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EDITORIAL

Envisaging Freedom vis-a-vis The Economy...

“At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom” said Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India. An overwhelming joy to breathe in a free India was reflected in his words. Freedom for India was a result of widespread resistances to the dominance, domestication and exploitation of an empire and its different forms, eventually driving the colonisers out of the country. The hope for a better India where the mind is without fear and the head is held high had been the driving force for the freedom fighters. Let us commemorate the valour and spirit of the freedom fighters who fought for the independence of the country from the British.

As we celebrate 75 years of Independence, we realise that India has changed drastically. The present regime hopes to declare the emergence of a new India where Lutyens' Delhi is dismantled in order to replace it with the new Vista project as a symbol of new India. When we say Lutyens' Delhi, it symbolises the legacy of the British Empire as it was manifested in Delhi mainly through the grand buildings and vistas built by Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944), who was responsible for much of the architectural design and building during the period of the British Raj. The new Vista project can of course be justified by highlighting it as an act of knocking down the reminders of the colonial regime. Yet reality teaches us that it is easy to erase the visible residues of colonialism but it is not easy to eradicate the colonial spirit which expresses itself through certain dominant values in the society. Reproduction of colonial values can be witnessed in the creation of inferior others and insider-outsider binaries among India's own citizenry. We now witness the sad reality that in place of the colonial masters the native masters with a claim of supremacy are establishing their condescending benevolence upon the native vulnerable.

Ironically by being part of global market system for the last thirty or more years, Independent India is reproducing colonial tactics of exploitation by creating new empires within its socio-political and economic sphere. The recent proposal of the Union Government named 'National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP)' is highlighted by its

critics as a typical example of recreating empires within India. The plan to hand over 6 trillion rupees (\$80.90 billion) worth of state-owned assets and public sector units (PSU) to the private players under privatisation plans gives an impression that the state is becoming a stockbroker. An emerging couple of elites in India resembles the oligarchs in Russia who rapidly acquired wealth by taking up state properties during the privatisation phase in the last years of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced perestroika. Such an oligarchy represents the rule of the few who handle money and power at the cost of the common citizens.

While the government is slashing the tax rates of corporates often in the name of encouraging investments in India, the common citizens bear the brunt of indirect taxes. It is vividly reflected in the pricing of petrol, diesel and cooking gas. As an example, Delhites now pay ₹100.21 for a litre of petrol within which ₹32.90 of the total amount goes to the central government coffer, while the state government is charging nearly ₹19.27 tax to fuel buyers. This means the central government tax alone is nearly 63% of total taxes fuel consumers are paying while buying petrol. Exactly ten years back in 2011 excise duty and state VAT together accounted for around 37 per cent of the retail price of petrol in Delhi.

Certainly, taxation is a tool for nation states to ensure distribution of resources but it ought to be fair taxation. The victims of the crisis have been systematically ignored and excluded by Governments globally. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 it was the transnational banks which received tremendously costly bailout packages made up of taxpayer money. Banks like Lehman and Barclays, benefitted from enslavement. The banks and financial systems received bailouts while whole nations and economies were forced into adopting rigorous austerity measures. Overturning these scandalous mechanisms of both historical and contemporary enslavement and exploitation is an urgent necessity which requires transformation of underlying power structures. The Zacchaeus tax campaign initiated globally by the World Council of Churches, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Council for World Mission and Lutheran World Federation is an example of the campaign for a fair system of taxation that ensures the peaceful existence of communities at the national and global levels.

Zacchaeus is well known to anyone familiar with the Bible. He was a tax collector at the time of Jesus, when the colonial financial and military system prevailed. An encounter with Jesus at his home leads Zacchaeus to the path of repentance and reparation. Zacchaeus' changed ways are signs of the changes needed in our systems so that through the fruit of our work and wealth, the poor are lifted up and those who have been exploited are recompensed.

Let the Church in India take up the challenge to address the unequal distribution of wealth by the state. Going beyond the communal lens through which the Christian minority is viewed, it is incumbent on us to be a prophetic presence by journeying with the vulnerable and the marginalised. Real freedom can be envisioned only when we have economic freedom along with socio-political freedom.

