Stanley Samartha, *The Search for New Hermeneutics in Asian Christian Theology*, Bangalore: BTESSC, 1987, pp50.
25. See Siga Arles, "Priesthood of All Believers - and the Contribution of the Laity to Christian Mission" in Victor Premasagar (ed.), *New Horizons in Christian Mission: A Theological Exploration*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Centre, 2000. Paper presented at the Gurukul Summer Institute in Kodaikanal, 6 May 1999. Cf. "A Revisioning of the 'Priesthood of All Believers' - with a view to Training the Laity for Missions", Paper presented to Theology Department Seminar at Serampore College, 30 July 1999. To be published in IJT.
26. See Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzinger (eds.), *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch's Work Reconsidered*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996.
27. Many books relate to the implications of this faithfulness. Cf. Siga Arles, "Prophetic Vision in Contemporary Missiologies" in Milton Jeganathan (ed.), *Mission Paradigm in the New Millennium*, Delhi: ISPCK for Mission and Evangelism Department of the CSI Synod, 2000, pp121-136; James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (eds.), *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1993, pp400; J Dudley Woodberry, Charles Van Engen & Edgar J. Elliston (eds.), *Missiological Education for the 21st Century*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997, pp310; F. Hrangkhuma & Sebastian Kim (eds.) *The Church in India: Its Mission Tomorrow*, Delhi: ISPCK for CMS-UBS, 1996, pp249.