



National  
Council of  
Churches  
in India



# **NCC REVIEW**

Vol. CXLI  
No.02  
March 2021

**The National Council of Churches Review (NCC Review)**  
***The Organ of the National Council of Churches in India***  
**UGC approved Journal**  
*Formerly published as "The Harvest Field" since 1862*

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National Council of Churches in India

**Registration No. 33/2019**

## EDITORIAL

### **Elections and an Easter hope . . .**

Beginning Saturday the 27th of March 2021, close to twenty per cent of the Indian population will be exercising their franchise as the stakeholders of a new India. Despite the fact that the elections are to the State assemblies of Kerala, Tamilnadu, Puducherry, West Bengal and Assam, it is an exercise that will be closely watched all over the country.

It is important to note that the clamour this time round, more than ever before, is not for seats nor a fight between persons or parties. Today we have come to a time when the election is about ideology. It is indeed an important and welcome development that political debates can be around ideology, primarily, and also about issues and concerns, rather than revolving around personalities who attempt to outdo each other in doling out freebies.

The irony however is that the electorate has not yet matured to fully grasp, digest, and continue the debates beyond the campaigns that they attend or that they follow on television or other media. It is pertinent therefore to work continually on this crucial dialogue regarding the real issues and concerns that confront the country and its people. Hopefully, this will also take the shine away from the politics of polarisation to which many run for refuge.

While this happens in the secular arena and amongst the academics and the intelligentsia, we are yet to help the ‘faithful’, particularly from among the Christian faith tradition, link to these discourses. This again is understandable since the gospel of the yesteryears was about withdrawal from the world as a Christian virtue. It is a welcome development however that at least since the 1980s the impetus from the theological fraternity and institutions has been on a spirituality of engagement. While we see strains of this welcome move, we are yet to see its impact on the spirituality of the average Christian.

Thanks to many who are engaged with the theological task of preaching and related articulations in the contexts of local congregations, the average Christian is at least introduced to the

phenomena and the experience of engaged spiritualities in their contexts of depravity and dispossession. This we hope will grow into a movement coordinated across the country, networked with all movements of different faiths and beliefs to the extent that they practice a spirituality and/or philosophy of affirmation of life for all.

Fr. Dr. Monodeep Daniel looks forward to a social resurrection with the immanent fall of Babylon, and we say Amen in our quest of nurturing life-flourishing communities. Dr. S. Devika, drawing upon the history of missionary activities in the erstwhile Travancore state, argues that the revolution has been shown to be possible in the case of the educational activities of the early Christian mission. In a related vein, Ms. K. Subhiktcha and Dr. K. Sindhu argue that the ‘fairy tales’ have the potential to nurture positive attitude in children which in turn will help them engage with the evil in their day-to-day world and triumph over it, together with all others in the fray, so as to affirm all that is good. Dr. George Zachariah challenges us to discern the difference between the word of God and the word of the establishment, further lifting up the “feminist hermeneutics of creative imagination which articulates alternative liberating interpretation that rejects the patriarchal motives of the (biblical) text”. Dr. Sam P. Matthew invites us to an experience of the ‘hijacked’ Jesus, in which experience the heavens and earth are moved to recognise possibilities of embracing the messianic presence in the midst of the ongoing mutilation of images of the divine

Such readings as these, coming as they do around the time when we celebrate the awakening of the divine in the midst of death and decay, should revive in us the spirit of Easter hope, which is the hallmark of the relentless, persistent, and unyielding Jesus ...  
May we grow in this Easter Hope!

**Asir Ebenezer**

*The General Secretary,*

**National Council of Churches in India**



## Resurrection: Truth, Hope, Peace

- Monodeep Daniel\*

From a Dalit perspective, the resurrection offers both an exciting prospect for the future and also a sober reality for the present. Instead of encouraging people to start living happily in a make-believe world, belief in the resurrection places demands on how they should behave in their present social context. Therefore, if their future after resurrection will be peaceful in the Kingdom of God, then they have to aim for peace here and now in their present condition of life. Jesus said;

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. (Mat 5.9).

Clearly, action for peace-making involves striving and struggling for it. It is a struggle against the tyrants who resist peaceful co-existence and regimes that divide and rule over people.

### Tyrant's Resistance

In his fourth book John of Salisbury (1115-1180 AD) wrote;

There is mainly this difference between the tyrant and the prince: that the latter is obedient to law, and rules his people by a will that places itself at their service.<sup>1</sup>

This, however, is not how a prince, or the government, in a society designed on the ideological basis of the caste system, behaves. In such a social context, the prince is required to uphold and implement the law of the caste system as laid out in the *Manusmriti*. He perceives himself as one upholding the dharma of *chaturvarna*. As a result, the prince turns to behave like a tyrant and still feels right about it. Bound by his religious obligation the prince uses power to protect the caste system. It is this illusion of rightness that makes the tyrant resist change in a casteist society.

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver O'Donovan. *From Irenaeus to Grotius* (1999) William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Cambridge (UK) P.282.

The society which is structured along caste lines is like a pyramid. Its top, the narrowest segment, is occupied by dominant communities, whereas all the rest are below them. As a result of the privileges and power of their status, the dominant communities have become excessively cultured, disproportionately educated, and accumulators of wealth and land. But to remain at that position requires continuous effort. This takes the form of structured violence, maintained by perpetuating the subjugation of depressed castes. Here violence is institutionalized in daily practices of maintaining distance, desisting from touch, endogamous marriages and separation in dining, in short inequality, segregation and untouchability. These practices, which are squarely based on the Laws of Manu, are emotionally and economically damaging to the Dalits. The reason is that it has enslaved Dalit communities and made them dependent on the dominant castes for the last four thousand years.

When it comes to Indian society and culture, it is the Caste System that forms its foundation, while other features – such as, attire, cuisines, dances, theatres, music, education, trade, customs, norms, jurisprudence and religion – constitute merely the superstructure. Even patriarchy in casteist society had a distinct flavor. A show of solidarity or support to Dalits for their cause of social equality, particularly by the intellectuals, if perceived as a threat to overthrow caste system, is dealt with Chanakya's mantra — *sama, dama, danda, bheda* — with no stones left unturned in the effort to subjugate them. Consequently, Dalits are faced with four restrictions: livelihood, inequality, nutrition and learning which were identified as crisis by Rahul Lahoti and Surbhi Kesar in their article on the Union Budget in *Frontline* (Feb 26, 2021).

It is very interesting to note that the Hebrew-people in their slavery under the Pharaohs suffered these drawbacks which God addressed in the Law which he gave to Moses. For this reason, within the primitive social setting God provided in the Law a fair distribution of land to all Israelite families, equal treatment of all people under the Law including the foreigners and the servile, provision of food for the most vulnerable people and learning of their Law and lore. Deficiency in these four areas in any society leads to death, but worse is when this crisis is perpetuated as 'culture'. In other words when the 'prince'

treats a large section of the citizenry who do not have access to these four basic needs as dispensable. Such is the condition of Dalits who count for very little. Just one example of the restriction on learning will suffice to make the point.

### **Restriction on Learning**

Due to Covid-19 pandemic the closure of schools caused restricted access to learning and limited online facilities for children. In these circumstances it was noted that the Department School Education and Literacy spent nearly ₹ 8000 crore which was less than the budgeted amount. This year the amount was further reduced to ₹ 5000 crore in the budget. In effect only those who can afford expensive private education will receive schooling. This has only increased the educational inequalities among people.

It was reported by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018 that only half of the Standard-V students could read Standard-II level text and only about a quarter of the students could do division. Now with no schooling for a year and a majority lacking any access to online and other learning resources, the situation is worsening. At home the children of less educated parents receive much less help than those whose parents are educated. A mark of the 'culture of death' is to muzzle the pipeline of knowledge of people. Without access to learning, people fail to articulate, analyze and communicate their concerns. Thereby silence is imposed on Dalit-people. A silent person even when conscious and sentient is as good as dead.

In the case of Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Pharisees made relentless efforts to silence him and his followers (Cf. Luke 19.39-40) but he outfoxed them. Similarly, before Pontus Pilate, Jesus largely held his silence but when he spoke, his dissent was pointed and precise. He did not defend himself but drew a line under truth. He was prepared to speak the truth and voice his dissent to those in power, to die for his convictions rather than recant. Ultimately the dominant groups silenced him with violence. They had him crucified - executed on the basis of trumped-up charges - along with two murderers.

## **Redeeming the Tyrants**

People have to be rescued from the culture of violence and death perpetuated by the caste system and restored to a life of flourishing. In theological terms, this is called salvation. However, the victims cannot be properly saved unless the tyrants are also saved. That is why God desires to save all people. This understanding of salvation denotes the change in the thinking and attitude of all people. They have to opt out of their violent mentality and embrace a peaceful mindset. St. Luke records a very interesting episode at the foot of the cross. This is what he records,

The Centurion seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely, this was a righteous man.” When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts. (Luke 23.47-48).

