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## EDITORIAL

### Country first . . .

The month of August every year is reminiscent of the spirit of patriotism that is afire in every citizen. This is on account of the freedom that India attained from a foreign and alien power on the 15th of August 1947. However, by and large, the country is unable to come to terms with handling many aspects of its coming to age, despite the attainment of political freedom and its consolidation over the years.

In the recent past, majoritarian exclusivist and exclusionary nationalistic premises have challenged the secular credentials of the country. This has unfortunately led to replacement of the fervour of inclusive patriotism with militant and triumphal nationalism that excludes peoples and groups.

Cooption of the constitutional bodies to suit majoritarian politics and the threat of subsuming the sanctity of the constitution itself is a warning to be heeded, not just the minorities in the country but for all who vouch for the secular credentials of the country that has made it a strong democratic, secular and socialist republic.

Country first with its unique secular ideology seem to be the rallying factor; not as the 'bhakts' would like to have it for serving political ends and perpetuation of power, but as peoples of all groups and orientations with a common agenda of serving the interests of all citizens, with a preferential option for the socially discriminated and historically disadvantaged among us.

Citizen as identity and citizenship as the outlook and frame of reference will serve well as the common denominator. This will in no way undermine the interests of the weak and vulnerable sections of the country, least its ethnic and religious minorities but will serve as a common affirmative identity of all; opening up possibilities of enriching and appreciating the other while having the space to challenge debilitating principles and practices in each.

Consolidation and upholding democratic principles, procedures and practice is the way. Strengthening local self governance and holding

elected representatives to the State Legislatures and to the National Parliament, as well as the executive and the judiciary, accountable under law are ways in which the civil society and the citizenry can establish India as a strong and evolving mutually accountable democracy.

Baba Saheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's assertion to Educate, Organise and Agitate is a clarion call to the country as a whole. This is important since power is never shared until demanded and neutralised by being distributed in the collective consciousness of the masses.

Jesus Christ himself has demonstrated in the cleansing of the Temple that conscientisation, consolidation and challenge works. The band of believers in Jesus' interpretation of the Law and the Prophets live to this day as shining examples of affirmation of life of and for all.

May all such groups of people who believe in loving others as themselves, from among believers in every faith and ideological persuasion, unite in affirming the values and principles of life affirmation enshrined in our Constitution. This will in all certainty ensure that India will continue to find strength and unity of purpose in her rich and diverse yet uniting heritage. Long live India!

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**

*General Secretary NCCI*



## Indian Democracy and the Crisis in Governance

- Vincent Rajkumar\*

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India established its democratic system after fighting British Imperialism. At a time when India opted for a democratic form of government, capitalism and imperialism dominated the global political order. In a democracy, politics is supposed to represent the voice of the people, wherein politicians are expected to fairly represent the expectations of the voters who vote them to power but this is an idealistic perception. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the concept of democracy has undergone considerable change. It does not consist of people merely exercising their franchise periodically, to decide by whom and how they would be governed. It is rather a holistic concept covering the social, psychological, cultural and attitudinal aspects of people. As a result, the success of democracy depends upon the structural, procedural and attitudinal attributes. More particularly the spirit of democracy is inculcated only through the democratic values and culture of the people at the grass root level.

As democratic Independent India turns 74, it is a kairos moment for us to remember the promises made, and to restore the democratic system to meet the new tasks in the changed situation. When we think of assessing democratic governance of India today, this promise or the mission statement of the people of India made seven decades ago would probably provide us with a standard to measure the quality and condition of democracy in the country. In this vision, the Parliament has a central role in our system of governance. While introducing the draft Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar explained why the drafting committee had preferred a parliamentary form over the presidential system of governance. The reasoning was that while the presidential system provides a higher level of stability, the parliamentary system is better at holding the government accountable on a daily basis through decisions, questions, motions and debates which related to people.

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In India the quality of governance during the first 25 years of Independence does not have much to find fault with. Most of the top political leaders of these years were nurtured by high ideals like service before self during the freedom struggle but things began deteriorating from the early 70s. From this time onwards, politics has been perceived to have become a “profession,” rather than an instrument for the service of the people. In a democracy, politics is supposed to represent the voice of the people, wherein politicians are expected to fairly represent the expectations of the voters who vote them to power but this is an idealistic perception. In reality, politics has become a business, often family business, where a small group of people control the ‘affairs’ of politics in an oligarchy, for selfish gains – monetary or otherwise. What is new in recent decades is an enormous increase in the number of individuals with criminal records directly operating in politics. Today, more than one-third of the current Members of Parliament have criminal charges pending against them. Though they are permitted to serve under the Indian law and face the risk of dismissal if convicted, such undesirable qualifications do not befit a role of national leadership. A fairly common observation is that in the past criminals and musclemen were used by politicians, now the criminals themselves have joined the ranks of politicians. Further, in India, the nature of parliament as a forum for thoughtful debate of issues facing the nation is clearly at risk, reflecting the endemic failure of the election processes, despite India’s claim to the title of “world’s largest democracy”.

The current state of affairs in the country is an example of how the Constitution is slowly and steadily being made to wither away. For the smooth functioning of democratic institutions in the country, the Indian Constitution has prescribed certain core values and represents its spirit by appointing independent Constitutional bodies. These bodies are of national importance and help in the effective functioning of the government. These bodies are responsible for the administration of specific functions. These constitutional or independent bodies have extensive administrative functions and the state secures their legitimacy and carries out its tasks of governance and development

through a diverse range of such institutions. The independent ways these institutions function endows them with certain nobility in manner of functioning and thus play a critical role in the democratic polity of India. Over the years these institutions meant to provide adequate checks and balances have been hollowed out under the present government. These institutions which are protected by the constitutional provisions from political interference have been manipulated in such a way as to align them with the political designs of the government of the day. In the process today, what we experience is a slow dismantling of such institutions. For example the functioning of the investigating agencies, which have become governmental tools, the central bank agencies which function as per the direction of the government's slender policies and the biased judicial pronouncements raising queries in the minds of the people are the few of the unprecedented events which reveal the fate of Indian democracy today. Once the sacred independent power moves away from these institutions there is little possibility of proper governance.

For ages, India has been proud of its secular credentials, and its status as the largest democracy and a pluralistic society with a longstanding commitment to tolerance and inclusion. But today many Indians feel that the overwhelming second mandate won by Modi's nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in the general elections has damaged the state of Indian secularism and emboldened those carrying out hate crimes against minority religions. The lie and hate campaign of Sangh Parivar against religious minority along with Hindutva ideological promotion is being carried out at an unimaginable speed, all over the country. The Hindu nation is the agenda of Hindutva forces. These groups have grown and evolved over the past decade, increasingly making their presence felt across Indian society. With government backing, organizations and individuals who previously were peripheral and considered outlandish, have now got a seat at the table: whether deciding educational policy and running universities, or through appointments to cultural institutions, economic bodies, and even the judiciary. Once Hindutva succeeds in implementing their version of India, the secularism and democracy, of which every citizens of India

enjoys justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, will be taken away. Moreover, the scale of crisis that the people of India are facing today and the government's response, and the very public nature of each of these issues on every conceivable metric, has failed and every single citizen has to pay a heavy price for the Modi brand of misgovernance. For instance the crackdown in Kashmir, the explicit discrimination against Muslims in the new Citizenship Amendment Act, the proposed National Register of Citizens in a country with notoriously bad documentation and the apparent intention to deport Muslims who cannot prove their right to stay, all reveal that though the Constitutional Secularism still remains unaltered, its soul is mangled and choked.

There is much that lies badly broken in India today. The country's institutions urgently demand to be rebuilt — the constitutional institutions, universities, the planning process, the Election Commission of India. But above all, if there is one thing that stands most dangerously damaged, it is our constitutional pledge of a secular democracy. In this context of the political assaults on the Constitution, the decline of political morality and the failures in the governance, the faith communities and civil society movements are called to engage in enabling the people to firmly grasp the true implication of the issues faced by them and work towards a new social and political order through which the people at large can again experience fuller democracy which guarantees an independent social and political governance.





## Nuclear Disarmament and Peace

- Kasta Dip\*

This year marks 75 years since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the worst ever war induced human tragedy and genocide. While it takes us back to a history of painful memories, we are also reminded of the fact that nations are competing in a race of nuclear armaments in the guise of modernisation of defence and security. We haven't seen any open, full-fledged wars after the Second World War not because we are all living peacefully, with no tensions among countries, but because most developed and developing countries now have nuclear weapons. The world has already seen the catastrophic effect of nuclear bombs had on Japan and with the passage of time we have developed even more powerful and deadlier nuclear weapons which can be fired from land, air or sea. We curse the Little Boy and the Fat Man for the unspeakable destructions they caused 75 years ago but today there reportedly 14,500 of them in the world<sup>1</sup>. Predictions are there that the next nuclear explosion can wipe out life on earth completely.

In a video message, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called on all nations to renew efforts to abolish such weapons. "Division, distrust and a lack of dialogue threaten to return the world to unrestrained strategic nuclear competition," he said; "The only way to totally eliminate nuclear risk is to totally eliminate nuclear weapons."

Speaking on the occasion, Hiroshima mayor Kazumi Matsui warned against the nationalism that led to World War II and urged the world to come together to face global threats, like the coronavirus pandemic. "We must never allow this painful past to repeat itself. Civil society must reject self-centred nationalism and unite against all threats," he said. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has been criticised by some for his attempts to revise a key pacifist clause of the country's

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\*Rev. Kasta Dip comes from the Church of North India. Presently he serves as the Director of India Peace Centre, Nagpur.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/>

constitution, pledged in his address to "do my best for the realisation of a world without nuclear weapons and peace for all time".