Rev. Dr. Abraham Mathew

The Managing Editor



Freedom Under Market Capitalism

- George K. Alex*

The vociferous claim of the neoliberals was that they have successfully “curbed Leviathan¹” within a short span of time. Milton Friedman claimed in 2002 that neoliberalism succeeded in the establishment of the alternative organization of society and economy, in this manner: “top-down versus bottom up; central planning and control versus private markets; ...socialism versus capitalism”². He further claimed that the liberty of the people from the yoke of the state was materialized through the success of the market capitalism. He had placed binaries between Taiwan and mainland China, West Germany and East Germany, and South Korea and North Korea. After twenty years of his update on neoliberalism, we have realized that authoritarian governments achieved great success in the market by adopting neoliberal policies. Freedom is not the reward of market-capitalism. The paper explores the myth of freedom behind the capitalist expansion. How does market-capitalism endanger human freedom? How does market capitalism pave the way for the return of Leviathan in the Indian subcontinent?

India has covered seventy years of its political freedom and thirty-two years of free-market enterprise. India is now passing through the trajectory of political nationalism versus cultural nationalism. The nexus of market capitalism and cultural nationalism is a scale to measure the real freedom of the people. Freedom is not an amorphous idea it can't stand alone without a moral ground. For Mahatma Gandhi, freedom is the commitment to truth. Gandhi is an exponent of “positive-freedom”. On the other side many scholars have placed Thomas Hobbes as the pioneer advocate of “negative-freedom”. Hobbes defined freedom as “the absence of impediments to motion”³. It is not so simple to understand Hobbesian notion of freedom without a scrutiny of the concept of free-will⁴. Hobbes postulated “free-will”

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¹ The State.

² Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* p.viii

³ A. P. Martinich, *Hobbes*, p.47

⁴ See David Van Mill, argued that Hobbes's concept freedom is a confusing one. On the other hand, John D. Harman argued it is not so confusing.

as a pre-condition for the materialization of freedom. Hobbes argues that the “general will” that is the will of the civil society has a greater potential to restrain the freedom of the individual. In essence freedom is a moral and ethical choice of the individual and collectivity. From Hobbes to Gandhi freedom is a greater consensus of the society for a greater good. What is greater good? Is it liberty? If it is liberty, then liberty for what? Is liberty for life? We must find an answer.

Freedom Under Market Capitalism

Neoliberals put-forward a working definition of the term freedom. It is “a condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as possible in society”⁵. In a neoliberal view economic liberty is a pre-condition for political liberty. They have rejected the concept of collective freedom and metaphysical meanings of freedom. They are trying to make the freedom of the individual loom large⁶. The concept of nationalism and national sovereignty is perceived as a perspective opposed to individual freedom. From these premises, neoliberals appeal for minimum government. Logically, neoliberals stand for the freedom of the individual and the curbing of coercive government with the support of a free-market economy. However, the advancement of market capitalism is not cherishing the ideologues of the neoliberal avant-garde. The spread of radical nationalism, the delusion of the myth of the fragile state, and the curbing of individual freedom were not only witnessed in the neoliberal battlefield of Chile during the coup of Pinochet⁷ but, the spirit of anti-humanism spread across the continents along with market economy and nestled everywhere and finally came to dwell in India with a ferocious face.

Myth vs. Truth

The advocates of neoliberalism said, “the concept of national freedom is analogous to the individual freedom, it is not the same; and the striving for the first has not always enhanced the second. It has sometimes led people to prefer a despot of their own race to the liberal government of an alien majority; and it has often provided the pretext

⁵ F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p.10.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

⁷ Pinochet’s government was the first one to experiment neoliberal policy in the world. Later it was copied by Ronald Reagan in USA, Margret Thatcher in UK and finally the rest of the world including India.

for ruthless restrictions of the individual liberty of the members of the minorities”⁸. Under the veil of individual freedom, the neoliberals are denigrating nationalism. According to their view nationalism is as venomous as racism. It is a mere proposition. On contrary the fact is that market capitalism lavishly uses the ferments of nationalism to strengthen itself. The expansion of market capitalism and the strengthening of cultural nationalism are mutually supportive in the current global context which belittled neoliberal fantasies of freedom. Baldev Raj Nayar explains this paradox beautifully in his book, *The Myth of Shrinking State* (2009, OUP). Globalization of the economy dissolved the entrepreneurial and welfare state. A state of the corporates, for the corporates and by the corporates evolved from its ruins. The agents of the companies elected to the parliament through the electoral process curtailed the real freedom of the people.