Here is a glimpse for us in the figure of the Centurion who supervised the Golgotha executions. The tyrant under the shadow of the cross changed his perception and mentality. The Centurion was overcome with peace, the crowd left in remorse and Golgotha fell silent.

We must admit that tyrants are people who are lost in the wrongness of their intellectual thinking to the extent that they have even lost the sense of guilt and shame for the atrocity they commit on Dalits and Adivasis. They too need to be rescued from their ‘lostness’, restored to ‘fullness’ and from ‘wrongness’ to ‘rightness’. Thus, salvation and the experience of being born-again have less to do with feelings and more to do with our intellect.

Now the question is this, is there hope for us who live in the violent culture perpetuated by the caste system?

## **The Hope of Resurrection**

The answer to the above query is our faith in resurrection. This is what Matthew has recorded;

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and other Mary went to look at the tomb.

... The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place.

This event is vital for Christians. Saint Paul wrote;

If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile, you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. *If only for this life we have hope in Christ*, we are of all people most to be pitied. Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The phrase in italics indicates that in as much as *Christ is our hope in life*, he also is our hope in death. Hence, St. Paul affirms that Christ is our hope in life here on earth.

In every society politics and economics, labour and market, culture and religion play inevitable roles. Human beings not only live as social beings but are also eager to govern their societies. Governing involves acquiring power. The quality of life is determined by the nature of society which is designed by those in power. Human life flourishes if the society is free and just; it is fragile if it is restricted and unequal. The hope in resurrection is that believers will be raised from the dead to enter the eternal phase of life. From the perspective of this faith in an assured future, we are expected to live in the fullness of resurrected life here-and-now. It means that there should be a collective flourishing of our life when all that makes us fragile is removed. We may therefore speak of *social resurrection*, in the light of the hope of the New Jerusalem which characterizes future society. Social resurrection is evident when all flourish together, none is left behind and none is suppressed.

An excerpt from late Justice P.B. Sawant (1930-2021) can bring clarity to what I am proposing, namely, social resurrection. This is what he said to the *Frontline* correspondent in October 2019;

Civil liberties are foundational of democracy and an infringement even of one of them seriously affects the democratic functioning of society. Secondly, civil liberties

also consist of inherent and inalienable rights of man. These rights are born with man, and in a democratic society they are the essential accoutrement of the citizen. They are not given by any statute, including the fundamental statute, the Constitution, and hence they cannot be taken away by any statute. That is why the right to life is not mentioned in our Constitution in specific terms and is assured, while imposing the restrictions on its deprivation in Article-21.

While attempting to articulate social resurrection, I am not talking of social reconstruction or reformation. My proposition is theological rather than sociological. While reformation or reconstruction is a human achievement, resurrection is initiated by God alone for the whole society. Like individual human beings, human societies too need to be healed and resurrected. They must enable their citizens to be reconciled and live together in harmony. Quite the opposite is the reality today, as our national society, owing to the casteist culture of violence, has become empty of these ideals.

It is no secret that Justice Sawant candidly stated that our constitution is not acceptable to those in power. This is clear in their policies and manifesto. They are against democracy, secularism and socialism. Their avowed objective is to establish a dictatorship, a national religion and give free rein to a virtually unregulated market economy characterised by crony capitalism. In the pursuit of this they have re-designed key institutions of governance and the judiciary. Similarly, the media are infiltrated by the RSS gentry. To create an opposition-free governance the critics are trolled, opposition is silenced and independent writers, dissenting speakers and social activists are suppressed. Masses are fed on lethal doses of false propaganda, untruth and manufactured events with a view to misguiding and fooling them. These are all trappings of a fascist regime, to which the country is being treated.<sup>2</sup> In this context it is crucial to uncover the truth, raise public opinion and register dissent. Here non-violent actions of protest and mass gatherings of resistance should be events of celebration even if they fail to yield desired results.

It is our hope that God will bring a social resurrection. This means the resurrection of civil liberties and fundamental rights as guaranteed in

<sup>2</sup> Lyla Bavadam. Champion of Civil Liberties. *Frontline* (March 12, 2021) P.52.

our Constitution. God will raise a generation of leaders who will, like God's shepherd emperor, Cyrus of Persia (Isa 44.28), overturn the empire of Nebuchadnezzar. Metaphorically the wealthy prostitute Babylon which is the empire of capitalists and corporates will stagger and fall when God will restore the full human selfhood of the Dalit and Adivasi who are the broken and beaten people of our nation (Rev 18.21-24). With His divine act of justice, in which we all must participate, peace will be established on earth.

In short, the message of resurrection in our times is to speak the truth like justice Sawant did, hold firmly to our hope as Saint Paul did and wait for God's gift of peace as it was granted to the Centurion. This is *Kairos*, God's time for social resurrection.

We need to cooperate with God, not that He is dependent on us but that it is our privilege to participate in His salvific plan. That is to say that we as children of Abraham are called by Him to be a blessing to the children of Adam (Gen 12.1-3; 18.17-19). And so, with the Nicene Fathers we affirm "we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come".



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## From Texts of Domestication to Celebration of Apostolicity

- George Zachariah\*

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How do we address a situation when a biblical text considered as authoritative by the church and the faith community is perceived to conflict with our ethical and political convictions? How do we handle texts that seem irredeemable? This is the question that bothers us even as we engage with the story of Martha, Mary and Jesus, as narrated in Luke 10:38-42. Religious traditions and their scriptures often perpetuate patriarchy through stereotypical images of the ideal Christian woman. Faithful women internalise such gender role models with utmost devotion and, knowingly or unknowingly, become passive agents of patriarchy. The question we need to ask here is whether we should maintain the integrity of the text at the expense of the integrity of commitments outside and beyond the text? This reflection is a fragmented response to these questions.

We find this text, a familiar story from our Sunday school days, in Luke's Gospel. The evangelist placed this story in the travel narrative of Jesus. This story seems to have a positive message for women. "I've been Martha all my life: Now it's my turn to be Mary." This was the response of a woman who gained the courage to move beyond the imposed role of domestic helper to engage in activities considered dignified along with men. In the Lukan narrative, we come across an autonomous household, where the sisters make decisions and execute them without the instructions or supervision of a brother or a father or a husband. Mary is portrayed in this text as a courageous woman who crossed the boundaries set by the patriarchal order to become a disciple of Jesus. As a result, we often read this episode as a liberating text in which Jesus invites women to engage in public activities, leaving behind household chores.

It is in such contexts of ambiguity that feminist hermeneutics cautions us to use the hermeneutics of suspicion before venerating the story as a liberating text for women and other communities who experience

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marginalisation and vulnerability because of their social location. Let us investigate how and why the text constructs the story of these two women as it does. What is the message that this story conveys to the readers? Mary is elevated in the text by humiliating Martha. If Mary has chosen the good portion, then Martha's choice must be at least not good, if not bad. But the fundamental question that we need to raise is: Why do we think that Mary is the ideal model for Christian women in our times?

In our popular expositions of this text, we approach the text in terms of a good woman-bad woman binary. Mainstream Catholic interpretations give women the choice of two lifestyles in their spiritual life: active or contemplative. Women can be either laywomen or nuns, serving their husbands or serving the Lord respectively. In the Protestant tradition, the text is generally interpreted to encourage women to be faithful to their duties as housekeepers along with fulfilling their religious obligations. We see this approach in the programmes of the women's fellowships of Protestant churches. Breakfast sales and intercessory prayer meetings form a part of that.

However, a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion would ask us to discern this text differently. How can we consider this story as a feminist liberative text when Mary who receives positive approval is the silent woman, and Martha, who argues in her own interest, is silenced and ridiculed? Further, the model of discipleship articulated through Mary includes only listening not engagement and proclamation. The Bible is a sacred text with several stories pitting sister against sister to legitimise patriarchal interests and projects. A hermeneutics of suspicion enables us to understand the toxicity of such texts and their interpretations and encourages us to explore alternative meanings and interpretations that are truly liberative.

Hermeneutics of remembrance is yet another feminist hermeneutical tool to uncover both the values inscribed in the text and the patriarchal or liberative interests of its historical rendering and contextual interpretation. Feminist biblical scholars such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza are of the opinion that this text was generated by and addressed to a situation in the life of the early church, rather than it being an episode in the life of Jesus. For them, the historical context of the text is that of the early Christian community which gathered in house-churches under the leadership of women disciples.

The fourth Gospel testifies that both Martha and Mary were well-known apostolic figures in the early Christian community. In John 11 we read that they were Jesus' friends whom he loved. The climax of the episode of the raising of Lazarus is the Christological confession that Martha makes: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world," (John 11:27). Martha proclaims the messianic faith of the Johannine community which is similar to the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. In other words, we see a parallel between Martha and Peter, and their roles in their respective communities.