Nuclear weapons are uniquely evil instruments of mass destruction, with the potential to exterminate all life from this planet. They are incomparably more destructive than any other weapons. Their use or threat of use violates all criteria of *jus in bello* (justice in the conduct of war) because they kill massively, indiscriminately, without distinguishing between combatants and civilians, and in barbaric ways. They are simply incompatible with the notion of proportionate and legitimate use of force<sup>2</sup>.

Thinkers and experts have been discussing that the two major threats in front of us are Climate Change and Nuclear Weapons. They have been urging for complete disarmament. When a nuclear bomb will explode the surface will become hotter than the sun and apart from the mass destruction and deaths, the generations of people and animals who survive will perish for many decades. A total of approximately 2,000 U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads are kept on high alert, quick-launch status. They are mounted on long-range land and sea-based ballistic missiles and kept ready to launch with only few minutes of warning. They can reach their targets anywhere on Earth in 30 minutes or less<sup>3</sup>. Any misunderstanding or miscommunication could lead to a disaster and with the impulsive leadership we are seeing around the world, possibilities are higher than ever. World leaders are failing to maintain peace and apart from country heads, several terrorist organizations are also trying very hard to obtain nuclear weapons. Now if by any chance they get nuclear arms there, we cannot even imagine the destruction that could be caused. Not every country has very high security for their nuclear arms, therefore apart from going into the wrong hands, the system that controls them can also be hacked.

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<sup>2</sup> Praful Bidwai, Founder of CNDP, For a Citizen's Movement: Focus-on-Security, Vol. 1, No. 10, 27 June 1998

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nucleardarkness.org/globalnucleararsenal/statusofworldnuclearforces/>

Different political school of thoughts and ideologies have hindered the process of denuclearisation which is due to pseudo nationalism or patriotism. Therefore, education is a critically important element of sustainable peace. Disarmament and non-proliferation education must focus on reducing, controlling, and eliminating weapons of all kinds in order to undermine militarism and prevent armed conflict and armed violence.

The UN has established several multilateral treaties<sup>4</sup> with the aim of preventing nuclear proliferation and testing, while promoting progress in nuclear disarmament. These include the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests In The Atmosphere, In Outer Space And Under Water, also known as the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was signed in 1996 but has yet to enter into force, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), opened for signature in 2017 but has yet to enter into force.

The time has come for India to sign unilaterally and voluntarily the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). India has a lot to gain and nothing to lose by coming on-board the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as Lassina Zerbo, Executive Secretary of the Preparatory Commission for the CTBT Organisation, an observer says. Talking to a group of visiting Indian journalists in May 2019, Zerbo, who is from Burkina Faso, said a “small step by a big country like India would be a big step for the international community”. Yes, for world peace, big countries can offer a lot and lead the way.

Civil society has played a very significant part in bringing disarmament objectives to governmental and public attention on issues ranging from banning cluster munitions and anti-personnel landmines to implementing the nuclear Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT) prohibiting nuclear testing. We obviously cannot depend upon political leadership, which is only capable in our frenetic world of

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/>

dealing with problems as they become acute. There is a furious pace to politics that dulls the political imagination and often results in less than visionary leadership. Our commitment to realise a world without nuclear arms demands an effective campaign led by civil society that awakens and empowers the people of the planet to put sufficient pressure on their political leaders to take action as a political expedient, without needing to engage their moral imaginations.

According to David Krieger, founder and president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, “the only way to assure the security of the nuclear weapons states, or any state, from a nuclear attack, is to eliminate these weapons in a phased, orderly and verified manner and place the materials to make these weapons under strict and effective international control. This is the reality of our common nuclear dilemma and getting this message through to the leaders of nuclear weapons states is one of the most critical challenges, if not the most critical challenge, of our time.” Only with the success of civil society in meeting this challenge can we have a reasonable expectation, in General Butler’s words, to “reassert the primacy of individual conscience, the voice of reason and the rightful interests of humanity.” As members of civil society let’s take a pledge to work for nuclear disarmament and thereby work for peace.



## Palestine Calls Again

- E. Immanuel Nehemiah\*

Israel's despotic rage in the Palestinian region not only ridicules the very notion of humanity, but it also rejects the acclaimed civilized context of the world today. We all know that borders are sites of dispute and tension in any given context. However, in the context of Palestine, the present borders have vehemently forged identities and forcefully continued to displace the people of the land. 28th June, marked the 53rd anniversary of Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. Najla M. Shahwan, in the Daily Sabah (Turkish daily) on 3rd July 2020, explains this grave history in irony, he states; "Ironically this anniversary coincides with Israel's plan to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank and Jordan Valley."

Palestinians have suffered under a historical blunder propagated and popularised by the Zionist politics and their violent allies. Mitri Raheb describes this carnage reality as "mythistory"<sup>1</sup>. There has been no sense of public civility or political rationality by the Israeli government and its barbaric allies. Since 1948, the Palestinian public has been experiencing harassment, exploitation, mass killing, displacement, sporadic military violence, discriminatory legal rules and unprecedented annexation of land, policies and resources. To these harsh realities, the "powerful" international communities have been complacent, while various affected masses from the diverse sites of exploitation have rendered empathetic solidarity to the people of the Palestinian region.

Palestinian region as a whole is a fading identity in the populist international arena. Irrespective of systematically functioning critical and political solidarity groups who engage with the struggles of the Palestinian people, the current state of affairs in the Israeli occupied Palestine seem to connote an estranged sense of existence in the world

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\*Rev. E. Immanuel Nehemiah serves the Karnataka Central Diocese of the Church of South India, Bengaluru.

<sup>1</sup> Ed, Mitir Raheb, The Invention of History. Diyar publisher, 2011. Pg. 13.

today. This is nothing but a thief taking control of the household while the owners are resisting spect-actors<sup>2</sup> with the international community trying to rave and rant around the bloody scene, some opposing the Israel army and some siding the terror.

On July 1st, Israel announced their annexation plans in de facto. Threatening ambiguities caused by the pandemic COVID-19 doesn't seem to interest Benjamin Netanyahu. As the prime minister of the country, Netanyahu focuses on extending his national sovereignty through his expansionist agendas. These policies are further vouched by Trump who himself is known to take questionable decisions as the American President. US support to the Israeli camp comes with a sense of violent impunity. Today we are at a juncture to defy the existing sovereignty of the Israeli state, to break the cycle of annexation and finally carve out a politically ingrained theology of solidarity to dismantle the powers that contradict notions of justice in the Palestinian region.

### **Defying the Sovereignty of the despotic Israel**

Vehement militarism, complete adherence to the State and related mechanisms, misinterpretations of history, authoritative governing methods and complete negation of democratic and progressive values are the orders of the day in Palestine. These grave realities constitute the sovereignty of the Israeli state. Micheal Hardt and Antonio Negri, in explaining the sovereignty and the Nation-state refer to Jean Bodin's work on the concept of national sovereignty. Bodin claims; *'the origin of political power and the definition of sovereignty consist in the victory of the one side over the other, a victory that makes the one sovereign and the other the subject. Force and violence create the sovereign'*<sup>3</sup>. Israeli occupations have been rooted in the above descriptions of Nation-state and National sovereignty.

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<sup>2</sup> Spec-actors, the term was created by Augusto Boal, to describe those engaged in the forum theater. It refers to the dual role of those involved in the process as both spectator and actor. In doing so Boal, democratized the very nature of theater. Here the spectator moves beyond the notion of viewing, the participant engages in action. This notion can also be assumed as the POLITICAL of the Revolutionized theater format by Boal.

<sup>3</sup> Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, HUP, 2000. Pg. 98.

Ambedkar, in his address at Sholapur during the Matang conference on 4 January 1938, expressed his views on the then working of the parliamentary democracy in India, by opining;

...but it is a democracy which has ceased to exercise its intelligence. It has bound itself hand and foot to one organization and only one. It is not prepared to sit in judgement over the doings or thinking of this organization. I consider it the greatest malaise, disease and sickness. It has affected all our people. They are intoxicated<sup>4</sup>.

The spoken context might be different but the crux of the matter which Ambedkar addresses is emphatically similar to the experiences of the Palestinians in their own land. For decades now Palestinians have suffered brutally under the militant Israel state. Palestinians have almost becoming nonentities in their own land.

To derive history from the mythistory propagated by Earl Shaftesbury, in the mid of the 19th century and the later English empire's political expansionist project that plotted against the people of the land are the primary seeds of destruction that the Jews of the 19th century capitalized upon building a violent nation in a country which was assumed to be, a country without a nation; a nation without a country<sup>5</sup>. Israel today is forcing down for an annexation in conjunction with the capitalist and racial supremacist Trump administration's so-called "peace plan". The taken for granted "peace plan" is becoming the platform for Israel to justify its appropriations in the Palestinian land. Netanyahu intends to annex up to 30 percentage of the West Bank. It is not the COVID-19 that asphyxiates lives in West Bank and other related places, but the very intention of the decades long annexation plan that is the asphyxiating agency in the Palestinian region today.

The primary praxiological question that all of us have to ask as the citizens of this planet earth is; what do we do now with the sovereignty of the Israeli state? On the other hand, we should also ask an epistemological question, which is; do we know the sovereignty with which the Israeli state functions in the Palestinian region today? The

<sup>4</sup> Jaffrelot & kumar, Dr. Ambedkar and Democracy, OUP, 2018. Pg.66.

