

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN INDIA
NATIONAL POLICY GUIDELINES ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN INDIA**

“Jesus came that all will have fullness of life”

John 10:10

INTRODUCTION TO THE NCCI NATIONAL POLICY GUIDELINES:

PREAMBLE

The National Council of Churches in India believes that, through the ages God has been a constant, caring and comforting presence in the history of the people, liberating them from oppression and injustice. It is out of this deep conviction and spiritual understanding that the NCCI seeks to evolve an authentic Christian praxis, which will eventually lead to the transformation of society, through works of justice and love.

The National Council of Churches in India as an icon of Christian faith and unity in India and serves as the voice of the hope and aspirations of the Christian community from Protestant and Orthodox Churches spread across the length and breadth of the country. It is a facilitating agent for dialogue, advocacy, intervention and action on common concerns and issues that affect the people and the quality of their lives.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION:

The Nazareth Manifesto Luke 4: 18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce the year of the Lord’s favour

Meaning of Anointed: Messiah (anointed) is the transliteration of the Hebrew term, *Mashiach*. The New Testament (Greek) equivalent is *Christos*. Both terms mean "the anointed one." The anointing meant that someone was authorized to serve God in a position of honor and responsibility. This is the high call of God into the ministry of great risk and great responsibility. To liberate the people who are under the clutches of various types of oppressions and whose rights and dignity are robbed off. To celebrate God’s designed Jubilee Year, which literally means a social festival celebrated as a result of debt forgiveness and returning of the lands which were snatched away unlawfully from the owners. This is the command and the blue print of Jesus’ ministry and the most important agenda for the Church to fulfil in order to be called the Church as Christians, the followers of Christ.

SOCO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS:

The Churches have been in solidarity with the oppressed and the marginalized, but the time has come when solidarity in spirit alone is insufficient to resurrect failing courage, and hopelessness, in the wake of injustice and atrocities perpetrated on vulnerable sections of society, particularly on the Indigenous Peoples, setting their life and livelihood at risk, affecting them physically, mentally and spiritually, and destroying the collective will for survival. The time has come to recognize that the engagement of the Church is the need of the hour, as it promotes kingdom values and just peace to all. The Indian Church has to be sensitive to the struggles of the indigenous people and cannot remain a mute spectator to the atrocities perpetrated on them, such as human trafficking, marginalization, dehumanization, loss of identity and displacement due to lopsided development. It has to re-define the meaning of ‘Development’ in the context of globalization that seeks to exploit natural resources without considering its impact on Indigenous Peoples, and ensure a life of dignity,

peace and security. It has to be inclusive, acknowledging Jesus as the *dynamic ideal and model for ensuring justice*.

RATIONALE

“The humanness of a society is determined by the degree of protection it provides to its weaker, and less gifted members. Whereas in a jungle everybody fends for him/herself and devil takes the hindmost, in a civilized society reasonable constraints are placed on the ambitious and acquisitiveness of its more aggressive members and special safeguards provided to its weaker and more vulnerable sections. These considerations are basic to any scheme of social justice and their neglect will brutalize any human society.” (Mandal Commission Report)

“TRIBALS and ADIVASIS are INDIGENOUS peoples, with a distinct identity and culture that has territorial identification, a harmonious and symbiotic relationship with the earth as her children, internally organized on egalitarian and communitarian basis, with systems of knowledge, self-governance and nationhood”

(ref : accepted definition arrived at by a consensus in a meeting of representatives from 18 states.)

But due to a history of violence and violation of human rights, in reality, they are now a migrant, marginalized and vulnerable community, suffering from extreme poverty, illiteracy, and a loss of their natural and cultural heritage. Apart from this they are subjected to new forms of violence like State repression, where the State instead of being the protector, monopolizes and perpetrates violence, with scant regard for human lives, livelihood and dignity. They are rendered much more helpless when the Church chooses to remain silent and sometimes are themselves the instruments of violence.

As per the Ministry of Tribal Affairs report there are 622 Tribes living in different parts of the country forming 8.2 % of the Indian population. It is estimated that there are many indigenous groups who have not been included in the Government records till date. Their voices are the most unheard in India as they fall outside the Hindu Caste system and remain at the bottom of the Indian Social Hierarchy, as outcastes.