It is also important to note the Greek word that is used to describe Martha's activity that Jesus criticised: "She was distracted with much serving," (Luke 10: 40). *Diakonian* and *diakonein* are the words translated to mean serving in this text. We tend to understand the meaning of serving here as serving at the table. *Diakonia* is a term used several times in Luke and Acts of the Apostles, but it is not used to represent kitchen activity. As we read in Acts 6, the term *diakonia* refers both to the social or Eucharistic ministry to the widows as well as to the preaching of the Word on behalf of the church. So *diakonia* is not a word that designates a person of inferior status involved in domestic work; rather, it represents authorised persons or agents engaged in the ministry of the Christian community. Let us therefore assume that Martha was not distracted by her domestic chores; rather, as a leader of the house church, she was busy with her ministry of serving, teaching and preaching in her community.

The Bible testifies to Mary as a true disciple. We read in John 11 that she had many followers and she enabled them to come to Jesus. Of course, in the narrative of the raising of Lazarus, Mary plays a subordinate role to Martha. But in chapter 12 she anoints Jesus. Unlike the Lukan narrative, in John, the two sisters are not seen in competition with each other.

The hermeneutics of remembrance thus helps us to understand the significant role that women played in the early Christian community along with men. Such discernment invites us to look critically at the Lukan text which pits the apostolic women of the Jesus movement against each other and uses Jesus' words to restrict women's ministry and authority. So we infer that the Lukan episode is not an incident

from Jesus' public ministry affirming women's role in the life of the church, but that it is a patriarchal project of the early church to silence and humiliate women leaders like Martha of the house-churches by exalting the silent, and subordinate role of Mary. In our engagement with sacred texts, we need to have to be able to distinguish between the Word of God and the word of the establishment.

This discernment is of great significance in our context where we continue to legitimise the silencing and exclusion of women by our interpretations of scripture and tradition. Churches in the Orthodox tradition always use tradition to perpetuate the exclusion of women from the total life of the church. A recent article on the women's choirs established by St. Ephrem in the Ancient Syriac Church reveals that Ephrem considered these women as teachers (*malpanyatha*) of the church engaging in doctrinal instructions, which is higher than the calling of a priest in the Orthodox tradition. To put it differently, orthodoxy (right belief) was faithfully transmitted over the generations through the agency of women.

Further, Jacob of Serug in his *Homily on St. Ephrem*, a 4th century work, affirms the liberative potential of the women's choir.

Our sisters also were strengthened by you O Ephrem to give praise, for women were not allowed to speak in church. Your instruction opened the closed mouths of the daughters of Eve. A new sight of women uttering the proclamation. And behold they are called teachers among the congregations. Your teaching signifies an entirely new world; For yonder in the kingdom, men and women are equal.<sup>1</sup>

This is the story of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the 3rd century. But where are we in the 21st century when it comes to women's role in ministry? Why do we not see or refer to such liberative texts and traditions when we talk about tradition?

It is in this context that feminist hermeneutics invites us to engage in the hermeneutics of creative imagination which articulates alternative

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<sup>1</sup><https://hugoye.bethmardutho.org/article/hv8n2harvey>

liberating interpretations that reject the patriarchal motives of the text. It enables women to reclaim the biblical text by entering into the text with the help of the historical imagination. Such retellings allow us to discard messages that divide, subordinate, and alienate one sister from another. They further enable us to engage with the contemporary reality of patriarchal oppression, subordination and silencing in our times through our organic participation in the struggles of women in our times. Liberating biblical women from scriptural captivity and affirming their apostolicity serves as an inspiration for the struggles of contemporary Christian women to make the church an *Ekklesia* of equals and disciples.



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## Diamonds in the Rough - Hidden Gems in Grimm's *Children and the Household Tales*

- J. Subhiktcha\* & K. Sindhu†

If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.

—Albert Einstein

Childhood and fairy tales have always gone together. The fairy tale can elicit feelings of joy, relaxation and happiness. The majority of children like the fairy tale world, and react very naturally and spontaneously to it. Childhood is the time when the fantasies need to be nurtured. The truth of the fairy stories is the truth of our imagination. The real Grimm Fairy Tales thrill and enthrall children. The land of the fairy tale is not the external world. It is rather, the internal one. The real Grimm's Fairy Tales take a child's deepest desires and most complex fears, and it reifies them, physicalizes them, and turns them into a narrative. The narrative does not belittle those fears, nor does it simplify them. But it does represent those complex fears and deep desires in a form that is digestible by the child's mind. Tatar in *The Grimm Reader: The Classic Tales of the Brothers Grimm* marvelously describes the wonder world of the Brothers Grimm's Tales:

Wonders and marvels tumble thick and fast through the fairy-tale worlds of the Brothers Grimm. There you will find shoreless seas, mountains of glass, and stars that fall down to earth as silver coins. In the glittering, luminous landscapes of the fairytale world, there may be brighter and more colourful creatures. Elsewhere, but monsters, ogres, and witches dart about too, contemplating their next meal. Danger lurks in the dark woods and also at home. Cruel stepmothers chop up children and serve them in a stew. Homicidal husbands hang their dead wives on the

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walls of dark chambers. Crazy widowers propose marriage to their own daughters. (xxi)

Should the young children not read the Grimm's Fairy Tales in fear of the misogynistic portrayal of women? Do many parents feel that the young innocents should not read the Grimm's Fairy Tales where the women are vilified? Can we deny the fact that the Grimm's stories were the representation of the society? The tales that the children are provided with to read at bedtime are violent in nature. They are filled with horror and terror. Murder, mutilation, amputation, butchering, cannibalism, child abuse, incest, bloodshed, infanticide, imprisonment, cruel, isolation, violent punishments and cruelty are basic elements of these traditional fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm.

According to the researcher, the children should read Grimm's Tales. The tales give the real picture of the society and the time in which they were written. The tale 'Hansel and Gretel', might be reflecting the situation during the Middle Ages, a time of war, famine and other harsh complications, where parents sometimes had to abandon their children in order to be able to survive. The main character of the tale 'Sweetheart Roland' is a young woman, the stepdaughter of a witch. The witch has two daughters, the mentioned stepchild and one biological daughter. One day the stepchild has a beautiful apron that the biological daughter decides she must have. The witch tells her true daughter that in the night she will kill the stepchild and give her daughter the apron. The stepchild hears this and that night switches places with the witch's daughter. The witch kills her daughter in the night and the stepdaughter escapes with her sweetheart, Roland. As they hide from the witch, Roland asks the stepdaughter to wait for him until he returns with food for their journey. While he is away, he falls for another woman and forgets about his sweetheart. The girl eventually finds out her man is to marry another and on the day of his wedding she shows up to sing for him, as all the unmarried women in the area are required to do. Roland sees his old love, remembers his duty and love for her, and casts aside his new bride. Thus, the tale ends happily with Roland marrying his sweetheart.

If the readers look at the tales through a cultural lens rather than personally identifying with the character of Roland's lover, then the readers can begin to ponder on the people who told this tale and what

the cultural values of their time were. Roland's lover's main trait is her steadfastness, her belief that if she remains true to what she believes in she will be delivered from evil. The tale of 'Sweetheart Roland' from Grimm's *Children and the Household Tales* was gathered during the mid-nineteenth century in Germany. This helped the children learn about the culture during earlier times. By studying the details that are in fairy tales and the details that have changed from era to era, the readers can make assumptions about how cultures and people have changed.

Though the Grimm's Fairy Tales gives negative pen pictures of women, it is true that the women in the olden times were viewed as inferior to men. Barren women were labelled as witches as they were unable to reproduce. The stepmothers were always represented as evil creatures because they were selfish and jealous. They were violently punished by the patriarchy for their wrong doings. And the innocent beautiful, and passive women were expected to do all the household work and treated as physically weaker. They were nothing less than household commodities and the society viewed these beautiful, silent, hardworking and suffering women as angelic figures. The Brothers Grimm portrayed some women as evil creatures in their tales and at the end they were given violent punishments.

In spite of such misogynistic and violent representation of the tales, the readers read and reread the fairy tales of Brothers Grimm. The fairy tales of Brothers Grimm are captivating, enchanting and filled with suspense. They begin with the little innocent child at the mercy of those who think little of her or his abilities, who mistreat and threaten the life of the innocent, as the wicked queen does in the 'Little Snow-white'

In the fairy tales of Brothers Grimm, the young children are mostly targeted by their enemies and they try to rescue themselves from these evil creatures. In doing so, the helpless young child faces difficulties and combats with the devil all alone as we read in 'Hansel and Gretel'. But the fairy tale readers or listeners, in spite of visualizing such violent and dangerous acts of combat, ultimately feel relieved when they read that good has triumphed over evil. It is always true that in the fairy tales, the victory is that of the pious and the good. Whatever the situation might be, uncanny or grotesque, the good characters always win and the wicked are defeated and punished. Thus, the young fairy

tale readers and listeners always get an optimistic moral lesson from these violent tales and they also learn to develop a sense of autonomy.