<sup>5</sup> Ed, Raheb, *ibid*, pg. 11-13.

general capacity of Christian thinking today is influenced by the self-drunk TV evangelists, who predominantly propagate Zionist theology and politics. There are also some clergymen/women, who have consciously kept themselves away from educating the congregation with difficult questions about the Bible, Faith and the Witness of the Gospel, thereby differently valuing the myth of Zionism.

Zionists believe that “Eretz Yisrael” the land of Israel, was promised to the ancient Israelites by God. Zionist Christians in totality advocate the Jewish Zionism in achieving the goal. The Christian Zionists provide a worldview where the gospel is identified with a certain ideology of empire and colonialism backed by heavy militarism. The general Christian population are led into this idea of Zionism with an overdose of “second coming” and heaven and hell spirituality. All of us are taught to adore and wilfully accept the sovereignty of God in this regard and “his” chosen few (many are called but few are chosen, Mat 22:14). The populist Christianity imagines God as a sovereign king, sitting on a throne and enjoying the songs of praises by the angels and the earnestly worshipping church congregations. The plight of the suffering masses has no prominence here. The violence furthers as the members interpret the signs of our times as the will of God, and all these happen to justify the coming of the sovereign king. In the coming of the King, the Zion has to be inhabited by the “chosen Jews and their allies” These blasphemous imaginations threaten the presence of the justice of God we see in the Bible. To defy the Israeli sovereignty is to defy anything that legitimizes its expansionist ideas and theories, be it even our understanding of God. The pain and pathos through which the Palestinians have suffered so far reverberate the community’s will to overthrow the Israeli pharaohs of the time. Do we join them in their defiance or do we join the violently singing masses with no sense of humanity, is the question of faith with political consequences that we have to ask ourselves today. What matters the most; is it the expansionist sovereignty of the Israeli state or the sovereignty of Palestinian people?

### **Breaking the wheel that rides it, unravelling the coloniser.**

Annexations happen in the Israeli occupied Palestinian region with impunity. Wesam Ahmad, a Palestinian human rights’ advocate in his article to Aljazeera (13th July 2020) claims that much of;



...the narrative in international diplomatic circles around the issue of annexation has revolved around deterrence, with the rationale being the threat of tangible consequences to annexation will lead to a reconsideration of the move. Yet, this narrative fails to acknowledge that we have reached a point, where Israel will annex yet another chunk of Palestinian territory precisely because the deterrence has not worked. The threat of the consequences has merely forced the successive Israeli governments to innovate. In fact, Israel has enjoyed wide-ranging impunity throughout the various stages of colonisation of Palestine as the international community has treated it as if it were a law-abiding sovereign state and not a colonising power. Israel's participation in the European Union's horizon 2020 programme is just an example of this.

Wesam Ahmad's claims record two disturbing factors. Firstly, Israeli governance has manipulated international diplomacy and has justified the violence caused in the Palestinian region. Secondly, Wesam Ahmad understands Israeli sovereign state as a colonising state. In our mundane thought process colonialism is in the historical past. However, Hardt and Negri notice something strange in the present, they see the Empire materializing before us<sup>6</sup>. Wesam Ahmad furthers his claim of the Israeli state as a colonising agency and understands the Israeli colonising as;

by incorporating globalisation and the free market economy into its colonial enterprise, Israel has created an economic incentive structure which continues to perpetuate the conflict in order to grow profit. By coupling state policy with private investment, Israel has invited both state and multinational corporate actors to benefit from its colonial enterprise. For example, Germany's Heidelberg Cement, one of the world's largest building materials' companies, has been accused of profiting from the extraction of resources from Palestinian land illegally confiscated by Israel in the West Bank and the sale of construction materials to illegal Israeli settlements.

<sup>6</sup> Hardt & Negri, *ibid*, Pg. Xi.

What we have here is the nexus of multinational corporations, international complacency and relics of colonisation. A periodical annexation that happens in Palestine is a direct reflection of the intended colonial power, sustained by empires that contribute to colonization in an era that claims, “Post-colonialism”. Israel has projected itself as the most progressive and all-inclusive state in representing itself in the global arena. There is a saying that the cat closes its eyes while drinking milk and thinks nobody is watching it. I can only imagine the naivety of the Israeli state that claims to be tolerant in its projections.

Hardt and Negri, while imagining **imperial sovereignty**, their understanding of the Empire apparatus is that the general apparatus of the imperial command actually consists of three distinct moments: one inclusive, another differential, and a third managerial. *The first moment is the magnanimous, liberal face of Empire*<sup>7</sup>. Divide and control is, therefore, an assumed archaic strategy. Israel’s international projection may be tolerant; however, it uses the logic of inclusivity, variety and management to establish its colonial sovereignty by congesting the living places of the Palestinians. Annexation contributes to this aspect of Israel colonial expansionism. In the course of protesting against the Israeli domination, one has grappled with the interfaces and multifaceted capacities of the Empires that pretend to be humane.

### **We have to descend to stage dissent**

Theology is usually assumed as a lofty collection of words, expressions and reflections about God, life, and related doctrines. It is taboo to even think of theology as prayer. Can prayer be contemplative? Can prayer be seeking, searching and interrogating? Can prayer cause serious political actions? Thomas Merton, one of the most influential writers, poet and activist from the previous century, while engaging with prayer and contemplation concludes contemplative prayer as; the monk faces the worst and discovers in it the hope of the best. From the darkness comes the light, from death,

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<sup>7</sup> Hardt & Negri, Ibid, pg.198-201.

life, from the abyss there, comes unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the spirit sent by the God to make all things new, to transform the created and redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in Christ<sup>8</sup>.

Paul while writing to the Ephesians understands the work of Christ in descending and grappling with the forces of death (Eph 4:9.). Prayer imagined by Merton and the Christological confession and affirmation of Paul, collide with each other framing a vast horizon of thinking.

Merton, accords; darkness and light, death and life in an animated ontological framework. From the darkness and death, light and life are imagined. Darkness, light, death and life are fused entities within the framework of realisation and contemplation. Likewise, Paul imagines ascending and descending of Christ in grappling with the forces of evil, death and oppression. Theology of dissent in the context of the Israeli occupation is to be imagined as the act of descending to ground realities where the death traps are laid down in the living premises of the Palestinian region.

The violent irony of Israeli extravagance is in its projections and acceptability of such projections as authentic by the bystanders. For example, the Holy Tour to Israel. Death pangs have glittered with gold and silver in the Palestinian region. Any engagement in the process of dissent in the context of Israeli occupation should engage with theologies that practice contemplative prayer as a tool to discern and interrogate the possible inversions of the Empire.

The theopolitical subversive nature of Merton's contemplative prayer is conceived in the idea of redemption. One of the most important theological imaginations in India is Dalit theology. Dalit theology is a counter theology<sup>9</sup>. A. P. Nirmal grounds theological emancipation with notions of activism and movement, he furthers the argument as; our pathos should give birth to our protest- very loud protest<sup>10</sup>. The pathos of the Palestinians is personal to them, as much as the pathos on caste grounds is personal to the Dalits. I. J. Mohan Razu opines that the Palestinian and Dalit struggles are distinct, and yet posit

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, D.L.T 1973. Pg. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ed, A. P. Nirmal, *A Reader In Dalit Theology*. Gurukul, Chennai 2007, Pg. 143.

<sup>10</sup> A. P. Nirmal, *Ibid*, Pg. 61-62.

commonalities<sup>11</sup>. Razu furthers the plight to justice on the bases of pathos and as a quest for human dignity and self-determination<sup>12</sup>. To bring emphasis on the emphatic nature of descending and dissenting theologies is necessary. Jon Sobrino, while labouring on the meaning of prayer by Jesus, concludes prayer as; *Christian prayer is not addressed to just any deity; it is addressed to the father of Jesus. A correct relationship with the latter is possible only if we participate in his very reality. We must be love as God is, and do works of love as God does*<sup>13</sup>. Theology weaved with such intricate dimensions of prayers with the immense weight of the praxis as a thread in the fabric of theology could inherently be spiritual and political, a much-needed discourse in the context of exploitations and vulnerabilities.

## Conclusion

While the world still grapples with the COVID-19 Pandemic, there are empires ambushing to plunder the vulnerable sections of the world. Israel definitely is one such predatory state waiting to completely devour the Palestinian region, resources and people. If we don't dare to think and act against the Zionist claims, imperial sovereignty of the Israeli state and politically engage in prayers, we would end up as mere spectators rather than being the Spect-actors at the face of violence and terror.



<sup>11</sup> Ed, Eapen & Larbeer, KAIROS-PALESTINE: An Indian Reflection, BTESSC, 2012. Pg. 106-109.

<sup>12</sup> Eapen & Larbeer, Ibid, Pg. 106.

<sup>13</sup> Jon Sobrino, Christology at the Crossroads, Orbis Press, 1976. Pg. 176.

## **Tribal Traditional Livelihood in Assam**

- Sikha Dutta\*

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of the research paper is to understand the nature and complexities of traditional livelihood practices among tribal communities in Assam. We know that changes are a universal phenomenon. Thus changes are inevitable in the realm of traditional livelihood practices also. However, tradition is currently at risk of extinction due to the challenges that are the concern for tribal communities. It is necessary to sustain their tradition through diversification strategies within their traditional livelihood. For that tribal people need to give more emphasis on commercialization and opportunity for investment. But at the same time, people ought to be aware of preserving and presenting the originality of culture along with evolution. If traditional livelihood practices are given a new shape with dignity, awareness, and effort, it would revive the pride of tribal communities.