The over-strengthening of the nation state is a threat to democracy. The nexus of the market capitalism and nationalism is well-illustrated by V. I. Lenin in his discussion on the “*Theses on the National Question*”. Lenin viewed the nation state as an offshoot of market capitalism. He said, “*fiery speeches about “our native land” try to divide the proletariat*”. The speeches of “our native land” demand the sacrifice of the commons for the nation. The commons were forced to abduct their land and livelihood for the nation in the name of national interest. The ridiculous slogan “one nation, one market” was unquestionably accepted in the name of national interest without reckoning the vast economic, geographic, and cultural disparities of the country. The net result was the erosion of the freedom of the state governments in economic planning and in the implementation of welfare policies. That planning itself be handed over to the market forces was a demand of the neoliberals. The net result was the subjugation of the commons to market forces. The last seventy years of Indian democratic experience witnessed the sacrifices of the freedom of the commons. This is the context in which we need to recount the meaning of freedom in everyday life.

Gandhiji: The Real Alternative

Freedom is not a mere political idea. Neoliberals outrightly rejected the spiritual realm of the concept of freedom. In our view the “coercion of some by others” is not a pure political question but it has a spiritual

⁸ F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p.14.

meaning too. Gandhiji tries to understand freedom as a spiritual experience. He stands for the inner regulations of the expression of freedom, i.e., positive freedom. Gandhiji used the term “SWARAJ”, for the term freedom. It is a synthesis of spiritual and political expressions of freedom. H. M. Vyas noted in the preface of M.K.Gandhi’s book, *Village Swaraj*, “Real Democracy, i.e. Swaraj works for the full freedom and growth of the individual who is the ultimate motive power of the real political system.” He continued, “Village Swaraj as conceived by Gandhiji is thus a genuine and virile democracy which offers a potent cure for many of the political ills that mark the present political systems. Such a pattern of decentralized genuine democracy will have a message for the whole of humanity”⁹. The Gandhian idea of freedom comprises social, moral, and economic meanings. Neoliberals stand for economic freedom is a reductionist perspective of freedom. The world needs a holistic perspective of freedom, and Gandhiji succeeded in offering precisely such an idea. Gandhiji stands for *Poorna Swaraj* (complete freedom). He said, “The Swaraj of my dream is the poor man’s Swaraj. ... Swaraj means the emancipation of India’s skeletons”¹⁰.

The Tricontinental Social Science Research Institute published an article titled “The Great Contest of Our Time Is between Humanity and Imperialism” on 29th July 2021. The article covers the specific context of US blockade against Cuba. The title catches varied issues connected with the expansion of US imperialism, free market competition, and the atmosphere of a new cold war between the US and China. The article presents a clinching critique of U.S. Capitalism:

“The capitalist system is very good at generating vast amounts of commodities and very high qualities of certain kinds of commodities. It is good at producing high-value medical care, for instance, but not so good at producing quality public health care. This has to do with the profit motive. Since there is great social inequality, most of the public does not have cash in their pockets for quality health care, so health care simply is not affordable or possible for the vast majority. It is this attitude towards health and education that shows us the inhumane side of capitalism. During the pandemic, 64 countries spent more to service their external

⁹ H. M. Vyas in M.K. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*.

¹⁰ M.K. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*, pp5-6.

debt than on health care. Such are the ways of the capitalist system: to ensure that wealthy bond holders in the developed world make their money while the poor struggle to survive”¹¹.

Conclusion

Market Capitalism ignored the liberation of the poor, the swaraj of the millions. It empowered central governments, nation states to protect market interest while at the same time waging war against the poor. The management of COVID-19 under market capitalism adversely affected the people’s right to health care, right to livelihood, right to movement, while at the same time the state became omnipotent under the guise of protector, under the garb of the greater good of the society. Actually, the greater good of the society is not the increase in GDP, not national products, not nationalism but humanism. Freedom rests in swaraj. Swaraj is equality, trusteeship, decentralization and so on, in essence, a search for truth and nonviolence.

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¹¹ The Great Contest of Our Time Is between Humanity and Imperialism: The Thirtieth Newsletter (2021) (thetricontinental.org)

Tribal Lost in Urban Society

- Anamika Marian Toppo*

A tribal who is born in the urban society is often unaware of their origin as a tribal person. It should not be said that they are ignorant of their true identity as a tribal, as the society and environment they have grown up in, often does not throw any light in their tribal customs, languages, etc. In the state of Jharkhand urbanization had started when it became a state in 2000, and is still going through this process with the passing time. But a major part of Jharkhand still comes under the rural society with a lot of villages and unexplored places. With the mixture of both the urban and rural environment the new generation faces the problem of realizing who they are in this modernizing society, should they embrace their origins as a tribal community or go along with what the modern society finds more acceptable. With the existing prejudice against the tribal community hidden in plain sight it gets quite difficult for the tribals to openly embrace their origins in their tribal states.