Common problems encountered by the Indigenous communities in India can be identified as follows – Violence and Atrocities against their Rights to dignity of life, Right to Land and Forest, extreme Poverty, Illiteracy, Poor Health Conditions and Lack of Leadership and integration. Among the 8.2 percent of the tribal/adivasi/indigenous people population in India, over 90 percent of them are living under conditions of extreme poverty even though 15 percent of natural resources are in their home lands. About 50 percent of adivasi/ indigenous communities are displaced in the name of development. In terms of education, the drop-out rate of children from tribal/adivasi/indigenous communities continues at 77 percent. The traditional rights of tribals over natural resources still lie with the State and the claim for its rightful use by the tribal/adivasis/indigenous people is not honored.

In addition, Indigenous people in different zones have their own particular socio-political, economic and religious struggles. For instance:-

- 1. The Central Zone (46% Indigenous presence) is reeling under State oppression due to the combination of factors that go against them. Being resource rich (minerals, forests and potential hydro electric power), and legally weak in terms of control, the local communities are under constant threat. There are multiple interests that are keen to exploit the resources of their homelands. And thus there is a constant pressure from the strong nexus between the bureaucracies, the corporate and the elected representatives to maximize exploitation and**

grab profits. With local insurgent groups and the military forces dominating the landscape there is a steady increase in violence and displacement faced by the communities. Migration for employment, exploitation and abject poverty have resulted in human trafficking, and flesh trade are eroding the basis of harmony, local self sufficiency and sustainable living has been the hallmark of tribal communities.

2. In the Western zone(27.6% Indigenous presence) the IPs have suffered mass displacement and denial of lands and livelihood due to Dams and Economic liberalization.
3. As both the North Eastern zone (12.4% Indigenous presence) and the North Western zone (2%) are situated along the international borders of China, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh in the North-East, and Pakistan and China in the North-West, these zones experience internal and external terrorism, are the hub of State atrocities due to Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and political unrest, ethnic conflicts, human trafficking for tourism & hospitality industry with extreme poverty and extreme lack of health care.
4. Southern zone (11.3% Indigenous presence) is heavily affected by the dominant culture hegemony and misplaced concern for animals at the expense of and indifference towards human beings by environmentalists and animal lovers.
5. Ever since the Tsunami calamity in 2004, the Islands of Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep (0.1% Indigenous presence) and even the mainland eastern coastal areas are continuously facing threat in various forms, to be precise, the tourism industry. Indigenous identity and rights are threatened by many rules and regulations that deny them their right to enjoy their common space, their identity, and traditional & customary practices.

Apart from the specified zonal problems Indigenous women in India irrespective of their geographical location or socio-cultural and religious background remain the most affected ones in spite of them being the backbone of the society from ancient days. Their values and sacred spaces in the society have been systematically destroyed; that has demoralized them with frustration and confusion. Only 18.19% of the 41 million tribal women are considered as literate. They are harassed, exploited and forced into the flesh trade or low paid jobs.

The church having a historical presence in tribal areas geographical, social and religious, taking cognisance of these facts, feels the need to retrospect its own role, policy and position vis-à-vis tribals, tribal christians and church doctrine. This would help the church to play a more proactive role in the progress of the tribal and adivasi communities.

PROCESS

The National Council of Churches, through its Commission on Tribal and Adivasis, and through its member churches, has recently been in close association with the tribal community in its endeavour to facilitate dialogue between them, the churches and the State. This enriching experience has been mutually strengthening and has challenged the Commission to formulate a policy that would create a permanent channel of communication with Indigenous people. With this in mind the Commission on Tribals and Adivasis organized Consultations in all the regions, meeting NCCI constituent members in collaboration with Church leaders, theologians, social activists, NGOs, people's movement, law makers, members of the legislature, and parliamentarians to discuss, debate and

deliberate on the problems and suggest solutions and strategies to form a policy that seeks to affirm, uphold and protect the rights of Indigenous peoples.

PROBLEMS

The findings of the consultations, in the four regions, reiterated the fact that the indigenous communities **are victims of historical and contemporary injustices, and challenged the churches were being challenged to address these issues vis-à-vis the protective laws in the constitution, the international instruments of the UN and the ILO, State Laws and to take urgent steps to redress their suffering and trauma.**

Economic indicators

Realizing that Indigenous people are living in abject poverty, (more than 55.2 % of them live below the poverty line), as majority have no access to land for cultivation, have lost their livelihood, have no jobs, or are engaged in seasonal jobs, are forced into low paid jobs and vulnerable working situations for survival, illiteracy, lack of infrastructure and non-implementation of welfare schemes,

Recognizing the fact that the tyranny of the market forces has widened the gulf between the rich and the poor, and has ushered in an era of consumerism, and unhealthy competition that benefits only a few,

Realizing that development has brought with it allied problems of tourism that destroys biodiversity and the ecological balance, deprives the indigenous of privacy, natural habitat and livelihood,