Thengal Kachari and Sonowal Kachari tribal communities in Assam are here selected for a comparative study of the above aspects of traditional livelihood as although both the tribal communities originate from the same Kachari group and ethno-cultural domain, yet their Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, socio-economic, demographic and geographical conditions are different. To understand their respective speciality as well as a peculiarity in growth and development through traditional livelihood both the tribal communities have been selected for the purpose of this study. From field investigation, it is found that both the Thengal Kachari and Sonowal Kachari communities are mainly dependent on wet rice cultivation which is the major source of their traditional livelihood. They also produce crops like betel nuts, betel leaves, coconut, vegetables, mustard seeds, spices like black pepper, turmeric, chilies, ginger, garlic, etc. in their homestead gardens. They are involved in livestock rearing, fishing, weaving, making handicrafts and bamboo products, etc. Sericulture is considered as one of the significant economic activities among farmers; which consists of rearing of cocoons or silk moth *Eri*, *Muga*,

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and *Pat*. The *Sasi* tree (Agarwood) plantation is very old in Assam although in earlier times the profitability potential of this tree had not been discovered. At present, this tree is emerging as a cash crop in a suitable geographical region of the Thengal Kachari community in Jorhat district of Assam. The climate and soil condition favour small-scale tea cultivation in the selected villages. The Sonowal Kachari community people in Dibrugarh district are more involved in small scale tea cultivation compared to the Thengal Kachari community people due to the nearby large tea garden.

The traditional livelihood challenges are rises after the 1990s, due to the opening up of new economy and privatisations have increased accessibility of tribal people to modern techniques, markets, and standard of living. With the increase in the population and change in the want of people, there is a high demand for cash; hence a greater number of indigenous people have moved away from subsistence production to surplus production through commercial activities. Some others uprooted their traditional crop (like rice, bamboo, orange) to cultivate commercial crops like small scale tea cultivation and *Sasi* tree (Agarwood) plantation. The traditional cow rearing activities are minimized in villages due to the shortage of land as well as time. Most of the tribal farmers' lands are being lost due to different state interventions like road, industry establishment, etc. Thus, they have been exposed to new economic parameters that largely deviate from the traditional practices and increasingly face the challenge of i) to retaining their traditional livelihood, ii) adapting to the changing and diversifying livelihood, and iii) sustaining their traditional livelihood.

## Methodology

A mixed-method approach with an exploratory research design has been adopted in this research. First, Jorhat and Dibrugarh district have been selected, the two districts are considered as good representation to Thengal Kachari and Sonowal Kachari tribal communities to fulfill the purpose of the study. After that, one block per district (Titabar in Jorhat and Barbaruah in Dibrugarh district) and four villages have been purposively selected from each block. Finally, 30 percent of the households have been selected from each village. This way a sample comprising 335 households from eight villages has been selected for detailed study.

The primary data were collected from January to June and October to December 2018. Household survey schedule, in-depth interviews, and focused group discussions were conducted to collect the data. The study is comprised of five traditional livelihood studies. They are designated according to the five identified traditional livelihood practices – i.) Rice cultivation ii). Homestead garden crops and livestock rearing, iii). Sericulture, iv). *Sasi* tree plantation and v). Small tea cultivation.

## Results and Discussions

### *i). Rice cultivation*

From the field survey, it is found that for both the Thengal Kachari and Sonowal Kachari tribal communities' rice cultivation is their traditional as well as a primary livelihood activity. They use their traditional indigenous knowledge (seed selection, sowing, harvesting) for rice cultivation. Among the four rice varieties (*Sali*, *Ahu*, *Boro*, *Bao*), *Sali* rice is most extensively cultivated in the selected villages. The attitude of tribal people towards utilisation of rice land has also changed in recent times. During the field survey to Titabar Kachari village, Thengal Kachari community of Jorhat district, Dhirendra Saikia (age 77), a retired teacher with experience of more than 40 years in the cultivation of rice, informed that earlier rice cultivation was the pride of the farmers. But unfortunately, the youth of the village is no more interested in this cultivation and are selling their rice cultivation land<sup>1</sup>. It is found that the use of improved implements in agriculture is quite negligible in the sample villages. Out of a total of 335 households, only 38 households used mechanical implements, i.e. 'power tiller' in the farm operation. Bullocks are the source of power for farm operation for the rest of the cultivators. It was observed during field investigation in the sample villages that modern irrigation is nil in all 335 farms and whole farm operation is dependent on rainwater. Two types of agricultural labourers are found in the sample farms, viz., (i)

<sup>1</sup> Field Survey dated 20/10/2018

family labour, and (ii) hired labour. The whole farming operation in Sonowal Kachari sample villages is characterised by a large involvement of family labour. On the other hand, in the Thengal Kachari community study area villages, maximum households prefer family labour than hired labour. Farmers usually hire casual labour during planting and harvesting season.

High risk of flood, low and static yield characterize the rice production system in Assam. Heavy rains from May to August cause floods and adversely affect the rice cultivation, thus impacting farm income and household food security (Bhowmick, et.al. 2001<sup>2</sup> Barauh, 2008<sup>3</sup>). In the Sonowal Kachari community, Paruliguri village is located near the Brahmaputra River where flood is a major problem. Most of the farmers in the village cultivate other people's lands that are flood-free. They do this as sharecroppers. Most of the cultivators are not cultivators but agricultural labourers. Hence, the risk of floods is one of the major causes of their shrinking livelihood and rising indebtedness in this village. Another major problem is that this village comes under forest land law. Due to this, they are not able to sell or mortgage their land. The data found that a larger percentage of farmers (about 59 percent) in villages identified flood problem as their main challenge which they face in their farming activities. This was followed by adverse wild animal attacks, which about 18 percent of respondents identified as their main challenge. Only small percentages of farmers cited non-use of improved seeds (1.8 percent), non-use of fertilizer in farmland (2.7 percent), and low education and skill level (7.2 percent) as the main challenge in their farming activities although other farmers chose a combination of various challenges cited. Lack of proper communication and transport system was reported as constraints by 38 percent of respondents. The analysis reveals that 31

<sup>2</sup> Bhowmick, B.C; Betne, R; Barah, B.C. (2001). Status of Rice Production System in Assam: A research perspective. *Prioritization of strategies for agriculture development in north-eastern India*: October, 50-68.

<sup>3</sup> Barauh, K.K..(2008). Environmental Challenges and Future Strategies. India's North East- New Vistas of Peace, (Eds), Institute of defense Studies and Analysis, New Vistas of Peace, (Eds), Institute of defense Studies and Analysis, New Delhi, Manas Publications.



percent of the respondents reported limited agriculture income as their priority for engaging in livelihood diversification, 20 percent considered available of non-farm opportunities as their second or most important reason, 15 percent reported living well as their third reason. The finding shows that the main reason why rural people engaged in livelihood diversified activities was to raise the household's income portfolio.

## ***ii). Homestead garden crops and livestock rearing***

The second traditional livelihood practice is homestead garden crops and livestock rearing. Results indicate a continuous decline in traditional crop and livestock farming. The production from the homestead garden has not been able to reach its potential due to a low level of awareness and lack of scientific garden management. Factors such as improper spacing, manuring, irrigation, lack of replacement of old plants with new ones, and inadequate plant protection have been the main reasons for low productivity in homestead gardens. These homestead gardens are often hampered by the fragmentation of Homestead. Presently, many traditional homestead gardens show a shift from subsistence-oriented agriculture to a market economy (Peyre et al. 2006,<sup>4</sup>). An abrupt shift of choice from traditional homestead garden plants to cash crops is also noticed in the present study villages and is evident by the high frequency and density of cash crops like tea and *Sasi* tree (Agarwood). Owners' choice for increased earning rather than the supply of seasonal crops or fruit plants may be the main reason for such change in the selected villages. The high frequency and density of agarwood and tea indicate a shift of choice towards cash crops and, thereby, homestead gardens may be considered as a vital source of income in the coming days.

Animal husbandry does not demand complex skills and is well suited to the lowland farmer. Pig rearing is prevalent among the tribal farmers with small land size, resulting in low returns from the activity. The farmers have a choice of marketing their product and this alternating between the direct sale to the consumer through farmer's markets and sale through traders and commission agents, depending on the

<sup>4</sup> Peyre A, Guidal A, Wiersum K F, Bongers F (2006). Dynamics of Home garden structure and function in Kerala, India. *Agroforestry Systems*, 66: 101–115

quantity of produce and the distance to the market. One-woman respondent (age 44) from the Sonowal Kachari community, Paruliguri village in Dibrugarh district says that they are “facing problems in livestock rearing. The veterinary hospital is in town and it is very far from here, so cow, pigs die without medicine or proper treatment.” One male respondent (age 35) from the same village says that ‘during the flood, livestock rearing is a most difficult problem. We take all our domestic animals to the embankment, but it is very far from the mainland’. Most of the animals are dying because of this flood and without proper domestication, shortage of food.<sup>5</sup> In Jorhat District Madhapur, Thengal Kachari Village head (age 75) says that ‘In earlier days, fowl and pig rearing were also prevalent among them as with the other tribal communities of Assam. However, as an impact of Vaishnavism, they had abandoned not only pig rearing but also the consumption of its flesh’. However, lately a few unemployed youths of some villages have initiated pig farming for business purposes. However, the pork market is not organized on an extensive and hygienic basis.<sup>6</sup>