India is a secular country comprised of people of different colour, caste and religion and it is reflected in the society. But with time many old customs and practices are left out from our daily lives in view of the modernizing society. Sometimes it is good as we are able to get rid of the customs and practices which could have been harmful to the society, but we have also started to forget a lot of the beauty of the different customs and practices, as not every old custom or practices are bad and harmful to the society, some of them are the opposite and might bring more profit than harm to the society. The tribal community is one of those communities which have greatly suffered this loss, as with the passing time the modern generation is often unaware of a lot of things regarding their community and have no definite source from where they can fill this gap of knowledge about their community. This gap has been created since the birth of the tribals in this modernizing society.

The initial stage of knowing who they are begins from the house of the child. A child born in the rural area is more aware of the tribal customs

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and practices of their community than the child born in the urban area. This is because the environment in which the child is brought up is rich of the tribal customs and practices of that region and therefore, they themselves are able to have these experiences which get deeply rooted in their mind and contribute to their information of the customs and practices of the tribal community in which they grow up in. On the other hand, the child born in the urban society does not get to have the same experiences as the environment in which they grow up in is more modernized and often lacks the pure tribal customs and practices which is present in the rural area. The child grows up learning about their tribal community indirectly by the information provided by their parents, and if the parents had also not experienced living in the tribal community and their knowledge is only based on the information passed down by the previous generation, then the child's knowledge about their community gets even more detached and seem more like stories rather than something which could be present in the real world.

The second stage where an individual gains more knowledge about themselves and the society to be able to be a part of the society, is the time when the child enters an educational institution, like primary and secondary schools. As a major part of the Jharkhand society is comprised of many different tribes, the tribals are given some benefits in every field, like seat reservations or relaxation in the annual fees for the school, etc. This is also applied in the field of education, so for this the tribal child is often taught what their caste is when they start their primary schooling, so that the child does not miss out on any kind of benefits for the tribal community in the educational institutions. The child often memorizes their caste and tribe, usually without even realizing what those words means, making the child realize that they belong to the community without even knowing anything about the community. It is also the educational institutions where the children with rural background and urban background come in close contact with each other by interacting with each other in a closed space, the school or class, and begin to realize the differences between them, that despite the fact that they might be of the same caste and tribe the child born in the urban society lacks the basic knowledge regarding their tribal community and the child from the rural society being quite knowledgeable about it, the child born and raised in the urban society also realizes that the things which they perceived as mere stories told by their parents and grandparents, actually exists in the present era but

in a different place. This sows the seeds of doubt inside the mind of the urban child as to why there is a difference in experiences between them and the child from the rural area despite being part of the same caste or tribe. With time, both the children interact with each other, often sharing their experiences of the environment in which they have grown up, like the language they speak at home is different from the languages taught in schools or they include or exclude a few activities from their daily life because it's a custom or practice of their tribe, here the urban child comes to experience the tribal customs, like the dances, languages, what the tribals usually wear, etc. But still, it only pours light into a small portion of the vast tribal community which is shrouded in mystery. The picture created of the tribal community in the urban child's mind gets limited to only these things which their friends have told them about, and as they do not find any other source from where they could receive more information, the child puts a pause in their search and exploration of their tribal community which could either be voluntarily or involuntarily, as even though they thirst for knowledge they are unable to find the river of knowledge of tribal community as with time this river has become an underground river.