In the fairy tale world, victory is not over others but only over oneself and over villainy. This is what maturity ought to consist of: that one rules oneself wisely, and as a consequence lives happily. But before the 'happy' life begins, the evil and destructive aspects of the personality must be brought under control. The witch is punished for her cannibalistic desires in 'Hansel and Gretel' by being burned in the oven. In 'Little Snow-white' the vain, jealous, and destructive queen is forced to put on red-hot shoes, in which she must dance until she falls down dead.

The fairy tale begins where the young reader is at this time in her or his life and where, without the help of the story, she or he would remain stuck; feeling neglected, rejected and degraded. There are various situations in a child's life which they are unable to share with their parents, or siblings, or friends. In such a moment of crisis and isolation, the young child seeks help from the fairy tale friends. These fairy tales help the young readers to choose the correct path in adverse situations. Then using thought processes which are contrary to adult rationality, the tales open glorious vistas which permit the child to overcome momentary feelings of utter hopelessness.

The fairy tales help the young readers and listeners to deal with the internal conflicts they face in the course of growing up. They stimulate the imagination of the young innocents and help young readers to deal with the struggles that are part of their day today lives. The symbolic language of the fairy tale states that after having gathered strength in solitude the young innocents have now become themselves. They have learned to become independent, active, self-reliant and capable of solving their own problems. Thus, the fairy tales of Brothers Grimm portray symbolic reality which every young and innocent reader and listener must comprehend in order to mature and develop into a better person. As Bruno Bettelheim says;

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror which reflects some aspects of our inner world, and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity. For those who immerse themselves in what the fairy tale has to

communicate, it becomes a deep, quiet pool which at first seems to reflect only our own image; but behind it we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul-its depth, and ways to gain peace within ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles... Thus the child will grow up to bring peace and happiness even to those who are so grievously afflicted that they seem like beasts. In doing so, a person will gain happiness for himself and...for his parents...[and] be at peace with himself and the world. This is one of the manifold truths revealed by fairy tales, which can guide our lives; it is a truth as valid today as it was once upon a time. (309-310)

Grimm's Fairy Tales often portray the heroine learning or performing some sort of household task, even when she starts out as a princess. Cinderella must cook and clean for her stepmother and stepsisters. The heroine in 'Donkeyskin' serves in the kitchen, and the goose-girl tends her geese. Perhaps the most important task is performed by the princess in 'Six Swans', while she is in the dark forest, she sews her brothers six shirts made of asters, a small star-shaped flower, to break the spell that has turned them into swans. This step could be seen as sending a negative message to young girls: while fairy tale heroes fight dragons, heroines are relegated to domestic tasks. However, these stories come from a time when women's roles were in fact circumscribed. Under those historical conditions, they make the case that women's work is valuable and even magical. The readers can learn an important lesson from this particular step that they must learn to work so they can sustain themselves and help others.

Grimm's Fairy tales also convince the young reader and listener that they need not be afraid of relinquishing the childish position of depending on others, since after the dangerous hardships of the transitional period, they will emerge on a higher and better plane, to enter upon a richer and happier existence. Ultimately, there will be moral and social development of the young readers and listeners and also of their inner psychology. After defeating their enemy, they will live happily ever after. And Jack Zipes states, "The fairy tale

demonstrated what it meant to be beautiful and heroic and how to achieve “royal” status with the help of grace and good fortune...To read a fairy tale was to follow the narrative path to happiness” (Happily 4).

Most fairy tales end with a happy ending, often ‘they lived happily ever after’ or ‘they lived happily till the end of their days’. The reader is assured that the main characters are over their trouble and for the rest of their lives only the good days are to come. And they are not alone, they get married or get back to their family, get reunited or find a lost love. The happy endings of fairy tales are very important for they spark hope that it will be so in the readers’ world too. The importance of the happy ending in fairy tales is a part of the consolation many people seek and find in fairy tales. Happy endings represent several things most people want and desire. Happiness is one of the things many people, both children and adults long for. Though the person goes through hard times, he/she can overcome them and find happiness.

Thus, the fairy tales of Brothers Grimm portray optimistic moral lessons hidden beneath the dark, sinister and violent activities. They are in reality the ‘Cautionary tales’ that warn the young readers to judge between good and evil, and become a true individual. The readers only need to decode the positive message that the tales convey leaving behind the dark and sinister violence. The tales are the treasure-troves piled with everything a child needs to be nurtured, binding them to the tales through wondrous worlds, ancient magic, demons and dragons. These tales have been an integral part of young children’s upbringing for generations. Being the first literary text that the innocents read or hear, these tales serve as important tools to teach children about themselves and the world around. They ultimately help in the psychological development of the readers as they learn to search the meaning of life through everyday experience. They are not only sources of entertainment, amusement and leisure, but they also delight and enlighten the young readers by teaching them optimistic moral lessons. In spite of the negative themes of fairy violence presented by the Brothers Grimm in their *Children and the Household Tales*, this collection of dark and sinister bed-time tales remains an all-time favorite of young children the world over.

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## Proselytization in Geeta Abraham Jose's *By the River Pampa I Stood*: A Historical Perspective

- S. Devika\*

Kerala, with its sobriquet 'God's own country,' has been home to several major religions of the world since ancient times. Christianity arrived nearly two thousand years ago and the Christian community has grown by extensive proselytization down the centuries. Today, approximately a quarter of the population of Kerala comprises Christians. This paper will trace the trajectory of Christian proselytization in Kerala and comment on the depiction of the phenomenon in Geeta Abraham Jose's novel *By the River Pampa I Stood* (published in 2007). The paper will also analyse how the novel presents education as a tool that opened the doors of opportunity to the oppressed.

According to a popular Keralite tradition, Christian proselytization is attributed to St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ who is believed to have arrived at Maliankara near Kodungallur in the first century AD on his apostolic mission to preach the Gospel. The Apostle, it is widely held, succeeded in converting many to Christianity, and "most of his converts were high caste people" (Mathew 75), in particular 32 Namboodiri Brahmin families. He founded seven churches and, leaving them in the hands of the priests he ordained for them, crossed over to the Coromandel Coast where he was martyred by enraged Brahmins at Mylapore. Susan Visvanathan writes that Syrian Christians who call themselves St. Thomas Christians "popularly believe that they are the descendants of high caste (Brahmin) converts of Thomas, the Apostle of Christ" (13). Though there is no documentary proof of the arrival of St. Thomas or the existence of the Christian Church in Kerala in the first century after Christ, "In the background of the extensive trade relations that existed between Kerala and the Mediterranean countries before the Christian era, it must be stated that there is nothing improbable in the St. Thomas tradition," says noted historian Sreedhara Menon (qtd. in Eapen 41). It is to this tradition that Jose refers when she writes in *River Pampa*:

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“The ethnic Syrian Christian community of Kerala, unlike the Christians in other parts of India, pride themselves on the fact that they have a “Christian heritage” dating back to the time of the Apostles. It is said that St. Thomas, one of the chosen twelve, came to India in AD 52 to preach the gospel of Christ. He established seven and a half churches in various parts of Kerala. About a hundred high caste Brahmin families embraced the new religion and their descendants who followed Syrian mode of worship came to be known as Syrian Christians or Nasranis” (24).

In the middle of the fourth century, the strength of the Christian community in Kerala was increased by an influx of a large number of Syrian immigrants from Baghdad, Nineveh and Jerusalem under the leadership of the merchant Thomas of Cana. Unlike St. Thomas’s mission to Kerala which remains shrouded in mystery, there is some historical evidence of this “East Syrian Chaldean Christian community . . . involved in Kerala’s thriving spice trade” (Dempsey 5), who proselytized and “intermarried with the local people” of central Kerala (Forrester 98). Though the immigrant Syrians merged with the indigenous Christians both commercially and spiritually, both were conscious of their different racial identities and remained separate, endogamous groups (Viswanathan 13). The descendants of Thomas of Cana were known as Knanaya Christians or Southists in contrast to the bigger number of St. Thomas Christians sometimes called Northists (Eapen 41). In *River Pampa*, the origin of the Syrian Christians features in Mathen’s book on the Ponnumpurackal family known as the *Kudumbacharithram: The origin of the Syrian Christians* was highlighted in the first chapter of Mathen’s book. Right from the days of the apostle St. Thomas to the days of Thomas-of-Canaan, who along with four hundred others, came three hundred years later to escape religious persecution in Syria. How Thomas-of-Canaan was received with great respect by the native ruler, Cheraman Perumal. How the Syrians were given all the privileges reserved for royalty. How the old Syrian Christians (belonging to the St. Thomas group) settled in the northern part of Maliankara (later known as Malankara) and the new Syrian Christians (belonging to the Thomas-of-Canaan group) in the southern part” (24-25).