### iii). Sericulture

The third identified means of livelihood is Sericulture, which is a traditional activity at a household level among the women of both communities but it remains under-utilized at a commercial level. They are confined to producing cocoons, which they sell to traders who pay one-third of the price of silk yarn. They now sell their sericulture products through different Self-Help Groups. *Eri* production is not growing at a faster rate due to the lack of capital among the *eri* readers as found from interaction with people. The interesting fact is that they have also *Muga* rearing host plants (*Som* tree) in their baris (homestead garden) but at present, they are not rearing *Muga*. However, they are reeling and weaving *Muga* yarn. Respondents collect or buy *Muga* cocoons from various government and other agencies. In Jorhat district, among the Thengal Kachari community villages *Muga* production is decreasing compared to other varieties of silk. In Dibrugarh district, Sonowal Kachari community only a few families are cultivating the traditional *Muga* worms which have been dying prematurely for years due to air pollution. The affected farmers blame

<sup>5</sup> Field Survey dated 23/10/2018

<sup>6</sup> Field Survey dated 25/10/2018

the use of pesticides in neighboring large tea gardens and the Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited (BCPL) industry. According to a member of the Thengal Kachari community, who happens to be the Hologuri village head (age 45), the *Muga* silk rearing culture is dying but at the same time *Eri* silkworm rearing is increasing due to the indoor rearing of *Eri* silkworms which require less care as compared to *Muga* silkworms. He also says that village people are protectors of age-old practices and they are also responsible for keeping the local indigenous tradition of silkworm rearing alive.<sup>7</sup> Lepetkota Kachari village is located in the tea garden areas of Dibrugarh district. One Lepetkata Kachari village (Sonowal Kachari community) respondent (Age 45) says that, in the present time, most of the Sonowal Kachari people are engaged in tea cultivation. He said that 'tea gives more profit compared to sericulture'. Thus, most of the village people have uprooted *Muga* and *Eri* host trees from *Bari* land (kitchen garden) in order to make way for the plantation of tea, because tea gardening is a more profitable business option for them.<sup>8</sup> From the study, it is also revealed that there is a suitable scope for product diversification and by-product utilisation in silkworms. *Eri* silk has diversified fabric products, dyed fabrics as well as blended fabrics. Besides, there is immense scope for food diversification. The litter of silkworms can be used as manure.

#### ***iv). Sasi tree (Agarwood) plantation***

The fourth traditional form of livelihood is centred on the *Sasi* tree (Agarwood) plantation. Agarwood or *Sasi* tree in Assam has great historical significance. The bark was once used for preparing a writing material called '*Sanchi Pat*' for writing history, mythology, folk songs, texts on medicine and holy scripture. Most of the early literature on *Vaishnavism* was written by Sankardeva on '*Sanchi pat*' during the 15th century. These scripts are still been preserved in many 'satras' and museums in Assam (Nath & Saikia 2002<sup>9</sup>). The *Sasi* tree is found in households of both the communities but there is problem of fungus infection of the trees among Thengal Kachari community villages. In Thengal Kachari community, Titabar *Jalukonibari* village (Jorhat

<sup>7</sup> Field Survey dated 25/3/2018

<sup>8</sup> Field Survey dated 16/3/2018

<sup>9</sup> Nath, S. C. and Saikia, N. (2002). Indigenous knowledge on utility and utilitarian aspects of *Aquilaria malaccensis* Lamk. In Northeast India. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, 1(1):47-58

district) has been selected for the study of Sasi tree plantation as a traditional livelihood source. It is interesting to note that almost every household had a minimum of ten Agarwood trees in their homestead garden, indicating that the villagers had easy access to seedlings and a good knowledge of silviculture and the uses of this species. In most of the households, they plant this tree with a view to selling. Among the villagers, only males engage in Sasi tree harvesting. According to one village respondent (age 56), the village people got a minimum of 3000 to a maximum of 60,000 from one Sasi tree. Whenever small holes are visible in every part of the trees they call the agents, who collect the trees. During the first 5-7 years the farmer could get a negative return but when it crosses the 10th year the estimated net income would be 30,000 to 50,000 per tree. If the tree is left in the field for some more years then the net return would be higher.<sup>10</sup>

However, the trade in agarwood is largely unorganized. Agarwood traders often work under cover of other businesses, and trade in a network with professional harvesters and independent agents. According to the village respondent (age 34), the local broker comes to purchase agarwood once per month. They mostly come from the Muslim community. The village harvesters have their phone numbers and they call them whenever the Sasi tree is ready for sale. Some village people also sell their trees in a time of urgent need for money.<sup>11</sup> The villagers are often unaware of how much agarwood value increase due to processing. Local village planters do not get prices for Agarwood following the national and international prices. According to the local agent (age 38), there are no practical gadgets available so far for detecting the right tree to be felled. Only people who have developed the skill of identifying agar-bearing trees through experience detect trees for felling. So, these are the unavoidable challenges in the extraction of best quality Agar and Essential Oils.<sup>12</sup>

It is found that Agarwood is a genuine opportunity of diversification to uplift people's livelihood conditions in the selected village. The removal of constraints might have an added advantage in the further development of the venture. To ensure agarwood's availability in the future, it will be necessary to raise public awareness about this natural

<sup>10</sup> Field Survey dated 04/03/2018

<sup>11</sup> Field Survey dated 12/04/2018

<sup>12</sup> Field survey dated 25/04/2018

resource. Furthermore, there must be a significant improvement in the identification of agarwood species and refined products on sale, to understand their different uses.

#### ***v). Small tea cultivator***

The fifth means of livelihood is that of the small tea cultivator. The village people do not have an idea about the optimum utilisation of tea farms. Moreover, the financial problem also restricts future expansion of area under tea cultivation. Besides small tea cultivators mostly rely on big factory owners for disposing their green leaves at the price fixed on a mutual agreement which seems more beneficial to big tea planters and factory owners. From the field survey, it is found that village people conscious to receive various Government added schemes plan and policies. The majority, 68 percent of Thengal Kachari farmers and 65 percent of Sonowal Kachari interviewed has indicated that they have only limited knowledge about tea garden maintenance. Only 11 percent and 19 percent of farmers indicate a high level of awareness and knowledge about tea garden maintenance among Thengal Kachari and Sonowal Kachari small tea cultivators. 51 percent of the Sonowal Kachari community sample small tea growers have started small tea cultivation for self-employment and 26 percent of them have undertaken it for additional income. Plucking is the most labour intensive operation in a small tea farm. The peak plucking season also coincides with the transplantation of paddy which is the principal crop in Assam. Labourers are often preoccupied with the transplantation of rice during this period. Field survey reveals that the price of tea leaves is not the same in all seasons and quality is the most important parameter for price fluctuation. According to one Sonowal Kachari village respondent (age 59), ‘tea gives more profit compared to rice cultivation. However, maintaining a tea garden is not an easy task. If rainfall happens during the plucking period, the tea-leaves become heavy and as a result, the price per kg is reduced by 2 to 3 rupees. Since the tea processing factories do not collect tea leaves from individual gardens, self-help groups collect tea leaves from every household and give them to the processing factory.’<sup>13</sup>

Necessary efforts should be made to train the small tea growers on various issues related to the scientific method of tea cultivation and

<sup>13</sup> Field Survey dated 6/3/2018

they should be encouraged to practice organic farming. This will help them to think about what may be the best way for plantation for earning high profit without overusing chemicals in their gardens.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is found that both the tribal communities have diversification potential in all five sectors of traditional livelihood but self-motivation and awareness are highly required. It is understood from a field study that increasing income through traditional farm-based livelihoods has its limitations. The agriculture landholding of farmers is fixed. The only way to increase productivity is through the proper management of the farm, which, in turn, would increase production. For that, the diversification strategies require traditional livelihood practices like improving technology; improved inputs, proper scientific byproduct management, intercropping, etc. Moreover, the existing agriculture market system has not been very efficient in terms of the timely procurement of commodities with adequate and fair prices to the farmers. The direct participation of tribal farmers in the market economy is very limited and communities who wanted to trade their yield are imposed to operate through a middleman. Appropriate marketing facilities need to be ensured for realizing fair prices of produce. Lastly, there is an urgent need to review critically the existing different approaches and strategies of the State and initiatives should be taken in formulating customized policies according to tribal communities' geographical, demographic, socio-economic, and environmental conditions. Area-specific opportunities should be taken up with the cooperation of Government, private agencies while keeping in mind sustainability of traditional livelihoods.



## Tribal Reality Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic

- Titoli Awomi\*

*Like any other day, she came to the farm, having walked kilometres from her village. From morning till noon, she tirelessly worked in the field. By evening, she would assemble and clean up all the produce that had been gathered from the field. One time as she settled down to work, busily sorting out different vegetables, I sat beside her, observing how meticulously she handled the organically grown vegetables.*

*We talked about how life had changed for us all due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I asked her how the lockdown had affected her and her family. She paused for a while and after taking a deep breath, as if she was gathering all her thoughts and experiences like those vegetables, she said, while continuing her work, "I don't like to share my pain with anyone because no one really has the time to help but instead they feel pity, which is of no use. But since you asked, I will tell you." In whispers, she said, "life is really hard now, not that we had a comfortable life before Covid-19, but now it is a matter of priority. Since, no one in the family has a regular monthly income, we have no choice but to find other ways to earn money. I have to choose between my own farm and others' farm, family or field, oil or green chilly, potato or onion. Though we were poor, before Covid-19, we could have meat and fish daily. Now we can't even buy a kilo of meat. Apart from this, we have debts to pay which makes me so stressed that it is better for me to work in the field. When it is night, I can't sleep but my husband sleeps peacefully (with her thumb out, she showed how her husband gets drunk). He gambles and drinks - does not even know what is happening at home. It has been this way ever since our marriage, so I don't expect anything from him. (Putting both her hands on her head) she says, "My 'mental' is not okay." Today, I am living a life where even 40 paisa is not in my hands.*

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\*Ms. Titoli Awomi belong to the Sumi Naga Tribe, she did her Bachelor of Divinity in the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India and she is a trained Social Worker in Mental Health from Tata Institute of Social Sciences. She is currently working in the Christian Education Department – Sumi Baptist Church Diphupar, Dimapur, Nagaland, India.

