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in India



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*Contents*

**EDITORIAL**

In the Midst of Death, There is Life  
*- Abraham Mathew* 127

**ARTICLES**

The Church and The Covid19 Pandemic in India  
*- Bobby John* 130

COVID19 and Life After  
*- Bimal Charles* 133

Ambedkar's Response to Christians  
*- Monodeep Daniel* 140

Tracing the hour: Challenges for Church's Public Witness  
in Human Sexuality  
*- Jessica Prakash-Richard* 157

**NCCI PRESS RELEASES**

We shall overcome...COVID19 174

Appeal to protect life, rights and dignity of persons from 176

North East India living in different parts of the country 177

Living out our Resurrection - in being the in-line Church... 178

At work with the resurrected Jesus, 178

Protect WORK - Protect Life... 180

Committing to the legacy and vision  
of Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

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## EDITORIAL

### In the Midst of Death, There is Life

Amongst grey, mossy grave stones,  
The vibrant colours of spring show life has returned;  
White stars underfoot - anemones,  
Pale creamy lemon primroses:  
In the midst of death there is life.  
(<https://allpoetry.com/Pam1066country>)

Death is holding its sway over the whole world in the form of Covid 19. A virus has managed to shudder humanity, causing even the most 'advanced' countries to shut down and retreat to the confinement of their homes. Leaders of supposedly advanced nations were confident that they would be ahead of the virus but reality proved otherwise.

Covid19 has demystified the myths of progress and development created by countries based on their GDP and Human Development Index. Even countries that claimed they had the best healthcare systems were unable to manage the pandemic effectively. Realities have emerged of many elderly people being denied medical care as they are considered to be unworthy of public expenses. Many welfare states have been following this strategy, reminding us of the capitalist and profit-oriented principle of survival of the fittest. The lockdown due to Covid19 has resulted in the job-loss and starvation all over the world. Governments are finding it difficult to arrange resources to handle the situation. Scientists are still preoccupied with the development of a vaccine to control the disease.

India is doing fairly well in combating and controlling the spread of coronavirus. The Central and State Governments have taken relevant actions together in identifying and isolating patients and providing them with proper medical care. The tremendous support extended by citizens towards the measures taken by Government is appreciable, yet the structural inability to envisage the issues of migrant labourers and starvation of the landless workers and daily wage workers, has left a

deep wound in the social system of India. The immediate announcement of lockdown left people stranded away from their homes. Instances of large-scale spreading and violence against health workers and segregation and stigmatisation of certain religious sects were reported. The worst expression of segregation appeared in Dr Simon Hercules being denied a decent burial and it remains a cause of shame to all of us. However, the role of health workers, essential service workers, including police forces, NGO's, voluntary agencies and individuals in relief work has to be acknowledged. The Indian Church and Church related agencies and institutions have responded immediately and spontaneously at the local and national levels.

Challenges in the post-covid period remain unpredictable but it cannot be denied that there are bound to be enormous consequences. Job loss and reverse migration raise a number of questions about the rehabilitation of people. Reverse migration within the country is a distressing experience that we will have to face. The work force, a majority of them being illiterate and poor, may leave the cities they work in and go back to their respective rural villages. Reverse migration from other countries to India is another issue. According to the estimates released by the United Nations, India was the leading country of origin of international migrants in 2019 with 17.5 million people in diaspora. The Ministry of External Affairs account projects more than the UN account, with an estimate of 28 million international migrants. India has to work out ways to address these issues thoroughly, with proper plans and arrangements of facilities. Strengthening of the agriculture sector can be an effective solution. Community farming with the support of modern machines should be introduced by the Government and as Gandhi had proposed in the past, villages should be made self-sufficient in order to tackle poverty.

Though the reality of death surrounds us, we see streams of life sprouting in the form of solidarity, care and love from genuine human beings. This is something we need to keep in mind as we attempt to overcome the coronavirus and its consequences. We need to remember that the proposed physical distancing does not stop us from having social solidarity and hence we need to continue the same spirit further

in order to preserve life and uphold the values of humanity. Churches as well as Church related organizations and institutions, need to initiate and enact well-planned community projects which contribute towards a sustainable living.

This issue of NCC Review highlights Covid 19 related issues and how Churches can positively respond to such problems. An article on Ambedkar's response to Christianity has been included, since April 14 was celebrated as Ambedkar Jayanti and World Equality Day. Concerns related to gender and sexual diversities have been a focus of NCCI, manifested through its National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities (NEFGSD) and the ESHA project. An article about this and the areas where the churches could consider responding can also be found in this issue.

**Rev Dr Abraham Mathew**

*The Executive Secretary*

***Policy, Governance and Public Witness***



## The Church and The Covid19 Pandemic in India

- Bobby John\*

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The expectations at the start of 2020 were nowhere near preparedness for a global emergency in the, of the size and nature of the Covid19 pandemic. Sure, the world had seen the Spanish Flu pandemic a hundred years ago, and a lot of the understanding of managing explosive epidemic conditions had been garnered in addressing the smallpox, HIV, ebola and polio control programs, either through successful vaccine-based programs, or through progressively improved therapeutics.

Covid19 comes from the zoonotic world and has shown an amazing ability to move from person to person across the world. In less than 90 days, almost no corner of the world was spared of the spectre of exposure and its related mortality. The only protections seem to be the humble soap and water, and increasing the distance between human beings, so that droplets from the infected would not easily land on others. Masks have become the equivalent of living in personal confinement in the public space, much like how headphones insulated the noise of the world for people to be lost in their own music hall.

In the absence of immunity – after all this is a novel virus the likes of which we have not seen before in humans – and in the face of the benefits of maintaining social distance, the response has ranged from fear to bewilderment at the individual level, and from laissez faire to draconian restrictions of personal liberty at the governmental levels, cutting across the world.

“Do not be afraid”<sup>1</sup> is the reassuring command from Jesus. That command is still operative in these Covid19 times – after all, we

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:32

believe that God is in our midst. Making that word come alive is the operational aspect of the Gospel in this moment – through the lives and actions of the many individuals working in Christian hospitals and institutions in India.

Since Independence, while the proportion of healthcare facilities identified as Christian has come down, the remnant small number still serves as an active agent of comfort in the community, and an active principle of change for the healthcare establishment in India. In both roles, the good news is made manifest – bringing hope, and renewal.

The historical Jesus was not afraid of those with disease, even though the diseased were doubly afflicted with social ostracization. In this Covid19 time, when the injunction is to socially distance, we need to understand that Christians are placed within communities, and are expected to act as links between neighbours. Solidarity with the neighbour, empathy with those who are anxious, and protecting others from harm, are all concurrent calls placed on the Christian. By maintaining an empathetic connect with those around us, we are not contradicting the act of ensuring physical distance. We are not called to ask who our neighbour is, rather we are enjoined to enact the gospel in loving our neighbour as ourselves. When we translate that into not exposing our neighbours to the infection we might be carrying, we are not putting the gospel to shame and we are not putting our neighbour in harm's way.

We are called to share – to whom much has been given, much will be expected from. Our fasts and rituals will mean nothing if there are the hungry amidst us, or those that mourn because they lack physical comfort. The current lockdown has shown the thin line between earning a livelihood and desperate hunger that many millions straddle day to day in India. Reports abound of individuals and families who are now desperate for a full meal a day. This is both a long-standing issue, and one brought dramatically to the fore by the lockdown response to the Covid19 pandemic in India.

While we need to engage with the Government at the federal and state levels, there is no substitute for immediate and local actions wherever the hungry are – the Church can, and should, be found feeding those that are hungry. Our houses of worship need to become sanctuaries for

workers finding themselves stranded by lockdowns on their way home. While this will be a temporary action, the situation should make the Christian institutions and individuals active in the advocacy to end food poverty in our land.

There is plenty that we harvest each year – enough to ensure that no one needs to go to sleep hungry at night or go through a pregnancy and give birth to a low-birth-weight-baby. In feeding, and speaking up for those who are hungry, we fulfil the words of Jesus – “I came to you hungry, and you fed me”. Besides, it also is our responsibility to do so, as citizens of India and stewards of our common resources.

We are called to persevere, and we are blessed with hope. The tools to address the pandemic seem to be rudimentary right now – physical distancing is a blunt instrument as compared to the specificity of vaccines and antiviral drugs. Medical Colleges and institutions that are run under Christian managements need to double their efforts to innovate and engineer solutions more elegant than lockdowns. Much of it will require wisdom, but that is something we are told to ask for. Wisdom without application and perseverance helps no one – it puffs up the recipient. Therefore, with wisdom and humility, let institutions and individuals work together, exhibiting unity of purpose and of the body, so that the answers to the problems Covid19 poses in our community are obtained, and Jesus’ high priestly prayer is answered. Our hope is built on the promise of Shalom, that all things will come together, for good. In working together, we will be called heralds of Shalom, peacemakers, the sons and daughters of God.

The Covid19 pandemic is an astonishing moment of understanding human frailty all over again. All that we build up, amass and consider are temporal in nature – God is sovereign, and he expects his Church to bear witness to his Sovereignty. In this challenging time, frail vessels and jars of clay, have the opportunity of bringing comfort and healing to many. In doing so, we become a blessing, and act in the full citizenship of both our country and of heaven.





## COVID19 and Life After

- Bimal Charles\*

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*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples,  
if ye have loved one another? John 13:35 KJV*

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### COVID19-the Present

During late 2019, Wuhan city authorities noticed several people developing severe respiratory infections similar to a viral disease called SARS, (severe acute respiratory syndrome) which was an epidemic that killed people in 2002. SARS spread to several other parts of the worlds, killed about 800 and after a couple of years it was contained. In 2019 many people in Wuhan were infected by this new virus named Corona and the disease was named COVID19. It was observed people with this infection developed severe throat and lung infection and many died soon after with other complications in the heart, kidneys and blood. China did not share this infection as a big threat to other nations and neither did the UN agency, WHO, which has the responsibility to alert other nations on such issues. The virus soon spread to European nations like Italy, Asian nations and other parts of the globe and was declared a pandemic by WHO on March, 11, 2020 after it spread to about 100 countries. A pandemic is a disease which is present in several countries at the same time and can cause destruction across nations. There have been other pandemics like this in the past, like plague in the 18th Century, Spanish flu in 1918, polio, small pox etc. Some of them killed millions of people in a very short time. Therefore, preparedness and containment strategies need to be made well in advance and timely alert is essential. The COVID 19 pandemic has thus far left behind vast destruction of lives across countries-China, Italy, Spain, Germany, Iran and now in the US. It has infected about 5 million so far, and killed about 200,000 people.