Few details are known about this early Christian community except that it had become, by the time of the Portuguese arrival, highly

integrated into the Hindu society. As the Indian Bibliographic Centre records, they adapted well to the Indian conditions, and shared the attire, diet, language and many customs with the local Hindus (61). Through the practice of local customs, including a variety of ritual observances for upholding caste purity, “these early Christians enjoyed a high social status similar to that of the well-to-do Hindu Nair caste” (Dempsey 5-6). By the time the Portuguese arrived in Kerala, writes Forrester, the Syrian Christians had been, for centuries, “encapsulated within caste society, regarded by Hindus as a caste, occupying a recognized (and high) place within the caste hierarchy” (14). They recognized and observed the whole apparatus of pollution like the caste Hindus: “The various low castes were reckoned as polluting by the Syrian no less than by the Nambudiri or Nair” (99). Interestingly, as Susan Visvanathan notes, “in the traditional system, Syrian Christians had the power of neutralizing ‘pollution’, and were called upon to purify by touch, for the Brahmin and Nair, such substances as had come into contact with lower castes” (3). In the caste society of Kerala, the Syrian Christians were people of consequence, commanding the respect and esteem of their upper caste Hindu neighbours (Mathew 67).

The recorded history of Christianity in Kerala begins with the arrival of the Portuguese. As Dempsey records, “Roman Catholicism in Kerala, introduced by Portuguese missionaries, officially arrived in 1503 with the completion of the first Catholic church in Kochi, five years after the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama landed on the shores of northern Kerala” in 1498 and was received warmly by Zamorin, the local ruler (6). The Portuguese, along with the mercantile activity of establishing trade routes between Kerala and their home country, also carried on zealous missionary efforts to convert the masses to their Roman Catholic Christian tradition. They sought to purge the Malabar Church of all its Nestorian heresies and Hindu superstitions, and succeeded in breaking the Syrian Christian ecclesial ties with the West Asian countries from where their bishops had come. The Syrian Christians became part of the Roman Catholic Church and came under papal authority, and for over half a century from AD 1600 the Malabar church continued under Roman domination (Eapen 42). The Portuguese, who were unsuccessful in persuading Syrians to become missionaries, turned to evangelization themselves. St. Francis Xavier converted considerable numbers, chiefly but not exclusively from the

lower castes such as the Illuvans, Mukkuvans and Pulayas. Although a number of high-caste Hindus converted to Catholicism, most of the Latin Catholics were from the so-called low-caste fishing communities. “The new converts accordingly became unambiguously separate Latin Christians and no attempt was made to integrate them with the Syrian Church” (Forrester 104). A wide gulf separated Latin-rite and Syrian-rite Catholics in terms of social and economic status as well as political clout (Dempsey 7). Syrian Christians who were long established as a high-ranking caste were inclined to despise those of the Latin rite who were largely from the lower castes, as the Indian Bibliographic Centre records (90). They did not intermarry with members of the Latin Catholic community in an effort to maintain their elite identity and distinction.

In fact, Roman Catholic evangelization, dating from the arrival of the Portuguese, adopted a policy of accommodation of caste norms, converting individuals without detaching them from their social context. Despite the Papal decrees of 1734 and 1744 denouncing untouchability as alien to Christianity and the condemnation of the Jesuits who adopted this policy of accommodation, it was generally accepted among Roman Catholics that “caste was a civil institution which be used for evangelistic purposes and maintained with only minor modifications within the Church” (Forrester 16). Evidently, Christianity as it was practised until the advent of the British missionaries worked within the caste system. With the subsequent decline of the Portuguese power in India the Syrian Christians were able to reassert their independence from the Roman yoke in 1653, which led to a split in the Malabar Church. The Syrians came to be broadly divided, despite later schisms, into Syrian Catholics or Romo-Syrians recognizing the Pope but still practicing the Syrian Rite, and the Orthodox Syrians or Mar-Thomites (Mathew 71). “The latter who found fresh anchorage in the Patriarch of Antioch were known as Jacobite Syrians” (Eapen 43).

The Syrian Christians of Kerala who form about “one-fifth of the country’s total Christian population” (Mathew 89), have from time immemorial been accorded a high status in the caste hierarchy. These high caste Christians, who prided themselves on their noble origin, show a concern with charting genealogies. In *River Pampa*, Mathen, “a ‘true christian’ with ‘Syrian’ in brackets!” (25) and very proud of

his ancestry, compiles a book that traces the family tree, starting from the sixteenth century with a forefather named Mathen Kuruvilla who left Kuravilangad for good, in search of new pastures: “A family history book, you could call it. With all the details as to who married whom, and from which family, who were their offspring, what became of them, their offspring and theirs and theirs . . .” (24). The book records the genealogy of the Ponnumpurackal family in order to make known to the forthcoming generations the ventures of their illustrious, industrious forefathers who had come to Kuttanad from Kuravilangad in the sixteenth century, settled in the fertile plains of the Pampa, became wealthy landowners, and later under European colonialism, prospered by acquiring land in the high ranges where they grew rubber, cardamom and coffee. Such genealogies showcase the ancestry and lineage of the Syrian Christians and constitute an assertion of their high status and heritage, and as Susan Visvanathan avers, they signify their need to keep marriages endogamous and status-bound (4).

“With the establishment of British authority in India, the Syrian Church entered a new phase in its history” (Eapen 43). The English East India Company, chartered in 1600 AD, took a keen interest in the spread of Christianity in India and brought missionaries for the purpose. The evangelists of the Church Missionary Society came to Kerala on a “Mission of Help” to the Syrian Church in 1816 to cleanse it of the “heathenish practices” and “popish superstitions” it had acquired since the sixteenth century (Dempsey 43). Bayly writes that the British missionaries, “in their post-Reformation fervor, found saint devotion to be particularly despicable” (qtd. in Dempsey 43), and sought to cure the Syrian Christians of their saint devotion. However, *River Pampa* portrays the spirited manner in which St. George’s feast is celebrated by the Syrian Christian community in the village of Kuttanad in the twentieth century. The local church, called St. George’s Church in the saint’s honour, is an ancient one, at whose portals stands a huge statue of the saint on a horse, with a sword, slaying a dragon. The villagers staunchly believe that St. George, the patron saint of the village, protects them from all evil. The feast of St. George, held in the first week of May, is a festive occasion when the entire little village bustles with excitement: “Believers flocked in from most parts of Kerala during the feast to plead for intercession by the patron saint” (34). It is a time when relatives from neighbouring villages visit the Ponnumpurackal house and Saramma keeps herself

busy ensuring that her guests are well-fed and have comfortable beds to sleep in. Thus, as evidenced in the novel, the tradition of saint worship continues unabated despite the attempts to reform the Syrian Christian church.

The British missionaries who arrived to restore among non-Catholic Syrian Christians, “the pure principles of faith and practice which prevailed before the arrival of the Portuguese” (Gladstone, qtd. in Dempsey 43), initially restricted themselves “to assisting the Syrians and attempting to spark off a reformation within the church” (Forrester 105). But, seeing the social inequalities and disparities among the various classes, and in particular the degraded state of the slaves belonging to the low castes, the missionaries considered it their duty to work for the social uplift of the outcastes, and used evangelization and education as instruments for the same (Dempsey 22). It was resolved by the missionaries in 1857 that “the slaves are to be introduced into our Churches and to partake of the ordinances of the religion and stand on the same footing as other members of the Church” (Dalton, cited in Dempsey 22). As a result, large number of the lower castes came under the influence of the Church Missionary Society. The missionaries fought for the freedom of the slaves. In 1835, by liberating the slaves on the Munroe Island, they set the ground for the emancipation of the slaves by a royal decree in 1855 (Dempsey 167). The missionaries also took the lead in the struggle against untouchability and the fight for the rights of the untouchables to use public roads, wells, schools, etcetera in Travancore and Cochin, which in due course, the Hindu leaders developed the struggle into a political and social movement, of which the campaigns seeking entry for low castes into the temples were part. As Dempsey writes, “Christianity did away with the hideous idea that the slaves belonged to a lower order of humanity than the master. Attracted by this novel idea, the slaves flocked into the Christian Church. They were given education by the missionaries with a view to improve their social and moral standards” (166).