The place where an individual is able to gather knowledge about the different aspects of life both academic and non-academic is the educational institutions like schools. But with regards to the tribal community the schools do not introduce the students to the topic of tribal community through their academic curriculum, despite the fact that the school is a part of a tribal state like Jharkhand. The topic of tribal community is only discussed as a part of the extracurricular exercise within the school and the initiative is often taken by a small group, like debates organized by schools, tribal awareness programs, tribal songs and dances on special functions of the schools. This limits the knowledge that is being circulated within the school and prevents in sharing a major part of the awareness and knowledge to circulate among the groups who are unaware of the true essence of the state/land in which they are residing. An example of this are the subjects in the academic curriculum that are taught to the students. The different aspects of life are covered by the different subjects provided for the children by the school. Language is one of the most important aspect of Human Beings, which has greatly helped them in evolving as an intelligent species of the planet and help an individual be a part of the society. As one explores the subject of language in schools of

Jharkhand, it is found that this subject is usually comprised of the languages English, Hindi and an ancient language, often Sanskrit. This group of languages has limited the children's vocabulary within these three languages, even though the most commonly used languages in the urban society would be English and Hindi, Sanskrit also helps the child to understand the origin of many Hindi words. But as a tribal dominant state, Jharkhand should introduce the tribal languages in schools as a part of the academic curriculum so that the essence of the tribal community is preserved and carried on for future generations, just as the schools of Odisha and West Bengal include the regional languages of Oriya and Bengali in their academic curriculum. This helps the tribal children born and raised in the urban society to help reconnect to their roots of tribal origin and provide a place from where the tribal students can find more about the language their ancestors used. A language is only forgotten when the people forget about it but the beauty and true essence of the language never vanishes. Just by including the subject of tribal language the child would be able to know more about the tribal community, just as the English language throws light into the English community and the Hindi and Sanskrit languages in the Indian community.

Another subject which plays an important role is spreading information regarding a community is the subject of History. History has been a compulsory subject for most part of the school life and often covers topics of ancient civilizations, different wars, etc. in other words it recounts all the major events of the past. But most of the information present in this subject which is introduced to the students at schools are based on the evaluations made by the colonizers or are only limited to the popular part of the community. This poses great harm for the tribal community as in these History books there are almost no mentions of the existing tribal communities of the past and creates an illusion that the tribals never existed and everything began only after the communities which are mentioned in those History books came into existence. Like for example the basic things which is taught about the state Jharkhand are the many rebellions which led to the separation of Chotanagpur from Bihar and finally the birth of the state of Jharkhand, followed by the scenic beauty of the state. This has limited the true history of the tribal community having the knowledge of its origin cut short and therefore not every tribal is aware of their true history and are often unable to defend themselves and their community

when told that they come from a lineage who lived as savages in the jungle. This is an insult which every tribal faces at least once in their lifetime. But they are rendered helpless when they try to defend themselves and their ancestors as they often lack the core knowledge about the history of their community which could have been a strong base for their defence. A major part of the tribal history is often left out in the academic curriculum and is only introduced to people who seek it outside the core educational institutions of the urban society of Jharkhand. This prevents the open and accessible flow of knowledge about the tribal community, which should have been a direct part of the academic curriculum in a tribal state to help everyone gain knowledge about their origins right from the start of joining a school. The lack of open and easy distribution of tribal language and history has made the tribals to out on knowing their true origin and explore and share more about their tribal community. Instead, they are pushed back and are forced to learn the language and history which is deemed more acceptable in the modern society without the freedom and choice of knowing about themselves and their ancestors.

With time, we are able to see that many tribal youth groups have started to spread awareness about the tribal community more openly and encourages other youths to do the same. But still their awareness is unable to be reached to each and every individual, as they lack sources and man power. With regard to this case, the 2020 and 2021 pandemic lock down has proved to be quite beneficial as the whole state had to be digitally active in this entire period and it was quite impossible to miss out or ignore many of the information circulating online. But still there is a limit to the digital world as many information which is circulated are misinterpreted or lacking in information which proves to be quite misleading to the people who have no prior knowledge about the tribal community. There is a rise in the number of people who want to trace the history of their tribal community and revive many of the tribal customs and practices in the modern society. But to do this a great amount of effort has to be put by the government and the community itself of the tribal state to pave way for the underground river of tribal community knowledge to reach the surface and become a great river spreading knowledge to everyone and helping the tribal who is lost in this urban society to find a path which leads them to their origin.



Reading Racial Discrimination Against Northeast Indians: A Christian Response to the Need for Socio-Economic and Political Egalitarianism in India

- Nampiegongbe Irangchung*

Introduction

One of the very realistic statements of Nelson Mandela against racial discrimination is, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”¹ His words explain that racism is a social virus that must be treated urgently in order to bring social harmony and equality in the world. Racism is not simply a spoken word but a realistic truth in many societies of the world. India is not free from racism and discrimination, be it in social, political, economic, and religious spheres. The main victims of racism in India are the North-Eastern Indian citizens and some foreigners who come to India for education and other purposes.