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Besides the economy of nations has been ruined and livelihood of millions is destroyed.

The world has been always on the edge when it comes to disruption caused by microbes, for quite some time. False prophets come out and posture – “I said so” with generalised quotes from their own prophecies to contextualize disasters. What is the church called to do in times of crisis, like the present one? Nations blame nations, communities blame other communities and individuals blame neighbours and others. Even health care workers at this time of need for health care are subjected to extreme personal insecurity and the community in general is looking for survival amidst collective damnation.

As of today, in India we have crossed 17000 confirmed infections with more than 500 deaths and several dying of other diseases due to the disruption to the local health, administrative and social systems. In an epidemic situation, this is the usual collateral damage. Institutions, health care workers and the health system focus on the crisis and people with other illness and emergencies suffer. Many die in want of access to medical care, transport and disruption of services. At present, there are 170 Corona hotspot (more than 15 infected) districts in India, which includes all six metro cities with huge populations. Besides the direct impact on the health of the people, the epidemic leaves behind a huge trail of destruction on industries, economy, livelihood and an irreparable scar on the mental wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.

The world has never seen a global crisis like the present one since world war 2, threatening the very foundation of our lives. The Virus has disrupted world systems to such an extent that normal living is not certain. The vulnerable are threatened for their very physical existence. The old, immune compromised, health care providers and people providing essential services are all living on the edge. People are not sure if, when, where and how they will be infected and are not sure if they will survive if attacked by the virus. Many on the edge are

affected due to layoffs, loss of livelihood and human made threats for survival. We have seen many families uprooted, with members scattered across geographies looking for the lockdown to get over and to connect to their loved ones. The resulting internal migration is going to further spread of the virus to new geographies. What is common and visible, is panic everywhere and across borders.

## **The role of the Church**

*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in their midst-*

From this simple definition of the church, the models developed since Christ's death has defined the church in many different ways, convenient to humans and their leaders. One wonders if these models fulfil the vision and purpose of God. The church membership is meant to, in many instances, function like a parallel administrative entity and hardly an outward expression of the love of God through its members. The teaching on the purpose, vision and action is not necessarily uniform across congregations and churches. Members prefer to visit the church as an obligation of the membership rather than a true requirement of their personal need to renew their souls. Therefore the purpose of the Lord to show love, concern and outreach to our neighbours as a "brother's keeper" takes a back seat or is even forgotten many a time and crisis is an opportunity to reflect and renew our vision and purpose.

The context in which the church exists in secular countries like India is challenged when they are forced to regulate their activities by majoritarian government policies when the relevance of their social and health related activities are questioned. The history of great contribution and the legacy activities that changed lives of the poor are eroding due to the present inward-looking policies of the church. The church has hardly adapted to the changing needs of the society since independence, and during a crisis like the Corona we are hardly able to respond as a community since we don't know what we can offer when our own lives and survival are threatened.

Whether the crisis is local, nationwide or global, threatening the existence of lives, the church has always risen above the challenge and contributed to solutions in the past. Whether it was acute crisis of war, famine, epidemic, disasters or chronic diseases, history is replete with witness of the church overcoming local challenges and politics to extend reach beyond its capability.

“I have witnessed first-hand, the impact of the faith community’s work in global disease outbreaks,” says Dr William Redfield, the director of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in a statement to the Catholic Review article.

The church in India will have to offer comfort, solace, compassion and perspective at this time of crisis and should be more outward looking, rather than caring for its own membership and entity. This is a great opportunity to plan and execute a program for a nation in crisis.

What are the possible options?

### **Church a praying community**

A well-planned praying calendar prepared by enlightened theologians and lay leaders for the laity would help. With the leadership taking charge of this piece to lead individuals and families as they remain cut-off from the physical gathering, would enhance the soul of the church-the laity. Unlike the assumption that everyone can connect online, the church has to spread message of hope through simple messages on TV and radio. Many rural congregation members may not have access to internet. A blended communication is required to reach all members.

### **Simple Messages of prevention, care and compassion**

It is important that messages of prevention, responsibility to the neighbour by staying at home, prevention of the spread to self, other family members and the community are shared. Understanding one’s responsibility to the nation and contributing to national efforts will be critical. The message of hope needs to go out from the church- the hope

of overcoming this crisis, protection to the vulnerable and assurance of relief and future wellbeing.

### **Activities towards prevention**

Congregation members could prepare/buy prevention materials like masks, sanitizers and disinfectants and distribute to the local poorer communities and homeless people living on the street.

### **Supply food and clothes**

Supply of food to the homeless, aged and destitute will be necessary as the lock down continues. There are many aged individuals living alone and supporting them through errands with due precautions would help.

### **Help the community to cope**

Staying home/alone is a stressful time and increases chances of mental illness in many. A call over phone to individuals and families from the church will help us understand the realities in and around our community. This is also an opportunity to know people who live near our neighbourhood. We can make information available to the community on prevention, testing, care, treatment and livelihood support from the government. Besides, helping the poor get access to other services which are disrupted would be a huge support during this crisis. Family donations and minimal financial and life support to the poor will be greatly appreciated.

### **Partner with others**

The revenue of many partner agencies will be reduced due to the lockdown and it would be necessary to support church owned healthcare institutions for few months before they are back on track to continue the mission once again, while looking after persons with COVID 19.

During the Spanish flu in 1918, we lost 5% of the Indian population. The impact of COVID19 on the country could be large and long drawn as there are new spikes being reported in other countries. There could be issues related to livelihood and development of the country. India with a huge population of young people will have to handle civil issues and unemployment. Church would do well to address some of these issues with micro entrepreneurship and self-employment programs.

### **Training of Volunteers**

Church could undertake training of volunteers in every congregation to organise livelihood and development work in the community. This is a great opportunity for the community and the congregation to join hands with each other and help the needy to re-establish their lives.

### **Training of Health Care workers**

It is important that the health system in India is staffed with compassionate, skilled and dedicated personnel from the family members of churches. We need well trained staff for our mission in church-owned hospitals as well as in the government system. We need large number of doctors, nurses and paramedics in health care who care, comfort and set models of compassionate care. The church could seed the concept of compassionate care starting from homes so that there would be perpetual flow of professionals for our health systems from the church.

### **Conclusion**

The present crisis is a challenge to the human race. This virus does not respect religion, caste, boundaries, gender, sexuality, power, positions and labels fixed by the world. Scientists are still discovering the modes of spread, genetic makeup of the germ, action of medicines on the virus and the disease management. However, the story so far has been about learning how to prevent and survive the onslaught of the germ. There is not much of a solution-except to prevent getting exposed, staying away from others and getting tested for safety of the self and others. Personal

actions and behaviour in prevention appears to have helped in prevention of the spread. The world system, led by leaders with no understanding of people, local culture and behaviours, has enacted actions which may not end this pandemic soon.

The main purpose a church at this time is to go beyond fellowship and meeting together, to serve and minister neighbours. Should we not put our neighbours first in our ministry? There's now an opportunity for more dynamic plans and actions to share the pain of others. We could work with and through professionals who are willing to disrupt their own lives and make sacrifices to offer health and healing. Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI), the national network of church-owned health care institutions, has more than 200 hospitals with more than 12000 members across India. The commitment and willingness of the church to fight for the care, support and survival of others will be much appreciated. When we focus on this perspective of the community, we will be nourished by the giving, and the routine fellowship begins to move towards service, sacrifice and grace. This priority shift from an inward-looking fellowship towards and an outward ministry in a pandemic is extremely important. Churches are required work to change the systems to make health care more accessible for the most vulnerable during this health crisis. There are many other ways in which the church is positioned to support communities around us during this pandemic besides medical care, since health and wellness has several determinants beyond medical care interventions. The church is called to address all these issues at such a time as this. We should be proud of our heritage and the past. What is required at present is to raise the bar ourselves, when there is calling to sacrifice!!

*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*

— George Santayana



## Ambedkar's Response to Christians

- Monodeep Daniel\*

On January 5th, 1938, at a Christian gathering in Sholapur Dr Ambedkar said,

“I have had a great impact on my mind of two great personalities, Buddha and Christ, I want a religion which could teach us to practice equality, fraternity and liberty.” (Moon 2007:122)

James Massey, a well known figure in Dalit Theology, observed that “Dr Ambedkar probably was the first person who, though not Christian, looked at Christianity and its message seriously. This was the reason he used in his writings both directly and indirectly, the illustrations from the Bible to clarify a number of his beliefs.” (Massey 2003: 43).

Dr Ambedkar was well acquainted with many Christian leaders. Some of these were Rev Ian Charles Weathrall of Cambridge Brotherhood in Delhi, Waskom Pickett a Methodist Bishop who recorded in his diary that Dr Ambedkar had twice asked him for Baptism, Bishop Samuel Azariah of Dornakal, Ms Mildred Drescher who was an American Methodist Missionary, Lady Fanny Fitzgerald in London with whom he shared his insights on Biblical passages.(Daniel 2019:72).

Granted that Dr Ambedkar did refer to the influence that Christ had on him, he in his writings cites mostly from the contemporary Christian practices and the Bible. For instance in the presentation Speech of the Draft Constitution for India, to the first Constituent Assembly of India in 1949 Dr Ambedkar cited a discussion of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the USA whether they could pray for the nation or not. This was the quote,

Some years ago the American Protestant Episcopal Church was occupied at its triennial convention in

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revising the liturgy. It was thought desirable to introduce among the short sentence prayers a prayer for the whole people, and an eminent New England divine proposed the words, “O Lord, bless our nation”. Accepted one afternoon on the spur of the moment, the sentence was brought up next day for reconsideration, when so many objections were raised by the laity to the word ‘nation’ as importing too definite a recognition of national unity, that it was dropped and instead there were adopted the words “O Lord, bless these United States.” (Ambedkar 2007:219).

It is not within of this paper to discuss Dr Ambedkar’s views on nation and nationalism, but this citation demonstrates his sense of association with the Christian world.

## **INSPIRATION FROM BIBLICAL SOCIAL VALUE OF JUSTICE**

### **Inspiration from Moses**

Biblical narratives were a source of inspiration to Dr Ambedkar. For him Moses was a compelling leader par excellence. This is what he wrote at the end of full masterpiece article on Moses in 1941,

As the Old Testament truly says there arose no a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. Moses was not merely a great leader of the Jews. He is a leader whose birth, any downtrodden community may pray for. Whatever interest others may have felt in the story of Exodus and leadership of Moses they have been to me a source of perennial inspiration and hope. (Writings and Speeches Vol.17.1: 343).