Shocked that child abuse and trafficking has been high on the agenda as flesh-trade-tourism,

Distressed that the culture and indigenous wisdom is disappearing in the attempts to be more modern for tourists attractions for economic benefits,

Pained that the development of infrastructure and planning to suit the market needs does not include the indigenous,

Shocked that the indigenous are not consulted while making plans that involve the place that is the natural habitat and source of income

Surprised that mining and deforestation has taken precedence over all efforts to preserve and protect natural resources and much necessary forest coverage that is needed for sustainable development

Realizing that semi nomadic Indigenous people living in the plains are dependent on landlords for agricultural and allied work that are seasonal and low paid, and that nomadic tribes depending on handicrafts, find it difficult to make a living,

Physical indicators

Food Security

Acknowledging the lack of food security due to shifts in patterns of cultivation, rejection of traditional and indigenous practices, aggravated by deforestation, water pollution, destruction of indigenous food crops, and introduction of genetically modified plants.

Health Concerns

Understanding that health concerns are a priority issue due to poor accessibility to medical treatment, medicines, lack of proper infrastructure, and pertinent health issues that need to be addressed in a specific and sensitive manner.

Shelter

Realizing that nomadic and semi-nomadic Indigenous communities who live in the plains are poor and have no proper shelter and suffer from lack of basic amenities.

Shocked that there is a lack of basic amenities like drinking water, lights, roads, health, education and nutrition (63.5% lack access to electricity, 53.1% do not have access to water at a nearby location, 83% do not have access to Toilet facility)

Social indicators

Accepting that literacy, which indicates the social, cultural, health and political status of a community, is at a staggering low at 29.6% (Male 40% and Female 18.19%), with a high school drop-out rate of 77.7%,

Acknowledging the demoralization experienced due to the distortion of identities, and discrimination based on social profiling, rendering them refugees in their own homelands,

Pained by the atrocities that are meted to the community and ill-treated without reason, regret, or punishment

Shocked by the high incidences of exploitation, violence and human trafficking, sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women and children

Cultural indicators

Acknowledging the disappearance of indigenous art forms and cultural practices that contributed to the richness of the communities

Conceding the fast disappearance of the communitarian values and a culture of sharing resources that encouraged living in harmony with people and nature

Ecological indicators

Alarmed at the displacement of 55.15% Indigenous people in the name of development, exploitation of natural resources due to mining and dams, ruining of biodiversity through deforestation, water pollution, and other forms of environmental degradation that destroys the symbiotic relationship between land and indigenous peoples,

Religious Indicators

Realizing that religious sentiments, freedom of professing any religion and innocence of the Indigenous communities who worship the elements are encroached upon by unscrupulous fundamentalists

Political indicators

Distressed at the extreme vulnerability and helplessness of a community exposed to atrocities perpetrated by military power by the Government through draconian Acts like the Armed Forces Special Protection Act (AFSPA) and vested interests, leaving them with no recourse to either judicial redress or relief through state intervention,

Shocked at the continued inaction about, and indifference to, the sufferings of the community, whose poverty and needs render them easy prey to political manipulators, extremists and fundamentalists.

NCCI NATIONAL POLICY GUIDELINES ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN INDIA:

CHAPTER I

This policy is envisioned on the Christian principles of Just Peace and aims to call on Member Churches, Related Agencies and all other constituents of the NCCI, Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organizations/agencies and other Faith-based organizations to challenge expressions of political authoritarianism and military power; protecting the poor and the marginalized of the Indigenous Peoples from the tyranny of the market forces, creating harmonious and non-exclusive communities, protecting the biodiversity and acknowledging the special bond of the Indigenous Peoples with nature, and rediscovering the prophetic voice of the church, by

- **Emphasizing that every human being be treated with dignity and respect.**
- **responding to acts of injustice and oppression suffered by the Indigenous people, who are victims of human rights violations, dominant cultural hegemony, and displacement due to lopsided development;**
- **developing an economy that builds on the indigenous values of sharing resources to fight the market forces that widen the gulf between the rich and the poor**
- **ensuring that there are no developmental projects and plans that exclude the indigenous peoples**
- **advocating for the restoration of the sacred space in which there is freedom to profess and practice indigenous spirituality and culture;**
- **reinforcing the symbiotic relationship of indigenous people with land and nature,**
- **promoting the reinstatement of the right to self-determination and self expression,**
- **assisting in reclaiming the rightful place of indigenous people as the earliest inhabitants of this great land.**
- **providing theological reasoning for the intervention and engagement of the faithful in the struggles and socio-political realities of the people.**

Through this policy, the National Council of Churches in India hopes to reaffirm and challenge the collective responsibility of churches and faith based communities, to ensure justice and fairness to the powerless and most vulnerable sections of society, to reach out in solidarity with the suffering, to protect biodiversity and to celebrate human plurality.