For millions of workers, no income means no food, no security and no future. [...] As the pandemic and the jobs crisis evolve, the need to protect the most vulnerable becomes even more urgent.

Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General<sup>1</sup>

## Mental Health and Social Determinants of Mental Health

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. Mental health and mental disorders are not opposites, and mental health is “not just the absence of mental disorder.”<sup>2</sup> Research points that “a person’s mental health and many common mental disorders are shaped by social, economic, and physical environments. Risk factors for many common mental disorders are heavily associated with social inequalities, whereby the greater in the inequality the higher the inequality in risk.”<sup>3</sup> Mental health and mental illnesses can both cause and be influenced by positive or negative social determinants of health. It is defined as “the specific features of and pathways by which societal conditions affect health and that potentially can be altered by informed action”. These determinants include income, housing, stress, early childhood experiences, social exclusion, occupation, educational level, sanitation, social support, discrimination (eg.racism), and lack of access to resources.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ILO: As job losses escalate, nearly half of global workforce at risk of losing livelihoods. April, 29, 2020 [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_743036/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Social Determinants of mental health, World Health Organization and CalousteGulbenkian Foundation. Social determinants of mental health. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2014. 12

<sup>3</sup> Social Determinants of mental health, World Health Organization and CalousteGulbenkian Foundation. 43

<sup>4</sup> Manderscheid, R. W., Ryff, C. D., Freeman, E. J., McKnight-Eily, L., Dhingra, S., & Strine, T. W. *Evolving definitions of mental illness and wellness*. Fecha de consulta: 31 de octubre de 2013.



## Findings - prevalence of stressors among the vulnerable groups

Findings show that there is a positive association between common mental disorders according to the gradient of economic disadvantage across society and those who are affected the most are the poor and the vulnerable groups. Research study points that in low-and-middle-income countries, there was a linkage between common mental disorder and poverty. Also, it was shown that the more the debt people had, the more likely they were to have some form of mental disorder...Another finding reports that the higher frequency of common mental disorders are associated with low educational attainment, material disadvantage and unemployment, and for the older people, social isolation. Poorer mental health was found in women, poorer groups, and among those who reported weak social support.<sup>5</sup> Study on college students in China, found that there was correlation between the covid-19 related stressors (including economy, life related, delayed studies) related to the levels of anxiety.<sup>6</sup> In many countries affected by Covid-19, records from helpline, police forces and other service providers indicate an increase in reported cases of domestic violence, in particular child maltreatment and intimate partner violence against women.<sup>7</sup> Studies have found that lockdown, isolation and quarantine elevate psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, phobia, trauma, etc. Also, other lockdown stressors such as economic crisis and recession, unemployment, poverty, etc. may be highly associated with psychological distress and

<sup>5</sup> Social Determinants of mental health, World Health Organization and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. 16

<sup>6</sup> Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., & Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry research*, 112934.

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization. (2020). Addressing violence against children, women and older people during the COVID-19 pandemic: key actions, 17 June 2020. In *Addressing violence against children, women and older people during the COVID-19 pandemic: key actions*, 17 June 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Dsouza, D. D., Quadros, S., Hyderabadwala, Z. J., & Mamun, M. A. (2020). Aggregated COVID-19 suicide incidences in India: Fear of COVID-19 infection is the prominent causative factor. *Psychiatry Research*, 113145.

suicidal behaviors.<sup>8</sup> An article on migrant mental health puts it clearly for other vulnerable groups in the society that "COVID-19 outbreak and consequent nationwide lockdown have resulted in a significant deterioration in all the social determinants of health. Loss of income and jobs, insecurities, and social isolation are increasing and are likely going to deteriorate the mental health of the migrant population which may worsen in post lockdown periods."<sup>9</sup> The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave health threat to Indigenous people around the world. Indigenous communities already experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation, and other key preventive measures, such as clean water, soap, disinfectant, etc. Likewise, most nearby local medical facilities, if and when there are any, are often under-equipped and understaffed.<sup>10</sup> As COVID-19 reaches the cluster of indigenous population in Brazil, Canada and others, it is a note of caution for India to endorse an inclusive approach to shield the indigenous communities. Studies have shown that the impact of such outbreaks could be devastating.<sup>11</sup>

In India's tribal areas, basic healthcare facilities are extremely poor. Besides, a lack of key information and awareness to effectively deal with outbreaks further adds fuel to the fire. Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic in tribal areas poses a serious threat to the tribal population.<sup>12</sup> Another study from Mexico found that "Families without broadband access to telehealth, the internet, electronic information, and technology are at greater risk for not having their health needs met. The health-related impacts that tribal nations will

<sup>9</sup> Singh, O. P. (2020). Mental health of migrant laborers in COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown: Challenges ahead. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 62(3), 233.

<sup>10</sup> COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>

<sup>11</sup> *Indhusmathi Gunasekaran and Catherine Elisa John*. Indigenous Communities Are at High Risk of Getting COVID-19 April, 26, 2020 <https://science.thewire.in/health/tribals-are-at-high-risk-of-getting-covid-19-not-just-because-of-the-virus/>

<sup>12</sup> Abhijit Mohanty. COVID-19 is lethal for the world's indigenous peoples. May, 29, 2020 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/environment/covid-19-is-lethal-for-the-world-s-indigenous-peoples-71458>

face are unprecedented.” – COVID-19: Internet Access and the Impact on Tribal Communities in New Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

### **Risk factors of mental health: Nagaland context**

“We have only God to save us, nothing else,” is the catchphrase of the people of Nagaland in response to the news on the Covid-19 pandemic. In hindsight, it signified the despairing state of the people of Nagaland. The dailies reported Nagaland’s inadequate health infrastructure to deal with the outbreak.<sup>14</sup> In the ‘National preparedness Survey’ the officials reported “Nagaland doesn’t have a single testing centre. There was a lack of essential goods in the state, following the sealing of inter-state borders.”<sup>15</sup> On June 23, 2020, 186 posts were created under the Department of Health & Family Welfare to meet the paucity<sup>16</sup> of medical personnel.<sup>17</sup> Along with it, the impact on the economy is devastating<sup>18</sup>, states the Nagaland Government. The CM of Nagaland, Neiphiu Rio stated that the state is reeling under financial crisis...<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Whitt. Addressing COVID-19 challenges in Tribal communities. June, 24, 2020 <https://news.unm.edu/news/addressing-covid-19-challenges-in-tribal-communities>

<sup>14</sup> “God’s grace”: Nagaland has no coronavirus, but also lacks health infra to deal with the outbreak. May 16, 2020. [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/gods-grace-nagaland-has-no-coronavirus-but-also-lacks-health-infra-to-deal-with-outbreak/articleshow/75774715.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/gods-grace-nagaland-has-no-coronavirus-but-also-lacks-health-infra-to-deal-with-outbreak/articleshow/75774715.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>15</sup> Anubhuti Vishnoi. IAS officers point to inadequate health infrastructure., 3 April, 2020. [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/ias-officers-point-to-inadequate-health-infra-structure/articleshow/74959132.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/ias-officers-point-to-inadequate-health-infra-structure/articleshow/74959132.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>16</sup> Imkong Walling. Half a doctor for every 1000 people in Nagaland. April, 17, 2020. <https://morungexpress.com/half-doctor-every-1000-people-nagaland>

<sup>17</sup> Nagaland Govt creates 186 posts in Health Dept. June, 23, 2020. <https://morungexpress.com/nagaland-govt-creates-186-posts-in-health-dept>

<sup>18</sup> Nagaland: Covid-19 to have devastating economic impact. May, 1, 2020. <https://morungexpress.com/nagaland-covid-19-have-devastating-eco-impact>

<sup>19</sup> Covid-19 impact: Nagaland is reeling under financial crisis, admits CM Rio. June, 15, 2020 <https://thenortheasttoday.com/covid-19-impact-nagaland-is-reeling-under-financial-crisis-admits-cm-rio/>

<sup>20</sup> Chubakumzuk Jamir. Covid-19 and its impact on Nagaland economy. April, 17, 2020. [https://issuu.com/nagalandpost90/docs/april\\_18\\_\\_2020](https://issuu.com/nagalandpost90/docs/april_18__2020)

According to the article in Nagaland Post, a local paper, it discussed how the lockdown has affected economic activities, especially the rural sector (71.14 per cent of its population), and can result in larger fall in employment and income.<sup>20</sup> The state is also faced with a situation of unemployment crisis with thousands returning home due to uncertain times. A matter of thousands of unemployed youth and zero utilisation of labour resources for economic development, from The Morung Express article.<sup>21</sup> The state government also ordered for the closure of all educational institutions on March 16 which led to an alternative online mode of learning to ensure that the academic year is not disturbed. However, the students and parents are faced with deplorable telecommunication service of the state.<sup>22</sup> Along with Covid-19 pandemic, the issue of the safety of women is also a major concern that has come to light. "A press release by the SRWC is (State Resource Centre for Women), Sakhi-One Stop Centre (OSCs), 181-Women Helpline (WHL) Nagaland, on June 25, said that for the entire period of lockdown, the 181-WHL and the Sakhi- OSCs have been operational 24/7, answering calls from women seeking assistance for sexual harassment, domestic violence and disputes, cyber-crime etc."<sup>23</sup> The state also had to deal with the problem of social stigma around Covid-19 positive patients, family members, health workers and recovered people posing danger to mental well-being.<sup>24</sup>