The inspiration of the Exodus narrative lies in its compelling storyline of liberation and unwavering role of Moses in not yielding to any pressure from within or outside. He saw in this story all that he had experienced over the years as he struggled for rights of Dalits, namely,

the yearning of slaves to remain under bondage rather than to come to terms with the risks involved in freedom, temptation to worship idols of oppressive deities and exclusion of aliens, for instance Moses' wife. It would not be difficult to notice the underlying analogy of the Hebrews to Dalits, and Moses to Dr Ambedkar.

Moreover, Dr Ambedkar underscored the relevance of Moses as a prophet who gave egalitarian laws to a society in its antique stage, as an inspirational figure not only for the contemporary Jewish leaders but also for Dalits and their leaders in India.

Dr Ambedkar was quick to identify "Justice" as the fundamental social value of the Bible. He knew that the justice had several aspects of which liberty, fraternity and equality were most important. Justice for individuals was possible only in a free and equal society where distinctiveness and worth of every individual was recognised. This meant that individuals were to be awarded what they had merited conversely unmerited disadvantages and sufferings were unjust as these reinforced social injustices. In this line of thinking it would be unjust for a person to suffer by virtue of belonging to a disadvantaged class. Here Dalits were the case in point. It would be equally unjust to not take initiatives to alleviate suffering from the lives of the socially disadvantaged people.

Let us study the three aspects of justice below;

## **Equality**

While drawing up a scheme for a rational religion, Dr Ambedkar held that religion changed in radical ways in its three phases of society, namely, savage, antique and modern. In the modern phase God came to be revered as a supreme moral being 'capable of absolute good and possessing absolute virtue' (Writings and Speeches Vol.3: 16). In this line of thinking God was absolutely "just" i.e. He upholds social equality which is a social virtue. The question that begs an answer is this, how did Dr Ambedkar explain God's justice specifically his goodness and his virtue? In answer he pointed out that God treated all human beings as equal. He used the Hebrew bible to show that God did this in two ways. Firstly, by creating them in his own image so that none was inferior to another. This how it reads in the NRSV,

Then God said;

Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created Humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

Secondly, God showed this by treating each personality as sacred so that no one was to suffer for then iniquity for another. He found a passage in the Hebrew Bible to support his view. As a starting point for the discussion of the subject one may begin by referring to the words ... where Jehova says to Ezekiel;

Behold, all should are mind; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is one; the soul that sinneth, it shall die ... the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked upon him. (Ezekiel 18.4 & 20)

Here Dr Ambedkar emphasises an individual's worth and privileges which he/she merits. Anything less than that would be unjust. Clearly in his view justice required the society to be prepared to treat people equally and with dignity, despite economic and political disparities. This was the foundational principle to modernise Dalits.

## **Fraternity**

According to Dr Ambedkar a society of equals will be manifested in the free intermingling of people with one another. The caste-based society does not allow this by prohibiting inter-marriage and Inter-dining between different castes. In his monograph “Philosophy of Hinduism” Dr Ambedkar explains two trajectories of human relationship which run in opposite directions. One trajectory is individualism. Those who live by this view are self-centred. Every individual regards himself/herself as an end to themselves and looks after their own interests thereby developing a non-social and even anti-social self. The opposite is the fellow-feeling or fraternity. Those who

hold this view identify themselves with others and seek to bring benefits to others. (Writings and Speeches Vol.3:44)

To highlight this point Dr Ambedkar gave a direct citation from the New Testament and from the writings of Pilgrim Fathers. This is what he wrote,

Fraternity is the name of the disposition of an individual to treat men (sic!) as the object of reverence and love and the desire to be in unity with his fellow beings. This statement is well expressed by Paul when he said, “of one blood are all nations of men. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither none nor free, neither male nor female, for yet all are one in Christ Jesus.” Equally well was it expressed when the Pilgrim Fathers on their landing at Plymouth said, “We are knit together as a body in the most sacred covenant of the Lord ... by virtue of which we hold ourselves tied to all, care of each other’s good and of the whole.” These sentiments are of the essence of fraternity. (Writings And Speeches Vol. 3:97)

## Fidelity

Dr Ambedkar made use of the story of Daniel to bring out the sense of fidelity. It primarily demonstrated faithfulness of the Israelites to their God YHWH, which showed that each antique society had its own deity which destroyed on its people prosperity and abundance. However, for Dr Ambedkar fidelity of a community to its God helped its adherents to proceed in the right direction. We know that fidelity to God means reposing one’s faith in God and in nothing else. Here Dr Ambedkar uses the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the Three Young Men of the Jewish tradition. He wrote;

Indeed, the Brahmins have made religion a matter of trade and commerce. Compare with this faithlessness of the Brahmins the fidelity of the Jews to their God even when their conqueror Nebuchadnezzar forced the Jews to abandon their religion and adopt his religion.

Then he follows that narrative of the book of Daniel chapter 3;

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold ...  
and these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and  
Abednego, (who refused to bow before the idol were  
arrested and) fell bound into the midst of the burning  
fiery furnace.

And he ended with a pointed question,

Can the Brahmins of India show such steadfast faith  
and attachment for their gods and their religious faith?  
(Writings and Speeches Vol. 4:6-8).

Dr Ambedkar's point was to underscore the fidelity of the "Three Young Jewish Men" to their God. Note that the Scriptures did not *displace* the deity. For Dr Ambedkar a religion that taught its adherents to place their trust in their scriptures instead on its God halted human progress. This may sound difficult to the Bible believing Christians; but if this is understood rightly in the context of religious pluralism, we will appreciate Dr Ambedkar's view. He showed that the advantage derived from this was that the adherents of all religions could be encouraged to be bold to doubt and to inquire their scriptures and traditions critically. Hence the hermeneutics of suspicion could be a useful tool.

## **DRAMBEDKAR'S DILEMMA WITH CHRISTIAN SOCIETY**

Notwithstanding Dr Ambedkar's use of the Bible to build his ideas, values and inspiration, he found that Christians in their social relationships were inconsistent. He was at a loss to explain social attitudes of Indian Christians with the ideals of their faith. Let us study his dilemmas.

### **Concerned yet Insensitive**

Dr Ambedkar observed the value of the extensive work of missions among Dalits; however, he could not square this with the disinterest of educated Christians to advocate the cause of their Dalit coreligionists. In his view they did little to protect the civil liberties of their Dalit

Christians. He attributed this disinterest to the divisive line of class and caste in society at large. In one place he wrote, “for centuries Christian missions have provided for them a shelter, if not refuge”, yet in another place he observed that there was no feeling of kinship between the educated class and the backward mass of Christian community. He wrote;

Within the Christian community the educated class and the mass had no kinship ... the educated class is largely drawn from the touchable or higher classes. This educated class being detached from the lower or untouchable class of Christians is not charged with the wants, their pains, cravings, desires, aspirations of the latter and does not care for their interest. The untouchable Christians are therefore leaderless and therefore unable to mobilise for the redress of their wrongs. (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:472)

This obviously was paradoxical for Dr Ambedkar. However, how far was he correct in his judgement is difficult to gauge from our times now. At that juncture he could not anticipate a time when political consciousness of Christian people would rise.

### **Equal yet disjointed**

Granted that social equality was an appreciable ideal in Christianity; Dr Ambedkar’s question was this: Why did equality fail to forge unity among the Christians? Dr Ambedkar preferred to use the word “disjointed” to explain that the incoherent social life of Christians was more complex than mere denominational division. (Writings and Speeches Vol5:476). The word “disjointed” figuratively described there belongingness to one body, yet the joints of this body were pulled apart. This is what he wrote;

Indian Christian is disjointed ... community. All that it has in common is a common source of inspiration. Barring this one thing which they have in common everything else tends to keep them apart. Indian Christians like all other Indians are divided by race, by language, and by caste. Their religion has not been

sufficiently strong unifying force as to make difference of language, race and caste as though they were mere distinctions. On the contrary their religion which is their only cement is infected with denominational differences. The result is that the Indian Christians are too disjointed to have a common aim, to have a common mind and to put a common endeavour. (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:476).

Obviously in the face of disjointedness, genuine equality and solidarity in Christian community was doubtful. Dr Ambedkar's critique of Christian preaching was that it was less centred on social than on attitudinal change.

### **Scholarly yet Immoral**

Another example that brings out the paradoxical nature of Christian society in India was their presence of highly educated men and women among its adherents on the one hand, yet on the other its failure to enhance morality among them, especially the Europeans. He wrote, particularly appreciating the achievement of the converts, "Not only the men are educated but also women are educated." (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:473). As far as the European missionaries were concerned, he highlighted their astonishing level of knowledge. Two outstanding names among them were of Joseph Beschi and Robert de Nobili from the Roman Catholic tradition. Paradoxically these learned missionaries had little influence on the morals of Europeans posted in India.

Dr Ambedkar further noted that the English settlers in India who had worked through the first eighty years of the seventeenth century did not build any churches. (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:432). This again was a paradox of Christians who to their own moral detriment did not bother to build churches in India. This licentious life of Europeans left the Indians appalled. They thought that Christians had no religion to discipline them.

Such was the disorderliness and immortality among Englishmen in India. No wonder that the Indians marvelled whether the British acknowledged any

God and believed in any system of morality. When asked what he thought of Christianity and Christians an Indian reported to have said in his broken English—“Christian religion devil religion; Christian much drink; Christian much do wrong; much beat, much abuse each other.” (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:434).

The snag of Europeans became a drawback of Christian religion; in turn this drawback became an obstacle to initiate social reform which ultimately was a loss for Dalits.

## **DRAMBEDKAR’S CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES**

He was critical of some aspects of Christian doctrines. The picture will be incomplete if we fail to take this into consideration. We will briefly study this in the sections below.