I, being a northeastern Indian, had so many presuppositions and fear psychosis when I went out to the ‘mainland’² cities like Bengaluru, Kolkata and Chennai for my education. The reason behind this is just because I belong to North-East India (NEI). Since I was a young boy, we were told of so many incidents where the NE Indians were tortured and beaten up in the mainland cities for no reason, thrown out of the moving trains on their journey, sexually abused and murdered, ragging

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¹ Phillip Powell, *Understanding and responding to racism - a Christian perspective*, <https://www.jubilee-centre.org/blog/understanding-and-responding-to-racism-a-christian-perspective> (06/07/2021).

² Mainland Indians or mainland is popularly used across NEI when talking about the rest of the country. The Siliguri Corridor, popularly known as the ‘Chicken Neck’ connects the Northeast to the rest of the country. The size of that connecting land is sometimes allegorically used to denote the ontological gap between the NE Indians and the rest of India.

in the colleges, looted from the streets, spat upon while walking, denied lodging and boarding, insulted with abusive comments, and so on, just because they look (somehow) different from the rest. The racists usually were preoccupied with how Indians should look and they have a stereotyped view of Indianness in their minds. Therefore, seeing people different from their stereotype, they treated them as foreigners and in quite a few cases bullied them or discriminated against them. People from the NEI face racism almost on a daily basis in mainland India even to this day and indeed this cultural and demographic discrimination has been tolerated by the NE Indians for almost half a century. Many precious lives were lost in the evil rage of racism in India. Young people from NEI who went out for higher education to Indian cities found to their shock that they were not always safe and comfortable in their own country. Due to racial discrimination, the NE Indians who are living in mainland India are not free from a precarious feeling even today. Therefore, this article would seek to underscore the historical narratives/events on racism meted against the NE Indian citizens in India and to propose an egalitarian socio-cultural view, with special emphasis from the Christian concept of liberation and shalom.

1. Discrimination and Racism: Natures and Meanings

Technically, discrimination and racism are two different terms that come together when expressing a human behavior in which one person or group undermines or elevates the other person or group on the basis of regional belonging and ancestry. Discrimination in human social system can be understood as ‘treatment/consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit’.³ It is ‘the setting apart of a person or group of people in a negative way, as in being discriminated against’, and therefore carries a more general connotation. Racism on the one hand is discrimination on the basis of one’s race (creed, color, and tribe), in which a person considers his/her race as superior or inferior than others. Likewise, treating someone based on this conception is called racism. Discrimination on the ground of racism is directed against someone’s freedom of living in his/her own country or elsewhere.

³ The English Dictionary V.3.7 (Android App).

Phillip Powell points out that racism in the modern world originated with the rise of European expansionism and is identified especially with Atlantic slave trade.⁴ It is also understood that the root of racism can be traced back even to Old Testament times and got its better definition during early Christian times when Christians began to distinguish themselves from other religious groups. In the case of the Indian society in the past, when caste system was prevailing, the hierarchical structure of caste division was the best example of racism (and to this day, caste practice is still visible in India, though often subtle, and can even be seen in the Christian community, especially in the south). Racism displays a scenario in which the original settlers and the migrant citizens clash for various reasons being monitored by the original settlers. It is often due to aggressions originating from the minds of the natives or original settlers towards the migrant citizens based on their superiority complex. Racial discrimination in India is experienced mostly by the NE Indians at the hands of the mainland citizens.

2. The Big Fight on Racism in India

The debates on racism in India, who are the accused and victims, and the like, are a regular feature in various institutions and social analytical seminars and TV debates in India. The NDTV shows like “Are Indians the most Racist?” (2009), “The Big Fight: Are Indians Racist?” (2014), “The Big Fight: Are Indians Racist? (2016), “We The Racists? India’s Unfair Obsession, Skin-Deep Prejudice” (2017), and the Times Now’s debate show on “Are Indians Racist?” (2016), The Quint’s show on “Are Indians Racist? Questions an African Living in Delhi” (2019) and also the TEDx talks’ on “The Unspoken Reality of Racism in India” by Reena Ngurang on 15th May 2019 and, so on, are some of the prominent media presentations in which a reality check on racism in India is conducted and views from different sides – the Left, the Right and the Centre – are shared. Going by the reality talks occurring in YouTube channels and television shows, and reflecting on the day-to-day happenings, one can easily trace racism in India. One can still pose concerns like ‘Which part of India gets abused and discriminated against the most?’, ‘Which parts of India face killings and sexual violence most?’, and ‘Who are the ones frequently tortured