The state of Nagaland indicates a potential risk of mental health due to regrettable social determinants in place. The lockdown stressors are also adding more to the anxiety and depression already existing due to Covid-19. The economy is deteriorating, the health infrastructure is

<sup>21</sup> Meyabi A Niphi. Where do we go after Covid-19: Nagaland in the new normal. June, 21, 2020 <https://morungexpress.com/where-do-we-go-after-covid-19-nagaland-in-the-new-normal>

<sup>22</sup> Internet Issues, apathy bugs, students learning from online. May, 5, 2020 <https://easternmirrornagaland.com/internet-issues-apaty-bugs-students-learning-from-online-classes/>

<sup>23</sup> Issues on Women's Safety During COVID-19 Lockdown Period. June, 26, 2020 <https://nagalandexpress.com/nagaland/issues-on-womens-safety-during-covid-19-lockdown-period/>

<sup>24</sup> Stop social stigma. July, 2, 2020 <https://nagalandpage.com/stop-social-stigma/>

inadequate and restructuring now, the accessibility to health care in rural areas can be more difficult than in urban areas, the services needed is also a question of affordability, unemployment in uncertain times, loss of jobs, cases of domestic violence and social stigma creating a more stressful environment. The state government itself is impoverished to intervene as a support system for the people. Thus, lack of an efficient support system and services, uncertain future, poor governance, precarious financial state and stressful environment could contribute to poor mental health.

### **Call for mental health promotion**

*“When you’re in the middle of a crisis, like we are now with the coronavirus, it really does...ultimately shine a very bright light on some of the real weaknesses and foibles in our society.” — Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, White House Coronavirus Task Force.*<sup>25</sup>

We are all fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and coping with the stressors of it. Yet, for some, even coping with a crisis becomes a matter of privilege. When every support system fails them, what can we expect of their mental health? Moamenla Longkumer, Women Welfare officer shares, “The most affected group were daily wage earners and ones who had small businesses. Many of them are unemployed, now, due to no market. The loss of jobs and economic instability is leading to stress and anxiety. Also, lack of effective health care facilities is adding more fear, stress, panic, worry and anxiety among people.”

Through this article, I advocate for the urgency to focus on the mental health of the vulnerable population. As individuals, communities and organizations - we can all influence in our own capacity to promote

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<sup>25</sup> Gray, D. M., Anyane-Yeboah, A., Balzora, S., Issaka, R. B., & May, F. P. (2020). COVID-19 and the other pandemic: populations made vulnerable by systemic inequity. *Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 1-3.

mental well-being. We can start by looking around at the resources we have at our disposal. We can build on resources like knowledge, material, community, cooperation of stakeholders etc. Along with the ongoing initiatives like supplying rations, disseminating correct information through regional language, counselling, supporting people in lockdown, working in partnership with state government; we can take more concrete steps towards building a resilient and compassionate community. The churches in Nagaland are an influential stakeholder in the society and, thus, the onus is unavoidable. As the church is always engaging in love, it can also use its platform to bring awareness and intervene in the lives of the people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, along with its pastoral care resources. It is encouraged to formulate programs in collaboration with professional healthcare to cater to the needs of the people at this time. The church can work towards mitigating social determinants that affect mental health, initiating relevant projects. Projects that will directly impact specific groups like people with financial crisis can be met with debt counselling and financial help projects, parenting counselling and so on. I urge all, let us use our resources wisely to support one another.

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the  
poor and needy.

- Proverbs 31: 8-9 (NIV)



## The Struggle Continues

- Japhet Ndhlovu\*

I am greatly honored to have been invited and given an opportunity to address you today as you come to the end of your intensive theological training on Human sexuality and sexual identities.

I was born in Africa in a landlocked country called Zambia. While growing up, my country was involved in supporting freedom struggles for its neighbors. One of those countries was the Portuguese speaking country called Mozambique.

We accommodated many Mozambicans just as we had accommodated many South Africans, Namibians, Angolans and others who had sought refuge in Zambia from their oppressive colonial or post-colonial regimes. That was courtesy of our founding President Kenneth Kaunda.

And so many times I heard on the Zambian streets people saluting each other or ending a public community meeting with the words *Aluta continua!*

*Aluta continua! The struggle continues!*

\* Rev Dr Japhet Ndhlovu is a staff at the General Council office of the United Church in Canada. He is incharge of Church's global partnership program as a Program Coordinator for South East Asia and Southern Africa partnership. ( India, Philippines, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe ). He has taken his first Masters degree from the University of Dublin and second Masters degree in Theology from the University of South Africa. His PhD is from the University of Stellenbosch.

This is the key note address given by Rev Dr Japhet in the valedictory ceremony of a Training Course for Theological Educators on Human Sexuality and Gender Identities, conducted by the ESHA Project of NCCI, held on the 20th of August, 2020 over Zoom. This course had been conducted in association with the Senate of Serampore College (University), from the 20th of June 2020 to the 14th of August, 2020. There were 50 faculty members from Senate affiliated theological colleges in India, the SHUATS, the Martin Luther Christian University and the Myanmar Institute of Theology. A total of 32 participants successfully completed the course.

A luta continua was the rallying cry by freedom fighters for the independence of Mozambique.

The phrase is in the Portuguese language. Dr. Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane was the one who started popularizing the phrase.

It was used to rally the population in their struggle for freedom. Following his assassination in 1969, his successor, Samora Machel, continued to use the slogan to cultivate popular support during post-independence to mobilize the population for a new Mozambique which Eduardo Mondlane defined as,

"We fight together, and together we rebuild and we recreate our country, producing a new reality - a New country- United and Freed. The struggle continues!" Aluta continua! Mozambique was a Portuguese colony for close to 200 years and in the 70's they became independent.

I can spin those words and say "We fight together, and together we rebuild and we recreate new theological horizons, producing a new reality - a New reconciled diversity- United, uniting and Freed.....I will come back to that thought about Reconciled diversity.

The struggle continues. Aluta continua! As you come to the conclusion of your course on Human Sexuality and Gender identities .....it is not the end of the struggle. It is not the end of the fight. It is not the end of the course. It is the start of further and deeper research on the matters on which you touched during the past weeks.

Our contemporary world is multipolar and complex, with many combinations of powers, ideologies and the associated cultures affecting almost all aspects of life and human relationships in every part of the world.

Human sexuality and gender identities are not excluded from these various ideologies at play.

Religion and sexuality are assumed to be inherently in conflict, an argument which centers on discourses that essentialize both religious and sexual identities.



We need to revisit our theologies and decolonize them to enable acceptance of other sexual identities.

When the controversies relate to gender and sexuality, often the strongest religious voices heard in the public arena are voices arguing that sexuality equality rights challenge religious beliefs.

So too are voices of those who are both religious and sexually ‘other’ or religious and in support of sexual diversity becoming more loudly heard, though often the assumption is that to be religious is to stand on one side of this particular dichotomy.

There is widespread evidence that the relationship between religion and sexuality is not inherently in conflict, but often is constructed as such in public discourse/media, further reinforced through theology or religion.

I propose we begin to think not just about how creed-based rights or religious identification challenges those considered to be ‘non-religious,’ but rather how theologies of inclusion can be formulated so that religion is not necessarily posited as in conflict with sexual diversity, or equality regarding sexuality.

One of the things I dream for is a world with reconciled diversity. Theological education therefore has a powerful role in shaping imaginations and people’s behaviour and conduct and the way people worship and relate to other human beings regardless of their race, social class or gender identity.

Human sexuality and gender identities is a complex area because of all the previous views we have held about human sexuality. That image and world view was shaped by our earlier formators.

Issues of sexual orientation, sexism, racism, and abilities are not yet settled and equality is not yet lived. Some Churches like the UCC has passed motions and supports the inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and Two-Spirit people in all forms of membership and ministry. It approves and supports same-gender marriage.

That was decided 32 years ago.

At the same time, not all congregations support same-sex marriage. Congregations have the final approval for hiring ministers and setting their own marriage policy. If the congregation approves but the minister does not, the minister is not required to perform the ceremony but must find a minister who will. If a congregation does not approve, but the minister does, the minister is prohibited from performing same-sex marriages elsewhere.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Two-Spirit people still have problems being settled (assigned to a congregation), called, or hired due to orientation. Discrimination remains, but various church courts are making efforts to improve equality.

Within the United Church of Canada, there remain organizations of diverse theological understandings. What we see at play is the phenomenon of reconciled diversity.

Where we do not seek to only have our theological position but allow diversity of theologies and still respect each other. Theology can help contribute to that.

May you all in your theologizing be guided by principles of intersectionality, inclusion, indivisibility of human rights and ‘do no harm.’



## BIBLE STUDY

### God and Freedom

*- John Samuel\**

I want to write a brief reflection on ‘Freedom’ in the Bible. ‘Freedom’ is a fascinating subject in our society. Every human being wants to be free. Every form of life seeks to live in freedom. Paul says, “that the (whole) creation (itself) will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:31).