### **Critique on “Original Sin”**

Dr Ambedkar regarded the doctrine of Original Sin of the traditional Christian theology as a drawback. The reason for his criticism of this doctrine was that he regarded it as wholly inappropriate for the Untouchable converts to Christianity in the Indian social context. But to say that he denied the doctrine of the fall of humankind from righteousness will be a hasty conclusion. What he did was to differently explain the cause of fall. He argued that a person does not fall due to Adam’s sin but due to wrong and unjust social environment. He wrote;

The Christian church teaches that the fall of man (sic!) is due to his original sin and the reason why one must become a Christian is because in Christianity there is promise of forgiveness of sins. Whatever may be the theological and evangelistic basis of this doctrine there is no doubt that from a sociological point of view it is a doctrine which is fraught with disaster. This Christian teaching is a direct challenge to social log you which holds that the fall of man is due to an unpropitious environment and to the sins of man.



There is no question that the sociological view is the correct view and the Christian dogma only misleads man. It set him on a wrong trail. Instead of being taught that his fall is due to wrong social and religious environment and that for his improvement he must attack that environment he is told that his fall is due to his sin. (Writings and Speeches Vol. 5:472f).

It is obvious that his argument had benefits for Dalits. Unlike the doctrine of Original Sin that blames the victims for this misfortunes, Dr Ambedkar's argues to shift the blame away from them. He pins down the cause of injustice of Adam, a remote ancestor, who had originally committed sin had consequences in the way people behaved and treated one another. As it was impossible to recede into the past to correct the remote ancestor, it was impossible to avert the predetermined consequences that fall on the descendants of Adam. Resultantly the Indian Christians were indifferent to social injustice. He observed that;

The consequence is that the untouchable convert instead of being energised to conquer his environment contents himself with the belief that there is no use struggling, for simple reason that his fall is due to the sin committed not by him but by some remote ancestor of his called Adam. When he was a Hindu his fall was due to the sins of his ancestor. In either case there is no escape for him. One may well ask whether conversion is a birth of a new life and a a condemnation to the old? (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:473)

If we venture to juxtapose two doctrines with which his death i.e. Image of God and Original Sin, what comes out is a paradox which explains to a degree Dr Ambedkar's uncertainty with Christianity. If the former empowered people with dignity, the latter made them interiorly weak. Now as far as the Dalits are concerned, they were not sinners, as the logic of Original Sin imputes; rather they are sinned against by the dominant castes. The question should be, if Dalits have been sinned *against* then what does salvation mean to them? Salvation them should be understood as emancipation from the dominant oppressors in this world here and now.

## **Critique on traditional “Christology”**

Another issue that drew Dr Ambedkar’s attention was Christology. Instead of writing directly about it he preferred to quote from the book of a person called Winslow who had underscored Christological propositions unacceptable to the Hindus. The first was that Christ was divine in a unique way; the second was that he alone was the God incarnate; the third was that Christ exclusively was the means of salvation (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:453). These in Winslow’s view made Christianity repulsive to Indians which explained their low numerical turnover to Christianity. Dr Ambedkar did not commit himself to approve or disapprove these ideas at this juncture in 1937; however, in 1956 he plainly rejected the affirmation of Christ as the divine incarnation and the sole saviour of this world.

Christ claimed to be the prophet of Christianity. He further claimed that he was the Son of God. Christ also laid down the condition that there was no salvation for a person unless he accepted that Christ was the Son of God. Thus Christ secured a place for himself by making the salvation of the Christian depend upon his acceptance of Christ as the Prophet and Son of God. (Writings and Speeches Vol.11:215)

He could not accept that a person had to depend on someone else for his/her salvation. Such doctrines placed the saviour at an unequal pedestal *vis-a-vis* the saved.

## **Critique on “Attitude to Poverty”**

His critique of Christian ethics is embedded in his defence of Buddhism to Communist charges against religions. He wrote;

But to communist Religion is anathema. Their hatred to Religion. Is so deep seated that they will not even discriminate between religions which are helpful to Communism and religions which are not. The communists have carried their hatred of Christianity to Buddhism without waiting to examine the difference between the two.

This excerpt is from the article *Buddha or Karl Marx* (1956). He was not explicit whether he supported the charge as valid, except that in the same paragraph he states “the Sermon on the Mount sublimate poverty and weakness. It promises heaven to the poor and weak.” (Writings and Speeches Vol.3:460). Dr Ambedkar underscored two criticisms of communists against Christianity. The first was to make the poor voluntarily accept poverty; and the second was to offer them false security of heaven. This is what he wrote;

The charge against Christianity levelled by the communists was two-fold. Their first charge ... was that they made people otherworldly and made them suffer poverty in this world ... The second charge ... is summed up in the statement that Religion is the opium of the people. This charge is based upon the Sermon on the Mount which is to be found in the Bible.

Dr Ambedkar agreed with both these charges and at this juncture was in no mood to defend Christianity. Here it is important to take into consideration his predicament to piece together what he saw in the gospels as two extreme poles. These were its liberating message on the one hand and on the other the glorification of poverty as an ideal. The former was just but the latter unjust because poverty made people unequal.

### **Critique on “Intellectual Neglect”**

One of the reasons of Dr Ambedkar to adopt Buddhism was his view that Christ, unlike Buddha, was anti-intellectual. To support his view, he cited Prof W.T. Stance who alleged that “knowledge has never been any part of the Christian ideal man (*sic!*). Owing to the unphilosophical character of its founder in the Christian scheme of thought the moral side of man has been divorced from the intellectual side.” It is with this in view that he wrote in 1956, a day after his conversion to Buddhism as an attempt to explain it;

There is a difference between buffalo, bull and man. Buffalo and bull need fodder every day. Man, also needs food. But the difference in between the two is that buffalo and bull have no mind; man has body and

mind too. Therefore, both should be pondered poverty. The mind should be developed. The mind should be cultured. It should be made cultured. (Writings and Speeches Vol.17.3:958).

Allegation that Christ did not promote intellectualism is not correct. In the gospels a reader can detect the Lord sometimes used Socratic method of demonstrating a truth by posing a “question”. Similarly use of parables also were a known method by Jews and we also know of Plato’s allegory of Cave in his book *Republic*. The ideas of these Greek philosophers were circulating in Palestine in the antiquity since Greeks had ruled that territory. We know that Jesus’ audience were not the philosophers, He used simple down to earth stories, instead of philosophical propositions, to make people grasp the truth. He also engaged excellently with the questions of the practice of Torah. Communication of ideas by alternative means instead of philosophical proposition does not make Jesus anti-intellectual.

**“Christianity will de-nationalise the Depressed Classes.” Could he say that?**

We have seen in our discussion above that Christianity confronted Dr Ambedkar with irresolvable paradoxes. Under these circumstances his ambiguity of considering Christianity can be expressed in his unspoken question as this, should Christianity be propagated in India? Surprise may well be expressed on a statement that was released on 24th July 1936 in the *Times of India* purportedly as Dr Ambedkar’s view. As it seems to offer an answer to the above query, we need to investigate it in detail,

Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam the number of Muslims will be doubled and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity, the numerical strength of Christians becomes five to six crores. It will help to strengthen the hold of British on this country. On the other hand, if they embrace Sikhism, they will not harm the destiny of the country but they will help the destiny’s the country. They will not be denationalised. On the

other hand, they will be a help on the political advancement of the country. (Writings and Speeches Vol.17.2:241).

The words “*denationalise*” and the phrase “*strengthen the hold of the British on this country*” were unduly hard against Christians of whom Dr Ambedkar always spoke with sympathy and tenderness. This is surprising. To examine this text we need to examine its source. Vasant Moon gives the context of this text in the paragraph preceding it in volume-17.2 of Writings and Speeches as below,

Regarding conversion, “Dr B.R. Ambedkar, consulted his colleagues from different provinces in the matter of choosing the proposer religion for conversion. He had now decided to embrace Sikhism. His friends and colleagues felt that Dr Ambedkar should seek the support of the Hindu Sabha leaders in their conversion to Sikhism; for the Hindu Sabha leaders believed that Sikhism was not an alien religion. It was an offspring of Hinduism and therefore the Sikhs and Hindus intermarried and the Sikhs were allowed to be members of the Hindu Mahasabha.” Accordingly, Dr Moonji, the spokesman of the Hindu Mahasabha was invited to Bombay, in the presence of two other friends; Dr Ambedkar had a talk with Dr Moonji at Rajgriha, on June 18, 1936, at half- past seven that night. Dr Ambedkar cleared all issues and had a free talk with Dr Moonji. Next day the *purport* of Dr Ambedkar’s views was *reduced to a statement* and given to *Dr Moonji who approved it personally*. (Emphasis added. Cf. Writings and Speeches Vol.17.2:239)

What has been published above is questionable for various reasons. Firstly, it is not known who wrote out this ‘purport’ of Dr Ambedkar’s views. For the press release and it is improbable that it was presented to Dr Ambedkar for a preview; secondly, how much of this text is an accurate recording of the actual words uttered by Dr Ambedkar cannot be determined. For it appears that Dr Ambedkar did not respond to this press release. It is possible that some were fed into the mouth of Dr

Ambedkar by the press reporter; thirdly, this statement could have been composed by a person with a degree of prejudice against Christians; fourthly, Dr Ambedkar had criticised Christians of tolerating caste but never becoming denationalised. Here it appears as a new word in his vocabulary in the sphere of his dealings with Christians. This word does not fit into the normal 'Ambedkar language'; fifthly, this was not a recording of the whole conversation but a reduction. In other words, it is only the essence of what was discussed; sixthly, the word 'denationalise' and the phrase 'strengthening the hold of the British' are in line with the Hindutva ideology which was not the line that Dr Ambedkar would tow.

Juxtaposing Christianity with Islam in this text betrays a similar colour of prejudice. It is unlikely that Dr Ambedkar keen on Sikhism at this phase could have embraced ideas resonating Hindutva ideology of Vir Damodar Vinayak Savarkar of which he was so critical. He was not a type of politician who would have said things to please people. This is evident in the 'formula for amicable settlement' on the question of conversion. (Writings and Speeches Vol.17.1.1936:476) Clearly Sikhism was preferred over Islam and Christianity, but in this view, it was the Muslims not Christians who needed to be checked in converting the depressed classes. Seventhly, in the light of Dr Ambedkar's statement on January 5, 1938 (Moon 2007:122) reiterating the great impact of Jesus Christ on his mind, the reliability of the above 1936-Press note seems dubious.

Keeping in view the above facts one could consider this statement as unreliable in details. In values and authenticity, it weighs less than the articles which Dr Ambedkar wrote himself. Accordingly, it would be misleading to construe conclusions on this text of press release. (Daniel 2019:92).