Evangelization was so successful among the untouchables who formed the lowest rung in the hierarchy of caste system that “by the 1880s there were some 16,000 CMS Christians, of whom more than half were of Pulaya stock and roughly a quarter were Syrians. The remainder was mainly from the Ezhava and other low castes” (Forrester 108). The strategy of the missionaries was to claim for the

converts the status and privileges enjoyed by the Syrians, by entreating and persuading the Syrian Christians to “bring their social behaviour more closely into line with a strongly egalitarian theology” (103). They were instrumental in encouraging bare-breasted Nadar women converts in South Travancore to wear upper garments, which was considered a prerogative of only the women of the upper caste. Ironically, it was felt among many that “slave-caste converts would lower the prestige of the church and make it far more difficult to retain Syrians or to convert members of the respectable castes” (Robin Jeffrey, qtd. in Forrester 107). So, while fighting for the rights of the slaves on the one hand, separate congregations were held for Syrians and lower caste converts on the other, though this was seen as a temporary expedient and they “kept up pressure on the Syrians to admit converts to their congregations” (Forrester 108). Thus proselytization carried out by the British missionaries emerges as one of the earliest strategies that attempted to dent the power structures of caste in the society of Kerala.

In India, Christian converts in general were reckoned, irrespective of their caste, to have moved out of the ambit of the caste system, and so depressed Hindu castes converted to Christianity for an upgradation in social status as well as educational and economic opportunities: “Conversion appealed as at least an apparent escape from the caste system for those who despaired of achieving improvement of their lot within the system” (Forrester 114). But, in Kerala, the reality was different because of the presence of a privileged Christian group, the Syrian Christians. As Ninan Koshy notes in *Caste in the Kerala Churches*, “the exclusiveness of the Syrian Christians as a distinct caste and their apparent determination to perpetuate this” has contributed to inter-caste tensions in the Kerala Church (cited in Forrester 110). The Church encountered in its acutest form “the problems arising from having Christians of widely different caste backgrounds and social status within one church” (Forrester 97). The high-caste Christians treated the neo-converts as low-caste Christians and discriminated against them, though they initially enticed them to Christianity with promises of dignity and deliverance from the injustices of the caste system (Srinivasan 22). Jose in *River Pampa* comments on the effect that conversion to Christianity as a strategy of resistance had in rocking the power structures of caste in Kerala. A number of farmhands on the Ponnumpurackal estate are untouchable

*pulayas* whose ancestors were converted to Christianity by European missionaries: “Christianity, they were told, was a religion that believed in the equality of men. Had not Christ set up a supreme example by befriending people from the lowest strata of society in his time” (41)? However, the Syrian Christians discouraged the merging of the two streams: “In some places they had separate congregations too” (41). Conversion fails as a strategy of escape from the morass of casteism.

Imparting education was part of the proselytizing mission of the evangelists. As Eapen writes, the Church Missionary Society missionaries converted the depressed classes, and used education as an instrument for their social uplift (166-167). Several schools were started by Christian missionaries for the depressed classes. The setting up of schools and colleges by the Church Missionary Society in the nineteenth and the twentieth century altered the educational scenario in Kerala. During the feudal times, the power dynamics of caste sought to keep the lower castes from gaining education, the fruits of which could inspire a quest for freedom and empowerment leading to revolt and rebellion. But, in the post-Independence era, in *River Pampa*, Thoma and other young men in the estate become beneficiaries of the evangelist mission of imparting education to the underprivileged. Thoma learns an important lesson for life: “One should strive to become rich. Without money, there’s no hope” (44). The novel depicts the transformation of Thoma, “a little boy from a humble hut on the estate” into an “educated” young man (40). Education paved the way for progressive ideas to find their way into the society of Kerala. The spread of education shook up such beliefs and values that safeguarded the interests of the upper castes. There came an awakening that brought with it a desire for material prosperity and better living conditions among the poor and the underprivileged lot. In *River Pampa*, in due course, “The poor farm folk were no longer poor. . . . They were all educated now. And one by one, they had left the Ponnumpurackal land in search of new pastures” (120).

The phenomenon of mass religious conversion of the lower castes in Kerala to Christianity, a religion that trumpets the values of equality and brotherhood, was a bid to escape the power politics of caste in Hinduism. Though the elitist stance of the Syrian Christians threw the neo-converts into the mire of casteism initially, the tool of education that the missionaries used eventually opened the doors of respectable

professions before the oppressed. Education and opportunity level society faster than anything else, for today Kerala enjoys the status of being the most modern and literate state in India and can boast of an egalitarian society.

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## BIBLE STUDY

### Experiencing the Risen Jesus Amid the ‘Hijacking’ of Jesus

(John.20:1-18)

- Sam Peedikayil Mathew\*

The response to the present struggle of the farmers in India for their rights amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the response to the common people's struggle for their existence amidst the implementation of CAA and violation of the fundamental right to food, have, by and large, revealed the outlook and the Christology of the churches in India. It appears that the Jesus of the Gospels, who was an artisan-peasant, and who showed his solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, is, to a significant extent, missing in the churches. There is a worrying increase of instances of corruption in our churches and in society. Crores of rupees are spent in elections, creating a web of corruption. Swindling of funds meant for the poor, property disputes, sex scandals involving our leaders are not uncommon now. Jesus, who stood for justice and took the side of the poor and the oppressed, is not seen among Christians as much as he should be; the voice of the Christ who protested against injustice and oppression is not heard in any significant way through the Christians of today. Serious questions arise, calling for deep introspection: Have many churches become silent, passive spectators of injustice in church and society? Instead of raising their voices against injustice and oppression, are mainline churches becoming guilty of utilizing every opportunity to pamper the powers-that-be in several states? We should all introspect and examine ourselves afresh in the light of the Gospel values.

However, every Easter reminds us that hope is not lost. As St. Paul reminds us in I Cor.15, the resurrection of Christ is the pillar of Christian life and the basis of our future hope of resurrection. Resurrection of Christ means that truth, love and goodness can never be killed and buried forever. It assures us of a life after this life, proclaims victory over death and the powers of evil and gives us hope.

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The Resurrection shows that the struggle of Jesus against the injustice, oppression, exploitation and exclusion perpetrated by the majority became victorious and that similar struggles of the followers of Christ will not be in vain. The Johannine narrative of the resurrection appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene in John 20:1-18 powerfully communicates that the risen Jesus can be experienced amid the ‘hijacking’ of Jesus. Therefore, let’s briefly meditate on the theme that emerges from a study of Jn.20:1-18: Experiencing the risen Jesus amid the ‘hijacking’ of Jesus.

## 1. Search for the Hijacked Jesus

In this episode it is mentioned thrice by Mary that “they have taken him away” (Jn.20:2,13,15). It shows that this is an important motif in the passage. In order to understand the significance of this “taking away of” of Jesus, it is important to know clearly about the person who sought the ‘hijacked’ Jesus against all odds. Lk.8:2-3 gives us some information about Mary Magdalene. We know four things about her background:

a) *She was a Stigmatized Person:* Mary Magdalene was possessed by seven demons (Lk.8:2). Her life was controlled by evil spirits before she met Jesus. She must have experienced rejection by everyone, even her family. They must have considered her a mad woman and she must have lived a segregated and secluded life, separated from human beings and God, in accordance with the purity laws of Judaism. Such a life, rejected and despised by all, must have been terrible for a woman, who was believed to be an instrument of devil. But Jesus rescued her from the powers of evil and gave her a new lease of life.

b) *She was from a despised place:* Magdala is a small village near the sea of Tiberias in Galilee, the Northern District of Palestine. It was an insignificant place. Galilean Jews were despised and looked down upon by the Judean Jews, since Galileans were believed to be lax in the observance of the law and also because of their free intermingling with the Gentiles.

c) *She was a woman:* In the Jewish society of Jesus’ time in the first century CE, women were considered to be inferior human

beings and were treated as sub-humans, always dominated by men. A male Jew would thank God every day for not creating him a woman. The case of a single woman was more miserable since she became the target of everyone.

d) *She was a disciple of Jesus*: Luke's Gospel (Lk.8:3) informs us that she participated in the ministry of Jesus. She, along with other women provided Jesus and his disciples "out of their means" through their possessions and served them. She remained faithful till the end and followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem up to the cross. According to Lk.23:39, women from Galilee stood at a distance and witnessed crucifixion, when all others fled the scene after the arrest of Jesus. The time after crucifixion was a trying and painful time for her. Her master was gone, and everyone had left. All hopes were lost for her. The light of her life had gone. Her plight is clearly evident from the text. We find that she is left alone without knowing what to do and where to go. She has lost the purpose in her life. Life seems to have come to a dead-end, and is full of pain and sorrow. She never dreamt of such an end to Jesus' life and she wasn't aware of the resurrection of Jesus. Yet, she came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus or take the body of Jesus to weep for him. Now let's see how this thrice marginalized person came to the tomb, searching for the body of Jesus.