We are celebrating our 73rd Independence Day. We remember the freedom we received from colonial slavery in 1947. While we cherish this freedom, we must introspect about it. We must try to understand the state of our freedom and engage with the system and replenish our freedom. We must make our freedom more relevant to everyone, particularly those who are marginalised by society. Our freedom must be organised in new ways. Our freedom calls for our attention!

The Jewish festival of the Passover is mentioned in the Bible. It is a festival of freedom. ‘Cherut’ is the Hebrew word for freedom. ‘Zman Cheruteinu’ means festival of our freedom. The Passover is in commemoration of their freedom from slavery in Egypt. It is the remembrance of how Moses led the people out of the tyranny of the Pharaoh. It is about the freedom march of the tribal groups from the clutches of the empire. The Passover has been celebrated from very early times up until now. The rituals followed during celebration are symbolic elements connected to this festival. However, the most important aspect of this festival, is the story behind it.

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\*Rev. Dr. John Samuel is an ordained minister from the church of South India. He is serving as the Principal of the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Chennai. Formerly, he was serving as Professor of Old Testament in the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Arasaradi, Madurai.

The Jews tell their stories in a unique way. They usually begin on a bad or troubled note and end on a good or triumphant one. There is no word for ‘tragedy’ in Biblical Hebrew. The word ‘asoun’ means catastrophe. They use the word ‘churban’ for destruction. But since the end cannot be a sad one, perhaps, they did not have a word for ‘tragedy’ in the Greek sense. They have now coined a word ‘tragedia’ in modern Hebrew as an equivalent for the term ‘tragedy’. The Jews refuse to give a tragic end to their stories.

There are two views about why they celebrated the festival of Passover. One view is that God delivered them from the slavery of Egypt and gave them freedom and hence the Passover. The other view is that God drew them out of idolatry and brought them close to Him/Her, so they celebrate Passover. The first reason comes in the beginning of Passover celebration and the second one comes in the end. Both views are based on two Bible verses.

The first view comes from, Exodus 12:17, “You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual”.

According to the second view, Joshua makes a speech at the end of his life. It is in the last chapter of the book of Joshua. And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan” (Joshua 24:2-3). The story of exodus begins even before Abraham and it does not end even after Moses. According to this, it is not a freedom from slavery, but freedom from idolatry! The juxtaposition of these two views side by side, only helps us realize that the concept of freedom is deeper and far more complex.

Passover is viewed as the festival of freedom (Zman cheruteinu). As mentioned earlier the Hebrew word for 'freedom' is 'cherut'. Interestingly, the word, 'cherut' never appears in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. However, the root with the same consonants do appear once, 'charut' which means 'inscribed'. The context of the word is, 'Charut al ha'luchot' which means, 'the tablet which is engraved'. The tablet was not written, but engraved. Whatever is written can be rubbed off. But what has been engraved can never be rubbed off. It remains for ever. Whatever is written, needs some external agent like ink etc. Whatever has been engraved is only from what is within. The word, 'charut' (engrained) and 'cherut' (freedom) derive from the same root 'ch-r-t', the sages say that the meaning of the words 'engrained' and 'freedom' are related and identical. This 'tablet which is engraved' is also simultaneously 'the laws of freedom'. That is how the word 'cherut' freedom has entered into post Biblical Hebrew.

Exodus 21:2 says, "When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt". The Hebrew word used for freedom here is 'chofshi'. When it comes to describing the Passover as the festival of freedom, they do not say 'chofsi cherteinu', but say 'zman cheruteinu'. The sages say, chofshi always refer to individual freedom. It does not refer to the community freedom. When a slave is freed, he/ she can do anything he/ she wants. But the Passover speaks about a freedom which enters into a law. Immediately after being freed from the Pharaoh, they receive 'the law' at Sinai. That is why 'chofsi' is not used for the 'festival of freedom'-'Passover'. There must be order and it cannot lead to chaos. It is injustice to treat others as slaves. To give freedom is law. But freedom is not for lawlessness, rather towards a lawful community. That is why, Passover is followed by the Sabbath. As part of their freedom, they had to receive law.

When we read the story of giving of the laws in Exodus chapter 19-20, it seems to be a free offer. God did not impose the law on the people. The people also received the law joyfully." The phrase "if you obey me fully and keep my covenant" in Exodus 19:5 shows that the people

of Israel received law with willingness. It was for the people to decide. Joshua when speaking to the people after they reached the promised land said, “Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15). The people answered, “No, we will serve the LORD!” (Joshua 24:)

Contrast this to the time when Moses asked the people to serve the Lord in the desert. They were not fully free. They had to depend on God because they were on the way to the promised land. They had no food in the desert. So, they followed God. But when they reached the land, they were free and did not have to depend on God any more. And now, when they choose to serve God, they choose in their freedom. We must choose freedom in freedom. Freedom cannot be imposed. That is why they say, the freedom mentioned in Joshua is superior to the freedom mentioned in Exodus. The story began even before Abraham, when there was idolatry and it was used to justify the hierarchical society. It was possible to live as rulers and slaves in idol worship. But when they worship Yahweh, they must live as equals in order to obey Torah. That story truly ends when they arrived in Canaan and became free people. When we speak about living in a free society, there must be rule of law. Otherwise, it will end in anarchy. We must be able to choose the law and the law must be able to free the people. The law must be able to protect the weaker sections of the society from the hands of the powerful. The law must be able to create an egalitarian society. The law must provide equal opportunities to all people. The law must guard the interests of the poor, women, aged, children, sojourners, aliens etc. The law must weaken the strong and strengthen the weak. This is the law of Moses.

When the Israelites received freedom, they had to remember the hardships they suffered in Egypt. They must recall the oppressions legitimized by the idol worship beyond the rivers before the days of

Abraham. Similarly our law must deny slavery, oppression, hierarchy, class, race and empire. The law must be an antidote to those negative experiences.

Great civilizations have known freedom, but they declined because they took freedom for granted. They did not know how to preserve their freedom. Many freedom movements like the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution and the People's revolution in China ended up in one way of tyranny or other. It is more difficult to preserve freedom than to receive it. We must work constantly to protect and grow freedom. We cannot delegate freedom to government and if we do so, we risk losing it.

We attained freedom seventy two years back after a prolonged struggle. When we attained freedom, we created a law-The Constitution. We developed various institutions to guard our freedom. We had debates about freedom. We were able to choose the kind of freedom for ourselves. We must continue this quest for freedom. We must celebrate the festival of freedom to renew new spirits in the minds of people. Our freedom must begin with the freedom from the Pharaoh. But our ultimate struggle is freedom from idols! Idols which can lead us to dehumanise human beings. Idols which makes the market as the saviour of human beings. Idols which serves Mammon. Idols which brings authoritarian state. If we are not awake, our freedom will be taken away from us. Let us celebrate this Independence Day for the true joy of freedom. All stories must end happily!



**NCCI PRESS RELEASE**

*- Issued on 73rd anniversary of Indian Independence, August 15th 2020*

**Rising to the occasion . . .****with a commitment to read and espouse the Constitution of India**

Saturday the 15th of August 2020 marks the completion of a journey of 73 years; a journey as a people who left no stone unturned to earn a freedom that we yearned for. The journey is wrought with imaginations and indignation. The journey that was dotted with advancement in different fields, struggles in some, stagnation in some others, but a determined movement toward self-rule, self-determination and self-sufficiency.

We salute the martyrs of the freedom movement and those who subsequently and to this day have laid down their lives in the service of their fellow-citizens - for their determination to secure for us, the people of this nation, a vibrant and living Secular, Socialist, Democratic, Republic.

We salute the astute mind of the architects of the Constitution of this country who have strived diligently to capture and construct the angst and aspirations of the different and varied peoples of this land.

We salute the spirit of comradeship and that of secularism which prevails amidst a vast majority of peoples of different faiths and beliefs coexisting in this country.

We salute the resoluteness of the citizens of the country, who have strived continually to preserve the values, practices and institutions of democracy so intrinsic to the preservation of its independence.

Recollection of these rich traditions is an invaluable strength and inimitable force in facing and dealing with the contemporary challenges to the richness of secularism, to equity that comes with socialism, and to the participation of the people in governance.



Rising levels of absolute and real poverty, alarming trends of communalisation of not only politics but also institutional governance, disrespect and sordid insult to the voice and presence of the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and gross violations of Human Rights at all levels everywhere, stare the nation in its eye.

It is time now, more than ever before, to recognise the writing on the wall and heed the call to rise to the occasion – as conscientious citizens and alongside all secular, socialist and democratically minded peoples in all faith tradition, non-communal ideological persuasions and political affiliations.

At the threshold of the 74th year of Indian Independence, and in commemorating the 70th year of the sacred document of the Constitution of India, the National Council of Churches in India, an expression of 30 National Churches present in all districts of the Country and 45 other networked nation-wide Christian and Ecumenical Councils, Organisations, and specialised Agencies, along with related social movements and inter-faith networks, commits to a reading and espousal of the Constitution of the country. This is done with a responsibility to preserve the edifice from any possible corruption, and with the desire and aspiration to build a nation of people that is aware of their constitutional rights and who will hold those in public office and civil service accountable to their statutory obligations.

Let us rise to the occasion, and build courage to envision and define a nation; a nation that perpetually holds itself accountable to securing and assuring Justice to the least in its fold, and thus to All.

Jai Hind! God bless India . . .

**Rev. Asir Ebenezer**

*General Secretary*

*National Council of Churches in India*



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