Considering the question, we raised earlier whether, in Dr Ambedkar's view, Christianity should be propagated in India? We must accept that he is unclear about it. Nonetheless, it will be apt to recall his most moving conclusion at the end of his article on Christians, *The Condition of the Convert*. He had realised the utility of Christianity for Dalits which was evident in their conversion to it. He expressed his

deep interest for Christians, that he was their friend and that he wanted them to be aware of their weaknesses in order to overcome them. This is what he wrote,

I am deeply interested in the Indian Christians because a large majority of them re-drawn from the Untouchable classes. My comments are those of a friend. They are not strictures of an adversary. I have drawn attention to their weaknesses because I want them to be strong and I want them to be strong because i see great dangers for them ahead. They have to reckon with the scarcely veiled hostility of Mr Gandhi to Christianity taking roots in the Indian social structure. But they have also to reckon with militant Hinduism masquerading as Indian Nationalism. (Writings and Speeches Vol.5:476).

For none else did Dr Ambedkar write a postscript with a touch of affection and tenderness such as this. He who wrote this could not have said what the 1936-Press note had released. Although he did not spare them wherever he found them at fault, this addendum demonstrates his inclination to Christianity. Yet he did not choose Christianity as a home for his Dalit community.

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## Tracing the hour: Challenges for Church's Public Witness in Human Sexuality

- Jessica Prakash-Richard \*

The National Council of Churches in India recently convened the Pre-Assembly Forum of National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities (NEFGSD), ahead of the NCCI Assembly 2020. This standing forum of the NCCI has, over the years, brought together the expertise and wisdom of significant voices from among the LGBTQI+ as well as feminist voices. NCCI pioneered conversations surrounding sexuality when it was still a taboo in India two decades ago by convening a series of Study Institutes on Human Sexuality as early as 2002 and 2003. It has been a privilege to be involved in some of these earliest efforts in the Study Institutes<sup>1</sup> as well as in more recent activities of the NEFGSD through the Ecumenical Solidarity for HIV and AIDS (ESHA) and as a core group member of the NEFGSD. I am grateful for this opportunity to expand on my reflections shared in the Pre-Assembly Forum for a session on 'Tracing the Hour: Identifying key issues in human sexuality and gender identities.' This has given me an opportunity to reflect on some of the nuances, lacunae and wisdom gleaned in this journey of human sexuality over the past two decades along with fellow sojourners who try to be true to our integrity to our bodies and to our faith and theological convictions.

Over the past two decades India has witnessed open discussions surrounding sex, body, and sexuality. This discourse in India especially within ecumenical circles has intermittently tried to embrace those of different Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities (SOGI). We have learnt from listening to the life experiences,

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Richard, "Embodying and Reimagining Our Sexuality, God and Sexual Marginals" Theological Reflection in the "II Study Institute on Human Sexuality" jointly organised by the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), SCMI, UELCI & CASA, 25 September, 2003, SCM House, Bangalore.

challenges, and struggles for identity and dignity of those from the LGBTQI+ communities and have tried to articulate them in our ecclesiastical and theological journeys<sup>2</sup>. While we must acknowledge that inroads have been made in creating awareness in issues surrounding human sexuality, it also feels like after two decades we still have not moved into practical and concrete ways of addressing epistemological, pedagogical nor existential issues regarding human sexuality.

An observation by a gay friend that I return to in order to process my own journey in sexuality is:

We are always perceived by heterosexuals as those who have sex and ‘different’ or ‘kinky’ sex all the time ... I wish I was having as much sex as you people think we are! We are persons first, we have all the dreams and aspirations that all people do, and are only as preoccupied with sex as so-called ‘normal’ people are. When you see me, why is it you only envisage how I do sex and who I do it with? Why is it you don’t see me first as a person? Without the filter of how I have sex?

I realised how painful it must be to be perceived only through the lens of one’s perceived sexual orientation. When people look at me, they see me as a woman. They do not immediately conjure up images in their heads about me having sex. Or so I thought. However, the more I thought about it, I realised that when people see me as a woman, some may also be conjuring up how to have sex with me, or how my body looks without clothes. One aspect that women share with those from the SOGI communities is this – that we too are first and last perceived as sexual objects and sexual beings and not as human persons. Our sexuality is seen as deviant when ‘uncontrolled’ and as sluttish when carried with confidence. This aspect of the human sexuality discourse needs attention. While it is important, and only right, that we create more space for understanding the articulation of those from LGBTQI+ communities about body, sexuality and identity, we must recognise

<sup>2</sup> See Roger Gaikwad and Thomas Ninan, *A Theological Reader on Human Sexuality and Gender Diversities: Envisioning Inclusivity* (Delhi:ISPCK,2017); Philip Kuruvilla, ed., *Christian Responses to Issues of Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity: A Guide to the Churches in India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2017); *An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality* <[https://ncci1914.com/?page\\_id=3405](https://ncci1914.com/?page_id=3405)> (29 Mar 2020);

that enough attention has not been paid to understand healthy sexuality within binary-gender-conforming sexuality. The various nuances, behaviours, and challenges that lie within male sexuality and female sexuality within the heterosexual spectrum too have not yet been fully explored.

Human sexuality<sup>3</sup> is a spectrum that is inclusive of diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities, but it does not exclude heterosexuality from its ambit. Discourses on human sexuality that exclusively focusses on LGBTQI+ without taking into account that heterosexuality (with all its problems and limitations) is a part of human sexuality (with its consequent issues), detracts from a wholesome discussion on human sexuality. I would like to reflect on some issues in human sexuality and gender identities keeping in mind such a spectrum of human sexuality that takes cognizance of issues pertinent to heterosexuality as well.

### **Perspectival change – Expanding beyond the ‘box’ and recognising faultlines:**

**Deviance:** Certain sexual behaviours within human sexuality (both hetero and homosexual) are still considered ‘deviant’ – in particular bisexuality<sup>4</sup> and polyamory<sup>5</sup>. I contend that this is because both these behaviours understand ‘deviance’ from the standpoint of monogamous sexual behaviour. Bisexuality and polyamory blur the lines between

<sup>3</sup> Some definitions of human sexuality that I find pertinent to flag for reference are: “...the entire range of feelings and behaviors which human beings have and use as embodied persons in the world, expressing relationship to themselves and others through look, touch, word and action. It includes the combination of our gender (identity and role) and sex (anatomy and physiology) and is co-extensive with personality.” (Joan H. Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* (University of Michigan: Crossroad, 1992); “Sexuality exists independently of marriage or the sex act. Jesus was a sexual being, though he did not marry or engage in sex. To be human is to be sexual. The two are inseparably linked. Sex is not just something you do. Sex is someone you are ... Sexuality is not confined to the sex drive, though it certainly embraces it.” Randy C. Alcorn, *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution*, (Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1985) 178 - 179

<sup>4</sup> Read more on Bisexuality: <<https://biresource.org/resources/youth/what-is-bisexuality/>> (29 March 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Christian Klesse, *Polyamory and its ‘Others’: Contesting the Terms of Non-Monogamy* <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069986>; Also Polyamory <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325880#The-hardest-question> (29 March 2020);

socially and religiously acceptable ‘boundaries’ related to monogamy and ‘sanctity of marriage’. If this is so, our discourses on human sexuality in India need to reflect on whether our discussions are from the standpoint of body, sexuality and affirming relationships per se or from the standpoint of preserving the sanctity of monogamy.

In the case of bisexuality, it is considered ‘unethical’ because of the preference for more than one partner (belonging to more than one sex). In the case of polyamory too, it is more the affront to exclusive relationship and ‘commitment’ as defined from the lenses of monogamy and exclusive one-to-one relationships (that is held higher-up in the hierarchy of acceptable and ‘more ethical’), that polyamory is not respected a choice that some prefer as more suited to who they are. This aspect is shrouded in silence and is not yet being explored in our ecumenical discussions on human sexuality. This is probably because of moralistic notions— both within heterosexual and homosexual relationships— that commitment to a single person is ‘more ethical’ and therefore hailed as ‘better’.

The ‘sanctity’ accorded to monogamous marriage render as unacceptable choices of sexual relationships that may be truer for a person to live with integrity to self. A person grows and evolves. To expect one person to satisfy all of one’s emotional, intellectual, psychological, and physical needs puts enormous pressure on relationships, especially when each partner has evolved and his/her needs and expectations change. Our proclivity to be extremely judgemental about adultery and ‘cheating’ on a ‘legally’ wedded partner arise because we have placed monogamous marriage on a pedestal and failed to recognise that it is possible for a person to be true to self and the other in configurations of multiple affirming relationships as well.

**Consensual:** There is a need to more intentionally process what ‘consensual’ means in changing contexts when, marriage and monogamy may not be the only options people choose to live out ‘commitment’ to loving, affirming, and abuse-free relationships.

Even in relationships that have the halo of legality around it, consensus is rarely something that can be negotiated especially by women or the more vulnerable partner in a relationship. What ‘consensual’ means

between ‘legally married’ couples is a grey area that we need to delve into. The connection between the lack of a healthy understanding of consensual sex and domestic violence has been intentionally ignored as it touches too close to home for comfort and challenges the socially normative understanding that a spouse is ‘obliged’ to provide sex to the partner on demand because the marriage almost entails legal ‘ownership’ over the other’s body. This often plays out to the disadvantage of the woman in a patriarchal society like India.

**Tokenism:** Trans persons, intersex persons, and those of differing sexual orientations, are still not fully embraced within the church. Barring few mainline and independent churches that have made conscious efforts to create ‘ministries for’ LGBTQI+ (rather than inclusion in the life and ministry of the church), ecumenical gatherings on sexuality are the only spaces in which they are called upon to share stories and participate in meaningful ways. This is becoming a form of tokenism to exhibit mandatory or politically correct expectations of ‘diversity’. Such participation is the exception and do not reflect the reality that in the routine life and ministry of the church in India, there has been only very marginal inroads (if that!) in creating spaces in heads and hearts, and physical spaces for the participation of trans people, intersex people or those with differing sexual orientations. The participation of the LGBTQI+ community that has the potential to enrich the diversity of the life and witness of the church in very real terms has not yet been experienced by the church in India.