CHAPTER II

The NCCI and its Constituent Members resolve:

- 1. To affirm a common heritage with the Indigenous peoples of India and affirm with respect their right to a life of dignity, and celebrate with them their uniqueness in the diversity that this nation is blessed with.**
- 2. To strengthen our understanding of human rights violations against the Indigenous communities, by reaching out to them as an Indigenous communities and not necessarily as Christian Indigenous people.**

3. To respect Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, privacy and autonomy, freedom to maintain and strengthen the diversity of their cultures, traditions and practices that contribute to sustainable development.
4. To accept Indigenous rights to traditional medicines and health practices and at the same time allow them access to all social and health services promoting wholistic health
5. To respect and advocate the restoration of Indigenous rights to land, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned or occupied, used or acquired
6. To use the resources of the church to provide good educational institutions that would open up a window of opportunities in the world
7. To urgently employ the abundant health care resources, in terms of infrastructure, human resources and finances, to promote health care of the Church
8. To impress on the Government to implement the UN Rights on Indigenous People and to ratify the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions which affirm their identity and enable them to have a decisive voice in all matters concerning them.
9. To strive for the complete implementation of the Acts such as the Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989, the Provisions of Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996, the Forest Rights Act 2006, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, and other laws enacted for protecting and promoting rights of Indigenous Peoples and preservation of Land alienation viz. tenancy acts, land acquisition acts, etc.
10. To strive to imbibe the values that upholds the Indigenous community life in sharing resources, caring for nature, in a symbiosis that is nourishing, fruitful and sustaining
11. To hold in high regard the sacred space of the indigenous communities and their relationship with land and nature
12. To affirm and respect the ethnic identity of all people and eschew all forms of violence, exploitation and discrimination based on race, religion, gender, language, colour or creed.

CHAPTER III

ACTION PLAN

The National Council of Churches and its Constituent members resolve to take immediate cognizance and urgent action to:

Challenge issues on Political authoritarianism and military power; protecting the poor and the marginalized from the tyranny of the market forces, creating harmonious and non-exclusive communities, protecting the biodiversity and acknowledging the special bond of the Indigenous with nature, and rediscovering the prophetic voice of the church, by adopting the Action Plan:

1. To conduct an in-depth study of all the Acts and International instruments and the Protective laws under the Constitution and International Instruments that have an impact on Indigenous life, document the same, for wide circulation to member churches and other constituent members, in order to educate the Indigenous Peoples in particular.
2. To encourage the formation of a Unit in each Church dedicated for Indigenous issues who will be responsible for creating rights awareness among the communities and be a constant reference point for Indigenous Peoples and for other Churches, NGOs and the Government machinery. To plan and conduct base line studies on status of Indigenous peoples (tribals & adivasis), with a view to consolidate the data across regions with reference to development indicators that can be planned in advance.
3. To encourage and develop an intense theological response towards the Indigenous Peoples' situation.
4. To encourage Priests and Pastors to use the Pulpit to create awareness, dispel prejudices and bias, in a concerted and committed effort to promote harmony.
5. To use the resources of the church to provide good educational institutions that would open up a window of opportunities for the Indigenous Peoples.
6. Use the resources of the church and the constituent members and other experts to revitalize indigenous knowledge and skills, particularly in the field of traditional medicine, agriculture and forest produce and to urgently employ the abundant health care resources and finances, to promote health care of the Church.
7. To educate policy makers, social workers, teachers and opinion makers regarding the protection and promotion of indigenous rights
8. To be a channel of communication between the Indigenous Peoples and the Government at all times.
9. To stand in solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples in all times and to be available to lend a helping hand in the event of calamities, unjust treatment, violence and exploitation.
10. To be specially sensitive to the needs of women and to encourage women's empowerment through education, special income generating skills, self-help groups, encourage handicraft, evolve good co-operative and marketing strategies,
11. Network with other Christian agencies locally, nationally and internationally working with Indigenous peoples, Human Rights Organizations, NGOs, Community based Organizations, people's movements for dialogue and advocacy.
12. To recommend a National Forum that would enable networking and coming together on common issues that would study Government policies and Acts that are relevant to Indigenous Peoples' life.
13. To ensure that the church gains and embraces from its close association with Indigenous Peoples of their culture and wisdom and that this is reflected in its life and activities.

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