## **2. The Manner of Her Search for Hijacked Jesus:**

The circumstances in which she searched for the hijacked Jesus give us insight into the manner of her search for the body of Jesus.

a) *She sacrificed her life to search for Jesus*: Mary Magdalene came to the tomb alone in the night, displaying extraordinary courage. Other gospels mention her coming to the tomb with others. But even there her name is mentioned first. She was not afraid of darkness. It was in fact night, literally and figuratively, as the Johannine pun in the usage of the term 'night' indicates. There was no ray of hope in her life. It was really night for her life. Yet she was not afraid of the Jewish religious leaders who were her enemies. Although the disciples of Jesus were all terrified, she was not. She didn't bother much about the Pharisees who would label her as insane or immoral. She was willing to take the risk. She was

not afraid of the Roman soldiers who were known for their cruelty and ruthlessness.

b) *She spent her money to search for Jesus:* According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus was buried without anointing with spices, as per the Jewish custom. Women from Galilee prepared spices on Friday but couldn't anoint Jesus' body due to fear. Probably they mustered some courage on Sunday morning, very early in the morning while it was still dark and came to anoint Jesus' body. This means that they spent a lot of money since spices were very costly in those days. To show their love for Jesus they were willing to spend their money on the dead body and pay homage to the departed by anointing his body with spices. They wanted to weep for their loved one, even at risk of their lives. Mary Magdalene is mentioned as the leader, since her name is mentioned first in the Synoptic Gospel accounts. Though in John's Gospel the motif of her coming is to take the body of Jesus, it could be assumed that the purpose may have been to anoint the body of Jesus.

c) *She was persistent and wholehearted in her search for Jesus:* Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of Jesus and found it empty. But she didn't give up. She ran to Peter and others. They came and saw the empty tomb and went back. But Mary Magdalene didn't go back. She persisted to somehow see Jesus. She was adamant to see Jesus. John's gospel informs us that she stood before the tomb weeping. But why did she weep? We can assume the reason for her weeping. She was weeping for her master, the one who gave hope and new life. Now all that is gone. She poured out her burdens and sorrows by weeping. It was catharsis for her.

d) *Resisting the imperial powers, she searched for Jesus:* Her search, alone in the night, for the body of Jesus was indeed an act of resistance against the imperial powers and oppressive religious forces of Judea, including the priestly aristocracy. Jesus was killed as a revolutionary or insurrectionist and she was a disciple of Jesus. Had they found her alone in the night, they would have ill-treated her or humiliated her. Thus, she exhibited unusual, extraordinary courage in the face of a very difficult and trying situation, to resist all the forces of the empire and the Jewish ruling class. Because of her courage in the midst of hostile situation, she

became a symbol of resistance and source of strength to other disciples.

e) *Her search was an imperfect, human effort*: Mary's effort to see Jesus was genuine and sincere, but it was an imperfect one. Although she sacrificed her life and resources and persisted in her effort to see Jesus, her effort was not perfect. Something was wrong somewhere. She sought to see the dead body of Jesus. She wanted to anoint the dead body of Jesus and weep for the dead Jesus. She never expected that Jesus would rise from the dead. She probably took Jesus as an ordinary holy man. But she came to the wrong place and sought for Jesus. She was expecting to see the body of Jesus in the tomb. Something was wrong in her understanding of Jesus or her Christology.

Mary's search for Jesus was a purely human and emotional search for the dead Jesus. According to her human understanding, it was the dead body of Jesus that she was seeking. That is why she was not able to recognize Jesus, though Jesus stood before her. She mistook him for the gardener. Her mental state determined the meaning or object of her sight. Her presupposition about the dead Jesus prevented her from recognizing the risen Jesus.

### **3. The Reasons for the Search for Hijacked Jesus**

Mary Magdalene frantically searched for the body of Jesus for anointing probably because of the following reasons:

a) *Because of the liberation she experienced*: Jesus liberated her not only from the power of the evil forces, but also from the society that excluded her and stigmatized her as a demon-possessed person. When all in the society rejected her and segregated her, Jesus accepted her as she was and healed her and gave her a new life. Therefore, it is not surprising that she told the other disciples that "they have taken away my Lord." Jesus became her Lord ever since the liberation she experienced. Now the Lord of her life had been taken away by someone, she thought.

b) *Because Jesus was her Teacher*: When the risen Jesus appeared to her, she addressed him as "Rabboni", meaning

teacher. She became a disciple of Jesus and was learning from Jesus. After the crucifixion and death of Jesus she badly missed her teacher. No small wonder that she stood before the tomb weeping.

c) *Because she was closely attached to Jesus:* Mary went to tomb alone in the night and ran when she found that the tomb was opened. Her anxiety can be seen in her complaining to others that “they have taken away the Lord” three times. Four times it is mentioned in the passage that she was weeping (vv.11 twice, 13, 15). This narrative technique of John emphasises the sorrow Mary had when she went into the tomb. Jesus’ addressing her as ‘woman’ and then ‘Mary’ also reiterates their relationship as a teacher-disciple. Upon recognizing the voice of Jesus, and seeing the risen Jesus, she clung to Jesus and did not let him go till the risen Jesus told her that he had to go.

#### **4. Experience of the Risen Jesus Amid Hijacking**

a) *Appearance of Risen Jesus:* To Mary, the risen Jesus looked like a gardener, a common man. In continuity with earthly Jesus who couldn’t be distinguished from ordinary people, especially when the Temple police came to arrest Jesus, the risen Jesus also did not have a special appearance. Just as the earthly Jesus indistinguishably identified himself with the common people, the risen Jesus also did the same. Since Mary did not expect to see the resurrected Jesus, she was not able to recognize him. Thus the continuity between the earthly Jesus and risen Jesus lies in the ordinariness of their appearance.

b) *Voice of Risen Jesus:* Although the risen Jesus first spoke to her, asking her why she was weeping and whom she is seeking (v.15), Mary was not able to identify the voice of Jesus. Only when she heard Jesus calling her name ‘Mary’, like the earthly Jesus who was her teacher and Lord, was she able to recognize Jesus. Thus, the vision of the risen Jesus came to Mary through the aural senses. She was able to identify the voice of Jesus or the call of Jesus. Through her hearing she could connect the earthly Jesus and risen Jesus and recognized that both were the same. Here we can see an astonishing continuity between the loving, endearing voice of the earthly Jesus and the risen Jesus.

c) *Touch of Risen Jesus*: Once Mary recognized the risen Jesus, she clung to him as she did not want the risen Jesus to go away. Unfortunately, in many translations of Jn.20:17, it is said by Jesus, “Do not touch me,” indicating that Mary and Jesus kept a distance. But the Greek Present Imperative of *haptomai* (to touch) used in this verse means, “Do not continue to touch me.” One of the characteristic features of the ministry of the earthly Jesus was his touch. The earthly Jesus violated many purity laws of Judaism to touch those who were considered impure. In fact, touch was a strategy Jesus used not only to openly confront the purity-pollution system but also to show solidarity with the victims of the purity system. Now Mary is experiencing that touch once again – the touch of acceptance, forgiveness, as well as resistance to the system that oppresses and excludes the majority of people. The touch of Jesus is yet another aspect of the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the risen Jesus.

The risen Jesus who appeared to Mary closely resembles the risen Christ who comes continually to the least in the society, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 25:31-46, where the risen Jesus completely identifies with the poor (hungry, thirsty and naked), the sick, the prisoner, and the stranger. The only criterion of inheriting eternal life is one’s willingness to help these poor and helpless people in the society.

## 5. Consequence of Mary’s Experience of Risen Jesus

The sincere and persistent effort Mary made to see the risen Lord, who was thought to be taken away from her, have now paid off. She could see, hear and touch the risen Jesus and could confirm the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the risen Jesus. Jesus entrusts her with the commission to announce her experience to the other disciples, who are referred to by Jesus as “my brothers.” Mary went and proclaimed to them, “I have seen the Lord.” (Jn.20:18) The Perfect tense in Greek used here for ‘have seen’ (*heōraka*), indicates an action that has taken place in the past but has a present consequence. That means, Mary’s experience of seeing the risen Lord in the tomb has a present impact on her. According to the gospels, an apostle is one who has seen the Lord. St. Augustine said, “Mary Magdalene was the apostle to the apostle.” She became the most important apostle in the early church, though her voice was suppressed and her importance was hidden in the course of the history of the early church, characterised as it was by patriarchy.

## 6. Relevance of Mary's Experience of Risen Jesus for Us Today

Although in the present Indian context, the Jesus of the Gospels, who resisted and protested the injustice and oppression of the powers that be, is hijacked by the leaders and interpreters through their presentation of a passive and silent, non-resistant Jesus, Mary's experience of the risen Lord teaches us that the risen Jesus can still be found among the struggles of the common people for their survival. In fact, Mary's experience of the appearance of the risen Jesus gives us the clarion call to expose and resist all attempts to hijack the Jesus of the Gospels who showed his solidarity with the poor, oppressed and marginalized people and to substitute that Jesus with a glorious, triumphalist, plastic and silent Jesus far removed from the common people. Mary's experience teaches us that those who make a sincere and courageous effort to resist the forces in our churches that, through their passive and silent response to the injustice and oppression all around them, take away the Jesus who identifies with the poor and the downtrodden, will be finally victorious because the risen Jesus will reveal himself to them. This revelation of the risen Jesus will inspire us to reimagine our Christology and re-envision our ecclesiology to include those with whom Christ identifies, because, as Ignatius of Antioch puts it, *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* (Where Christ is, that is where the Church is).