**Difference and allies<sup>6</sup>:** Similar to the struggle within feminism to not gloss over differences between women<sup>7</sup> in the eagerness to create a

<sup>6</sup> Ally – a person who is not LGBTW but shows support and promotes equality in variety of ways. <<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>> (7 April 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Black lesbian poet and feminist Audre Lorde captures this powerfully in her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” where she says: “As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression ... But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist... Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections”. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossings, 1984) 110-112;

‘universal women’s experience’ or ‘sisterhood’, in the struggle for self-determination and dignity of LGBTQI+ people too, the importance of talking about the differences within<sup>8</sup> the community needs to be stressed. Differences in terms of caste, class, and disability exist within the community, as well as differences about prioritisation of issues pertinent to each community within the LGBTQI+ umbrella. These need to be explored with integrity to forge a more robust solidarity that appreciates difference.

A more problematic issue is the differences among the ‘allies’ of the LGBTQI+ movement. The differences in terms of caste, class and religious affiliation among those purporting to be allies has to be taken seriously for open honest analysis. Whether one is heterosexual or from different sexual orientations and identities, the extent of agency one can claim in making sexual choices and claiming rights, is coloured by caste, class, faith, and educational identity markers. These fault lines of not taking difference seriously enough for debate and introspection within the discourse on human sexuality and solidarity with the LGBTQI community are bound to keep precipitating recurrent and potentially divisive politics in the fight for rights and dignity<sup>9</sup>.

### **Misrepresentation in media and missing in Art:**

Movie makers falling into the trap of tokenism is a growing problem that surfaces more since the reading down of Section 377. Ill-researched portrayals that perpetuate negative stereotypes about trans

<sup>8</sup> Linda Alcoff has an insightful analysis when she contends that the manner in which categories for membership within groups are constructed is profoundly political. One’s location and positionality are not static but multiple. Therefore, what it means to speak from or within a group or a location is immensely complex. See Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”, *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-2) 7.

<sup>9</sup> I find it helpful to use Audre Lorde’s thoughts on this when she talks about the dangers of subsuming many categories under the word ‘black’ and the necessity to talk about differences constructively: “... I see certain pitfalls in defining Black as a political position. It takes the cultural identity of a widespread but definite group and makes it a generic identity for many culturally diverse peoples, all on the basis of a shared oppression. This runs the risk of providing a convenient blanket of apparent similarity under which our actual and unaccepted differences can be distorted or misused. This blanket would diminish our chances of forming genuine working coalitions built upon the recognition and creative use of unacknowledged difference, rather than upon the shaky foundations of a false sense of similarity.” Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: and Other Essays*, (Dover Publications, Ixia Press: 2017) 60. [www.doverpublications.com/ixiapress](http://www.doverpublications.com/ixiapress)

and queer people is one end of the spectrum and outright transphobic portrayals by main characters is the other. There are critics from the queer communities in India who are boldly reviewing and calling out such portrayal in Indian cinema<sup>10</sup> and all forms of art. There are also significant initiatives by those from the LGBTQI+ community in India to project the creative literary art forms that those from the community are involved in<sup>11</sup> while attempting to also fight misrepresentation. Such initiatives need to reach the mainstream church-goer and special efforts need to be made by churches in India in this regard.

### **Daily Life, livelihood, dignity, care and provision:**

Livelihood and a life with dignity continue to be elusive for LGBTQI communities. Those from LGBTQI+ communities, who have managed to find employment even in the corporate sector, mostly do not disclose their identities at their workspaces. At best they are able to do so when the said corporate entity uses them as their tokenism for 'diversity' in the workspace. This is attested to in interviews by gay and transgender Indians across the country collated in an article in the *New York Times* that says:

Even now, it is an act of calculated risk to identify publicly as being gay in India, or to advocate for change ... gay and transgender Indians from across the country described the cost of living in a country that has forced them to be outlaws: shunning by parents, social isolation, few

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<sup>10</sup> Kannan Deepan, a queer feminist; Romal Laisram, editor in chief, *Provoke Magazine*; Moulee, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Professional and founder of Queer Chennai Chronicles, a literary forum and independent publishing house - are some who are consistently involved in such truth telling in social media platforms.

<sup>11</sup> Transgender rights activist and Hindustani classical musician Rumi Harish in the field of literature and performing arts; Gireesh, illustrator and writer, in the field of publishing; Rachna Mudraboyina, trans rights activist and founder *Transvision*, a youtube channel; Priya Babu, documentary film maker and theatre artist, founder Trans Resource Centre; Living Smile Vidya, theatre artist, poet and writer and founder of *Panmai* theatre - are some who are making significant inroads in this realm. See also: Shilaja Tripathi, "Does Increased Visibility of Trans People in Performing Arts Translate into Progress?" <<https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/trans-people-performing-arts>> (7 April 2020); <<https://www.queerchennaichronicles.com/>> (7 April 2020); <<https://www.queerlitfest.com>> (7 April 2020); <<https://feminisminindia.com/2019/11/25/rachana-mudraboyina-transvision-interview/>> (7 April 2020)



protections in the workplace, and a frightening vulnerability to both police abuse and sexual assault with limited legal recourse<sup>12</sup>.

The most basic issue of housing and the LGBTQI+ community struggling to find places to rent<sup>13</sup> is something that should give us all pause. Self-declaration of gender identity is still not understood as a human right impacting the dignity of trans people. The most serious flaw in the new law – Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 – is the procedure it mandates for legal gender recognition that:

... sets an extraordinary amount of power with one government office to arbitrate which trans people ‘qualify’ to be recognized as who they are. It also coerces people into medical procedures they might not want — a fundamental rights violation that Indian and international jurisprudence condemns.<sup>14</sup>

There is lack of access to enter sports for those from the LGBTQI+ communities, especially for trans persons, as sport is still globally segregated along binary gender lines. As global sporting authorities still grapple with the conflict between inclusion of trans athletes in competitive sport and the fairness of this for cisgender<sup>15</sup> peers, trans persons struggle to gain recognition at the most basic institutional levels in India<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Kai Schultz, “Gay in India: Where Progress has come only with Risk” *The New York Times*, Asia Pacific Edition June 2, 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/02/world/asia/gay-in-india-where-progress-has-come-only-with-risk.html>> (29 March 2020)

<sup>13</sup> “Stop Discrimination in housing” *Urban Debate*, From 50:30 mins onwards specifically, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHxkqp0pCHE>> (7 April 2020)

<sup>14</sup> Kyle Knight, “India’s Transgender Rights Law Isn’t Worth Celebrating,” *Human Rights Watch*, 5 December 2019 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/05/indias-transgender-rights-law-isnt-worth-celebrating>> (29 March 2020)

<sup>15</sup> A person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. <<https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>> (7 April 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Anvisha Manral, “An all-trans men football team in Manipur challenges male-female binary in sport, hopes for greater queer inclusion,” *Firstpost*, 07 April 2020 Edition <<https://www.firstpost.com/living/an-all-trans-men-football-team-in-manipur-challenges-male-female-binary-in-sport-hopes-for-greater-queer-inclusion-8182681.html>> (7 April 2020).



Those who are gifted in sports are forced to give up the sport when they decide to come out as trans. As a trans person facing this dilemma when he came out as trans says:

I wanted to participate in matches but I was not able to since I fit in neither of the two categories — male or female.<sup>17</sup>

As a church we have not begun to delve into something as simple as opportunity to pursue the sport of one's choice as a legitimate livelihood option or for leisure.

There is a generalised ghettoization of trans persons to certain professions even in well-meaning interventions catering to the interests of the community. As a gay friend observed, we need to change the charity mode that 'we' (the church) know what 'they' need or what is 'fitting for them'. We need to listen to the community's aspirations. There are social, cultural, economic, legal and policy factors that affect the skills, employability and livelihood opportunities for transgender persons<sup>18</sup> that must be comprehensively understood.

Discrimination and stigma pose the biggest challenge for the trans community to access employment or other legal livelihood options. A UNDP study observed that:

Transgender people's effeminate behaviour, trans status, real or perceived association with sex work; real or perceived HIV status, dress code, physical appearance and others contribute to the multiple forms of discrimination they face from families, neighbourhood, communities and public and private institutions.<sup>19</sup>

Livelihood options that meet the expenses for maintenance of body and health needs are still a huge struggle for trans people. Many transgender persons engage in commercial sex work (CSW) as a

<sup>17</sup> Anvisha Manral, "An all-trans men football", (7 April 2020)

<sup>18</sup> UNDP Study by National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), "Skilling for livelihood Opportunities for Transgenders in India," 2016, <<https://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/pub-povertyreduction/Skilling%20for%20Livelihood.pdf>> (29 March 2020). 20.

<sup>19</sup> UNDP Study by NACO, "Skilling for livelihood." 26.

livelihood option as it “...provides them greater autonomy, with few barriers to entry and financial stability compared to other workplaces.”<sup>20</sup> Viable livelihood ensuring dignity needs to be understood from the perspective of various lobbies of trans people. Although trans people prefer sex work for reasons mentioned previously, it must be recognised that:

... sex work increases trans people’s vulnerability to harm in many ways exposing them to multifaceted violence from clients as well as law enforcement officers. Avahan data from May 2016 reports 8.49% of transgender persons faced police violence over a period of six months in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra.<sup>21</sup>

Ecumenical discussions on human sexuality in India need to set aside moralistic views related to legalisation of sex work and look at it from a human rights point of view to understand this better from the perspective of various stakeholders. Legalisation of CSW can help curb the violence and brutality which is part of CSW. Police brutality and extortion can be avoided. The debate on legalisation of sex work remains a grey area that the church has been silent about because of moralistic notions surrounding sex work.

When the options in lieu of CSW that are offered to trans people can hardly meet one tenth of what they need for the upkeep of their cosmetic, hormonal and health needs, it is small wonder that such livelihood projects for trans people initiated by churches end in failure. These projects simply do not provide them a viable income to live with the kind of dignity they want.

Related issues<sup>22</sup> in terms of livelihood for trans people, such as, lack of education and awareness among trans persons who leave home at an early age and abandon education, the mismatch between skills and livelihood opportunities, mismatch of information in identity cards and discrepancy in birth certificates and official documents after sex reassignment surgery (SRS), and the medical issues and body shock they go through post SRS that makes it difficult for them to do jobs requiring manual labour or daily wage jobs – need careful analysis.

<sup>20</sup> UNDP Study by NACO, “Skilling for livelihood.”20.

<sup>21</sup> UNDP Study by NACO, “Skilling for livelihood.”20.

<sup>22</sup> UNDP Study by NACO, “Skilling for livelihood.” 26-28.

**Care and provision:** With different configurations of what ‘family’ means evolving among the SOGI communities, the responsibility for care of ageing trans people has not yet been addressed by churches’ interventions. Questions about whose responsibility is the care of such ageing trans people unable to engage in gainful employment anymore need to be addressed. Such trans people are often left to fend for themselves or look to poorly run and under-funded State-run shelters for a roof over their heads.

Although Section 377 has been read down, this has not yet begun to fully impact the lived-realities of the LGBTQI+ especially the children and youth. As a researcher in LGBTQI+ rights writes:

The picture is bleak for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in India. Many face harassment and bullying, and to avoid humiliation and violence they often skip classes or drop out of school altogether. Most teachers are not trained or empowered to respond to anti-LGBT bullying, so in many cases they don’t. In some cases, they even participate in the harassment.<sup>23</sup>

Gender non-conforming children run away from families unable to accept them. Such run-away children are not even reported missing. This is a clarion call for the church to come up with initiatives to educate parents, teachers, and significant others who may be the cause for children to leave homes. Sensitised staff are empowered to respond when they encounter abuse and shows the growing generation that being gender non-conforming is no longer a taboo or illegal and is a basic human right. Observing that while legal changes were important Kyle Knight’s research indicates that:

... much more is needed for LGBT people in India to be able to live without discrimination and with dignity. Young people who are bullied in school are less likely to succeed and more likely to find themselves vulnerable to discrimination and violence as adults<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Kyle Knight, “Section 377 is History but Young LGBT Indians Need Concrete Policies to Protect them from Bullying,” *Scroll.in* June 24, 2019 2:46PM EDT<<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/24/section-377-history-young-lgbt-indians-need-concrete-policies-protect-them-bullying>> (29 March 2020)

<sup>24</sup> Kyle Knight, “Section 377 is History”.

Care and provision for ageing trans persons and gender non-conforming children not accepted by families is an area related to human sexuality that the church can make a great impact in. Professionally run care and educational facilities for such children that they are spaces free of judgement and bullying will empower such children to grow into productive and balanced adults.

### **Legal, judicial protection, social security, reservations, health care:**

**Legal lacuna:** The LGBTQI+ community affirms that marriage equality is not the only priority in their agenda for rights. Marriage being a problematic, oppressive, abusive social unit based on heteronormative patriarchal norms – it is not something that homosexuals are aspiring for. However, for those from the LGBTQI+ communities for whom it is important, the church has still not negotiated how to address same-sex couples who desire their marriages to be blessed by the church. The legal issues of inheritance, property rights, and adoption between same-sex couples are also issues for the church along with civil society coalitions, to be involved in advocacy for with the State.

Marital rape within both heterosexual and homosexual relationships and the legal ambiguities around this is also an issue of human sexuality. The basic right of a person over one's own body and sexuality and agency over one's sexuality is in question in cases of marital rape which is nothing but legally sanctioned rape. Adultery laws, the legal silence on polyamory and definitions of 'unnatural sex' inherent in existing legal mechanisms also need to be revisited in the light of changing contemporary contexts. Social benefits like housing, shelters for trans people, reservation in jobs, leadership and political representation are still issues that need more lobbying and advocacy with concerned state and secular players. Violence and brutality meted out by law enforcers and general public on trans people and homosexuals is a reality that fails to rouse the righteous anger of the church. We have failed to be present in the violent realities faced by trans people repeatedly over the years.

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019, does not align with other laws like the Domestic Violence Act<sup>25</sup> 2005, the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2013, the clauses on rape and sexual assault in the India Penal Code 1860 and the relaxation of gender barriers in laws determining marriage to include the trans community.<sup>26</sup> The Trans Act 2019, is silent on reservations for the trans community in education and employment and falls short of an adequate definition of ‘discrimination’ that is necessary when jobs, education and the aspect of having families is being opened out to them<sup>27</sup>. Although the new law recognises intersex people, it offers no specific protections and is silent on any directive to protect intersex children from medically unnecessary ‘normalizing’ surgeries.<sup>28</sup> If the church is to take its public witness in human sexuality seriously, we must discern this nuanced relationship between of the need for medical interventions, agency over one’s body and individual’s choice of personal identity. As Kyle Knight puts it succinctly:

Put simply, the process for recognition before the law and control over one’s own body should be separate from any medical interventions. But if an individual’s personal identity or transition process requires medical support, those services should be available and accessible.<sup>29</sup>

Health care has been the strong forte of churches in India that have catered with special force for specific marginalised communities. However dedicated attention to services specifically required by LGBTQI+ communities like provisions for SRS, counselling for gender non-conforming children, testing for sexually transmitted diseases and it’s sustained monitoring etc., have not been prioritised in church related health care institutions. Most health care providers themselves are not sensitised about health issues of the community and end up discriminating those from the community approaching such facilities. While the provision, affordability, relevance and access of health care services relevant to the LGBTQI+ is one aspect, the

<sup>25</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act

<sup>26</sup> UNDP Study byNACO, “Skilling for livelihood.”21.

<sup>27</sup> UNDP Study byNACO, “Skilling for livelihood.”21.

<sup>28</sup> Kyle Knight, “India’s Transgender Rights Law”.

<sup>29</sup> Kyle Knight, “India’s Transgender Rights Law”.

facilitation role the church run institutions can play in delivering available services cannot be overstated. Facilitation means the last mile connectivity linking the people to the right services (provided by government and other players) and ensuring support to acquire the said services.

### **Spirituality, faith, religious affiliation and participation:**

Talking about ‘Religious Life,’ only in terms of inclusion of LGBTQI+ into theological studies, ordained ministry, priestly roles, does not embrace the wide ambit to be explored in terms of human sexuality, faith and participation in religious life.

It is exceptional rather than the rule that the LGBTQI+ community find acceptance in our churches, much less opportunities, to participate in institutionalised/ mainstream worship spaces. From the lived-realities of the LGBTQI+, the lack of acceptance in the mainstream religions is the norm. The deep need felt by the LGBTQI+ for acceptance into the lives, practices and fellowship of worshipping communities have not been met with the same urgency on the part of established religions.

However, the eagerness to ‘include’ in the so-called mainstream religious life, should not fail to recognise the need to identify and respect personal choices of spirituality that LGBTQI+ community may prefer that may not align with any established religion – this has not been explored enough. The ability to embrace the LGBTQI+ choices of indigenous eclectic spiritual practices needs careful study. And such a study should not aim to ‘convert’ them to the so-called mainline Christianity but to understand how the practices of the church could be a more embracing and welcoming for these communities and how our liturgical traditions may be enriched by them.

### **Research and academic advances in human sexuality / gender identities**

The NCCI can rightly be proud of the resources and publications created in the area of human sexuality so far. Publications catering to differing audiences have been produced. What needs more attention however is dedicated research. Research on body, gender fluidity, sexual identities, and human sexuality in general, are not prioritised for

promotion and support by the church. There is a need for concerted efforts to collate existing research. Rigorous studies pursued by some NGOs working in areas of sexual health, sexuality, and among trans people etc., remain the knowledge of only NGO circles and do not reach churches, lay training centres, libraries of theological seminaries, colleges, and universities run by the churches. Scholarships from the churches and related educational boards are needed to support both quantitative and qualitative studies.

A pool of experts and practitioners from the LGBTQI+ community – educationists and academicians/researchers from within the community who can guide research scholars needing guidance on topics related to human sexuality, need to be identified and made available to mainline seminaries, universities and research institutes to encourage more students to opt for such studies under their guidance. NCCI has made a good start in this area by providing scholarships for such research and also initiating a dialogical interface<sup>30</sup> between students pursuing this research and those in the NEFGSD Forum. This exercise revealed the wealth of expertise and knowledge available among those who are part of the Forum in terms of professional research guidance capabilities.

### **Theological articulation and Interfaith perspectives grounded in human sexuality and gender diversities**

One aspect that proved to be of seminal importance in fostering the growth of feminist theological articulation was the emphasis placed on experiences of women in informing the process of theologizing. This meant not just descriptive narratives but reflective and reflexive processing of *kairotic* experiences that become the basis for theologizing.

Similar emphasis for theological articulation based on the *kairotic* experiences in the lives of those who have chosen to be mindful of, and live lives in integrity with their sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual orientations, needs to be taken seriously. As a subset within feminist studies or within whichever discipline the community considers most appropriate, and as a cross-cutting perspective across disciplines, theological articulations based on experiences of human sexuality need to be gain visibility and support.

<sup>30</sup> Held in NCCI Campus, 20-21 July 2019.

I speak of this not only as academic theses that need support, but as a concerted effort to encourage popular writing and reflection in art, poetry and songs. These need to be disseminated and read widely for more people to understand the seminal role that bodies and human sexuality have in the way theology is done and needs to be done for it to be a liberating and transformative theology.

Some reflective pieces on social media are powerfully articulated by those from the community in both English and vernacular; some theological thesis done from the basis of the body and sexuality over the past two decades in various seminaries have not been read by wider public. There is a need to collate these and give it visibility in both formal study and informal reflection. Interfaith perspectives and studies on historical and contemporary narratives that foster a more mature understanding of human sexuality and sexual diversities based on epics, scriptures, oral traditions, and written narratives also need to be further explored.

As a progression of the journey in human sexuality that the NCCI has prophetically undertaken it could provide leadership in creating a space for such a research facility that brings together both academic research on human sexuality and gender diversities as well as popular writing, reflection and articulation in various art forms reflecting on this as well.

### **Good is the flesh that the Word has become ...**

I began by pointing out that NCCI's prophetic public witness in human sexuality began in 2002. We recognise that we have not progressed far from those discussions. The same gaps from 20 years ago should not continue in our journey. Therefore, in conclusion I find it relevant to reiterate what I have repeatedly affirmed in years past, to remind ourselves that human sexuality is not just a fetish borrowed from western influence, as some insist, nor is it a side-show in the main march towards wholesome spirituality and authentic theological articulation. Human sexuality is at the heart of our quest for God and spirituality:

It is forgotten that God in the physical form that God took, was involved in a ministry that included touching,



communing, and fellowshiping with people. We forget that the central theme of Christian theology is an incarnational theology – “a God embodied”. God became known through human presence and that involves bodies, and bodies are not asexual. Our bodies are not mere coverings of our, so-called, “real” personhood, but are integral to our personhood. Our sexuality and our bodies are basic to our knowing, understanding and imaging God ... we also need to affirm that we should listen to the diverse images of God that people imbibe through their unique experiences of body and of god. ... When we affirm that “good is the flesh that the Word has become”, we are also called to affirm that together – male, female, LGBTQI+ – God created us in God’s own image. When we affirm this, we are also admitting that something of God can be known in our human image. Down the ages we have internalized that our bodies (and our sexuality) cannot reveal anything of the spirit. But a holistic spirituality needs to make this bold effort at unlearning this conditioning.<sup>31</sup>

Churches in India will do well to go forward in our journey of human sexuality embracing our learnings from the past years recognising the lacunae, and moving with faith, hope, integrity, and compassion to act upon all that our prophetic witnessing has taught us in this journey. And thus, we will create a just community that embraces and affirms diversity as part of God’s design.