Mary's experience of the risen Jesus and Jesus' teaching in Mt.25:31-46 beckon us to revise our Christology and be sensitive to the presence of the risen Jesus among the ordinary people who suffer the most in our society. It challenges us to seek the risen Jesus among the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized sections of the people and meet Jesus in the ordinariness of life and listen to the voice of the risen Jesus among them. The experience of Mary motivates us to embrace the excluded and the underprivileged who protest against injustice and oppression in our midst and feel the touch of the risen Jesus in them. When we are able to see, hear and touch the risen Jesus among the least in our society who struggle for their life and livelihood, each one of us can proclaim like Mary, "I have seen the Lord." If only we can do this, our Easter can be meaningful and we can be called true followers of Christ.



## TRIBUTE

### **“Sudhakar Dada... an International Ecumenical Leader”**

I am deeply saddened to know that Mr. Sudhakar Ramteke, Founder and Director, PRAGATI and former First Chairman of Church of North India Synodical Board of Social Service (CNI-SBSS), New Delhi, and an international ecumenical leader went to be with the Lord on Sunday the 21st March 2021 after a brief illness. He was born in Mure Memorial Hospital, Nagpur on 13th July 1939. He studied MA Sociology, MA in Industrial relations and Personal Management from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.

Many of us met him in the journey of life especially during his involvement in the movement of sustainable development through the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI)- Urban-Rural Mission (URM), Ecumenical Social & Industrial Institute (ESII), Durgapur (WB), CNI-SBSS, Nagpur Diocesan Development Association (NDDA), Church of North India Social Service Institute (CNISSI), Mure Memorial Hospital, Nagpur (MMH), Asian Development Network, World Council of Churches (WCC), and many other organizations. He was a founding member of the Association of Christian Institutes for Social Concern in Asia (ACISCA) as part of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

As founder Director of Ecumenical Development Center of India, he always had a deep concern for sustainable development activities at the grassroots level. He had compassion and care especially for maintaining a healthy environment. He took initiative to help farmers of the Vidharbha region from Nagpur to Gadchiroli, (a tribal district) for irrigation of their land by digging open wells and bore wells for them free of cost through funding from his international networking organizations. He also established a hostel for tribal boys and girls living in deep forest areas of Chamorshi which helped them to pursue higher education. Later same hostel was handed over by him to CNI Nagpur Diocese which is still in service for the tribals.

We belong to the same church i.e. St. Thomas Church, New Colony, Nagpur. I vividly remember seeing him as a child but as soon as I

joined Comprehensive Rural and Tribal Development Project (CRTDP) managed by NDDA in Chandrapur in the year 1989 he became a familiar face to me. I fondly used to call him “Sudhakar dada.”

My memories with him take me back to my first ecumenical foreign trip in June 1990 when I represented NCCI at CCA’s General Assembly held in Manila, Philippines. There were more than 300 delegates from all over Asia. I was pleasantly surprised to meet Sudhakar dada who was already there representing his Asian level organization. He made my participation comfortable in my first international conference. Later in 1996 when I joined CNI-SBSS at Durgapur WB, any person who knew Mr. Sudhar Ramteke as former Director of ESII used to say, “Bilas Bhai you are from Sudhakar dada’s baadi aache i.e. from Nagpur.” They used to share with me his development contributions in that region. He was very close to Late Bishop Vinod Peter who was very keen that Sudhakar dada has to be there as a co-opted member on the management boards of NDDA, CNISSI, and MMH.

He served as Vice-President on all these boards for 1-2 terms and fortunately, I was part of these boards as reporting officer or executive member or as Director/Secretary of the board. His opinions and views were very valuable while drafting policies of the organization or implementing any project by that organization. Late Bishop Dhotekar and Rt. Rev. Paul Dupare former Bishop of Nagpur Diocese also continued to take his advice on many complex matters about development projects in Nagpur Diocese. He was also active in the secular forum of this region and was one of the founder members of “Vidharbha NGO forum.” He had developed very good relations with foreign funding organizations and especially development agencies from Japan, who believed in his philosophy of sustainable development. He has set-up a beautiful ecumenical development center in Lonara village near Nagpur. Many Governments and NGOs from Central India and other places used to conduct their seminar, training programs, and conferences on that campus which is very environmentally friendly.

He was instrumental in mass plantation drive in Nagpur district in 1980-the 90s with the District Collectors. He must have traveled 3-4

times across the world visiting many countries as an ecumenical leader representing various organizations. He wrote many articles and books on Ecumenism and social aspects due to his extensive experience of involvement of people's struggle in different regions of India and abroad. He also had a hobby in poetry and published a mini booklet of his poetry. He immensely contributed to Development Sector through his rich experience from grassroots to international level. I feel glad that his son Sandesh is following his father's footsteps and has taken realms of EDCI to continue Sudhakar Dada's legacy of sustainable development to help people in need.

Many of his friends have shared condolence messages recognizing his contributions and personality stating he was one of those brilliant and down to earth leaders who impacted greatly in their life. Rev. Dr. Ipe Joseph, former General Secretary NCCI said, *"He was a great ecumenist and a balanced thinker. He was a good friend and trustworthy companion."*

His wife Mrs. Dorothy, his son Sandesh, two daughters Veera and Mandira, Son in law Ashish Lawrence, daughter in law Mrs. Minal, grandchildren Sohraab, Stuti, Srishti, other close family members, and ecumenical friends all over the world will miss Sudhakar Dada's charismatic personality in days to come. May the departed soul rest in peace.

**Vilas Shende**

*Director/Secretary,*

***Mure Memorial Hospital, Nagpur***

March 24, 2021



**NCCI GOOD FRIDAY/EASTER MESSAGE 2021****Crucify him ! Crucify him !**

We are living through a time when this high decibel campaign ‘*to crucify*’ is alive and all around us like never before. The intimidation of the religious sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart Society of the Catholic Church on the train to Odisha (and at Jhansi railway station) is the latest of such incidents in the insidious agenda to discredit centuries of unselfish service of the Christian community to the least, the last and the lost in the country who are victims of generations of dispossession. It is an attempt to finish off an entire community that stands by and serves the communities that are deprived, discriminated and systematically disprivileged. We condemn this incident and all such violent attacks on citizens of this country who practice faiths other than those related to dominant communities, particularly those that practice Christianity and Islam.

The dominant narrative around the issue of conversion coupled with anti-conversion ordinances and Acts that embolden fanatical people to take the law into their own hands are paving the way to a culture of mob rule. Although the current targets are minorities, no one will be safe eventually, especially women. If such mobs become more emboldened by the idea that they won't be apprehended, we can expect more such attacks initiated by such vigilante mobs.

We welcome the Union Home Minister Shri. Amit Shah's assurance of strict action against the culprits. But we should see progress in terms of concrete action in this case since such heinous acts disrupt the freedom of individual rights guaranteed by the Constitution including one's right to convert to any religion through exercising one's right to free choice in matters of faith. It is heartening to note the intervention of the National Human Rights Commission in this matter.

Easter faith reminds us of the resurrection of Jesus who was persecuted and killed by the Roman authorities under the pressure of rulers and religious leaders of that period. Resurrection event gives us a hope that intimidation or killing cannot hold sway over the movement(s) that affirms life of All. The liberative faith of over a two-thousand years can know no fetters, nor can be killed. Through faith, here and now, we partake in the resurrection of Jesus and in the eternal life that God shares with us.

Let us therefore challenge the intimidation to be crucified by continuing in the task of proclaiming the good news to the poor, standing together and with each other in calling the haughty to a life of repentance and rectitude.

Come, let us make a solemn renewal of our EASTER faith . . .

**Asir Ebenezer**

*General Secretary*

**National Council of Churches in India**



**Statement about ownership and other particulars about the National Council of Churches Review required to be published under rule 8 of Registrar of Newspapers (Central) Rule 1958.**

**FORM IV**

Place of Publication	Nagpur
Periodicity of the Publication	Monthly
Printer's Name and Nationality	Rev. Asir Ebenezer, Indian
Publisher's Name	Rev. Asir Ebenezer
Nationality	Indian
Address	National Council of Churches in India, Post Box # 205, Civil Lines, Nagpur - 440 001
Editor's Name	Rev. Asir Ebenezer
Nationality	Indian
Address	National Council of Churches in India, Post Box # 205, Civil Lines, Nagpur - 440 001

Name and address of the individuals who own the magazine and partners or share holders holding more than 1% of the total capital: National Council of Churches in India.

I, Rev. Asir Ebenezer, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Sd/-

Signature of the Publisher

March 2021

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**Bank Transfer:** Bank name: INDIAN BANK  
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