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<sup>31</sup> Jessica Richard, “Re-imaging Sexuality and Divinity through Embodiment”, in *God’s image*, Vol.29, No.1, March 2010, p.31-41 (ISSN 2085-8590).

**NCCI PRESS RELEASES****We shall overcome . . . COVID 19**

Churches – from local congregations/ corps to the Synods/ Councils/ Conferences/ Territories, Christian individuals and institutions, have all responded to the corona crisis. Amidst dealing with their own fears of the situation and also adhering to the advisories of the administration, they have been in the thick of things also caring for the needy and vulnerable in their communities and neighborhood. Most church heads have also advised the faithful on what needs to be done.

Frontline missionary doctors, nurses and allied health care workers, chaplains and counsellors, have all been in the forefront battling the virus. The Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) circulated an early note to help churches address and cope with the situation. The Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) have also moved in, coordinating community level responses through their community based networks across the country.

Faith communities worldwide and in India have been discovering new ways of gathering and worshiping together, even virtually. Many online platforms have been created, existing platforms activated and intensified, to nurture interaction and support amidst communities who now face situations of a lockdown albeit temporary. Faith leaders, pastors and theological educators are addressing issues relating to articulation of faith in these trying times and its implications for interpretation of faith and God.

We do not completely know how the situation will evolve but we do know that we can stop the virus in its course and break it down. We have done it before. Our scientists will help us. India has the opportunity to learn from countries that were in this spot a few weeks ago.

While cooperating with different measures that are put in place to curtail the spread of the virus we are also faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of the people affected by prolonged curfew in different parts of the country. We pray God for wisdom to guide neighborhood ministerial communities -local churches – to cooperate

and strengthen initiatives of all well meaning people and institutions in the neighborhood to help vulnerable people tide over the situation

We appeal to Churches in every neighborhood to assist in some way those who are stranded and those that are homeless, those with disabilities and the elderly, those confined to their homes and limited mobility and those that are socially disadvantaged including the gender and sexual minorities. May our spaces where required and everywhere be sanctuaries and safe spaces for those in need. Where possible let us enhance possibilities for small traders to sell their produce. None should starve. May our people be angels to the unknown.

Pray for our medical missionaries and community workers who are exposed to the virus on account of the nature of their work; call and enquire if they need any support. It will be good to recognise and acknowledge the services of sanitary workers and such others in essential services without whose services we will be worse off. They will value our encouragement and tangible support in their work everyday. It will also be wise to use this time to plan for restoration of persons and communities once we come through this crises.

It is a tough ask, a hard task, yet a call to be Jesus in our times. We thank God for virtual spaces and communication facilities that we can use to extend pastoral counseling and care to all of God's creation.

Let us encourage each other by sharing how we have been involved in helping people/ communities cope with the challenges of the times, as well as how we coped in dealing with our challenges. **Write to [communications@ncci1914.com](mailto:communications@ncci1914.com) OR message on WhatsApp +91 72181 83675. These will be posted in the 'NCCI constituents responding to COVID 19' link on our website.**

Finally, one thing we always know and it comes to us through Jesus our lord; **'for one who believes all things are possible'**. Be assured of the prayers and accompaniment of the leadership and secretaries of the NCCI. We **shall** overcome . .

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**  
*General Secretary, NCCI*

March 24, 2020



## **Appeal to protect life, rights and dignity of persons from North East India living in different parts of the country.**

The National Council of Churches in India takes serious note of the racist comments passed on persons from the North Eastern States of India, and the consequent fear with which the concerned persons are living in their neighbourhood.

Many of them who are stranded because of the 21 day lockdown announced by the government to tackle the Corona pandemic are students, migrant workers, and even those who have come for medical treatment in different parts of the country.

We do note that the actions of a miniscule miscreant group not only causes undue hardship to the persons who are far away from home, but is also a violation of human right and an assault on the persons dignity.

We condemn this violation of rights and dignity of our own citizens and appeal to the governments and statutory bodies in the respective states to advise all concerned to protect the life, rights and dignity of these our fellow citizens (from North East India living in different parts of the country), who are already traumatised by the context of the virus and it's effect on their conditions where they live now and back home, and now by their own fellow citizens.

The National Council of Churches in India is a National platform of 75 National Church networks, Regional councils, National Christian Organisations, and Professional and Specialised agencies.

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**  
*General Secretary*

31st March 2020



## **Living out our Resurrection - in being the in-line Church...**

Jesus' commitment to God's purposes even unto death on the cross could not be held back by the grave. God raised Jesus to life to accompany all who are touched by the resurrection experience.

Touched by the experience of resurrection Mary proclaims that the grave could not contain the life that God gives, Peter and the disciples witness boldly than ever before amidst people of different tongues, and the migrants who already hit the road get back as the message of the Mission

In having died with Jesus and risen to Christ we partake in this resurrection experience. Jesus accompanies us in our mission of living out the proclamation of this resurrection faith that the gates of hell shall never prevail. While thus proclaiming 'O grave where is thy victory and death where is thy sting', we are called to build a world where death will be conquered and life sustained.

The corona virus and the fear of contracting COVID-19 has put many of us in different countries behind closed doors; some had to hit the road to their homes; a few others with nothing to look forward to are seated outside tombs even in which they cannot find the love of their loved ones.

The saviour who comes alive to us in each such lived experience of today unites us as the Easter day passes, to listen to the experiences of resurrection – of those locked in, of those on the road, and the bereaved – to sit with them around the fire of the power of the Holy Spirit to chalk out a new way of living out faith that will conquer life-denying and life-negating contexts.

Traditionally we have gone to Church to experience the presence of Jesus the Christ in our coming together. The COVID-19 context invites us into the empty tombs with the words 'come and see he is not here', indicating that Jesus is ahead of us and already in galilee; and henceforth can be met there . . . an invitation to be in-line with Jesus in Galilee.

May this ‘Sabbath’ forced on humanity, costly to many as it may be, heal us and bring us to join all of creation in witnessing the rising to life of the people of God together with all of creation, in which death will forever be conquered . . .

Let us greet one another with this kiss of Easter Peace – Jesus conquered death; We too can . . . and All will . . .

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**

*General Secretary*

April 11, 2020



**At work with the resurrected Jesus,  
Protect WORK - Protect Life...**

When most establishments including businesses and industrial establishments could resort to possible cost cutting on account of the impact of the lockdown, it is the labourer/ worker/ employee who is most vulnerable and seemingly dispensable.

The Government authorities have taken measures to make sure that this vulnerable section of society is not held ransom for what could play out in the days to come. The Ministry of Labour and Employment GOI has been issuing advisories to this effect from time to time (<https://labour.gov.in/whats-new>)

We request all our constituents, heads of churches, members of the NCCI General Body and Executive committee, partners of the NCCI-Urban Rural Mission (NCCI-URM), the India Peace Centre (IPC), the Indian Disability Ecumenical Accompaniment (NCCI-IDEA), and the National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities (NCCI-NEFGSD) to take cognizance of the matter and advise all their units and institutions to take necessary action to protect the interest of all categories of their employees.

We further request the above mentioned esteemed leaders and partners to advise their members, units and institutions to coordinate with local civil society organisations in ensuring that the work, rights and dignity of migrant workers and daily wage earners in their vicinity is protected. Every life counts. Protect WORK – Protect Life.

The Council is mindful of the noble initiatives of the Churches and the guidance of the leadership of each Church. This commitment to the cause of providing for the needs of the poor in our midst, even amidst the busy season of Lent and the commemoration of God raising Jesus from the dead, is commendable and appreciated.

We will continue to uphold each other and all concerned in prayer as we act decisively on the immediate fallout of the COVID-19 situation. We lift the dedication of the medical workers with thanksgiving and pray for their protection and for their families. We continue to pray for wisdom to all policy and law makers as they guide us through this context.

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**

*General Secretary NCCI*

***Easter Monday 2020***

April 13, 2020



## **Committing to the legacy and vision of Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**

The 14th of April every year marks the beginning of a new year for many cultural, social, and linguistic groups in India. These festivities in no way cloud the remembrance of the birth anniversary of Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is the Pride of India, and a Global Icon for all working on issues and concerns relating to liberty, equality and fraternity. He has made India proud in enshrining these justice values in the constitution of the Indian Union as it's foundational pillars.

As Indians we are ever grateful to the contribution of this legal luminary, the first law minister of Free India, for the leadership he offered in constructing the legal framework for a country as varied and complex. His ardent campaign for universal adult franchise irrespective of educational standard or landholding is what holds India in good stead as the world's renowned and tested democracy.

Babasaheb's endeavour to nurture a country that is casteless has given rise to innumerable social and socio-political movements in the country that keep the balance tilted against casteist hegemony of a few. Ambedkar's analysis proved that various forms of caste destroyed the socio-economic and cultural progress in India.

His legacy as a socio- political reformer has had a deep effect on modern India. His socio-political thought has acquired great respect across the political spectrum. It influenced various spheres of life and transformed the way India looks at socio-economic policies, education etc. Ambedkar thought influenced doing Christian theology in India, challenging at once the edification of the Indian Church as well as the relevance of its public witness.



Churches, Ecumenical councils, Christian organisations and specialised professional agencies related to the National Council of Churches in India, as well as its autonomous bodies and the standing fora, will do well to remember the contributions of Babasaheb and commit to nurture the constitutional and justice ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, in paving the way for a just, egalitarian and casteless India that we can all be proud of.

We bow to the legacy of this great soul that braved many an injustice and challenged unfair display of brute power. We pledge to work for an India that he dreamt in his times and that we will contextualise in ours.

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**

*General Secretary NCCI*

14th April 2020



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## **Bethel Bible College**

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Website: [www.bethelbiblecollege.edu.in](http://www.bethelbiblecollege.edu.in)

Email: [bbcguntur@yahoo.co.in](mailto:bbcguntur@yahoo.co.in)

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**30th April, 2020.**