⁴Phillip Powell, *Understanding and responding to racism*, (06/07/2021).

and murdered in mainland India on the ground of racism?’ and so forth. Giving a cumulative analysis on the issues of racism in India, one’s concern is automatically directed towards the NEI. Even when people try to locate racial discrimination in other parts of India, their focus is always pointed towards the NEI because it is the people of NEI who have experienced racial discrimination in India the most. The south Indians were targeted in India once on the basis of their skin color and also sometimes on the basis of their diets. A quote from Anna M.M Vetticad’s article posted in the Hindustan Times on 24th May 2017, which reads, “*Aaptoh south Indian dikhti hai par aapki behen Indian dikhti hai*”⁵ is vocal enough to make readers understand that racial discrimination was meted out against the South Indians too. ‘Black’ or ‘darkness’ was considered as something unclean and inferior by many central and north Indian racists. And their white complexion was considered as refined or superior in comparison to the blacks.

An African student by name Samuel Jack⁶, who came to India for education, once commented on “Is India a racist country?” in *The Hindu*, in which he shared his personal experience of being a black student/man among Indians. According to him, racism against the Africans in India is linked to the prevalent caste system which is very hierarchical. Black people and Dalits are linked to caste prejudice. He points out that Africans are not even free to smoke in public (although smoking in public is not a good behavior) when other Indian youths can do that freely. African students are not even free to play loud music in India. People become aggressive when they see the black person in the streets. Right from the moment of their arrival in India, the black people could notice that their color would become an excuse for Indians to display all their prejudices on them.⁷ On the other hand, people who are on the political Right says that there is nothing as such like racism in India but the discriminatory issues that we are

⁵ Anna M.M Vetticad, “Let’s Talk About Racism: North Indians are ‘gora-chitta’, dark skin is for the South”, in *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/lets-talk-about-racism-you-look-south-indian-but-your-sister-looks-indian-story-4DgxcprTrZPC7db9rqziWgM-amp.html> (12/07/2021).

⁶ Samuel Jack was the then President of the Association of African Students in India (2017).

⁷ The Hindu, *LEFT, RIGHT, CENTRE COMMENT: Is India Racist country?* [https://C:/Users/HP/Downloads/Is%20India%20a%20racist%20country_%20-%20The%20Hindu\(08/07/2021\).](https://C:/Users/HP/Downloads/Is%20India%20a%20racist%20country_%20-%20The%20Hindu(08/07/2021).)

experiencing is the conflict of cultures which is a law and order problem, not racism.⁸ Rakesh Sinha once told *The Hindu* that ‘racism is a negative value of life which is not a part of Indian psyche, that no society or nation can claim to have achieved a completely ideal stage where its citizens are on their best behavior.’⁹ To him, whether a society is racist or becoming racist can be judged only by the collective consciousness of larger masses. Discrimination is also seen even in the western societies, indeed in quite a strong sense. Therefore, Right-wing ideologues would say that the feeling of egalitarianism rests only upon the few elites and not with the masses. Social realities are a far cry from the academic discourses on an egalitarian society. There was a time when George Yule (1888) and William Wedderburn (1889) became presidents of the Indian National Congress. History reveals that India held around 24,000 Jews and 1,09,754 Parsis in the 1931 census. The Indian National Congress also participated in the anti-apartheid conference of 1927 at Brussels.¹⁰ However, historical narratives do not necessarily depict the truth of the present society and cannot be ruled as one’s originality because the past was not messy but the present is.

According to the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s novel, ‘Invisible Man’ (1952), the invisibility of a person occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with who he came into contact with. In line with Ellison’s expression, Sanjay Srivastava says, “What is the peculiarity of the Indian eye that makes blackness such an invisible – that is, insignificant – thing as to take an axe to it when it seeks normal, human visibility, expressing the same desires and anxieties as those who think of themselves if not as completely white then at least something like possessing whiteness?”¹¹ Whether it be cultural conflict or failure of law and order, or the unfortunate disproportion of the social behavior or the so called ‘Racism’, one thing for sure is that our cities are turning intolerant to strangers and especially to those who fit our stereotype. We are becoming more hospitable to those with whom we are familiar and hostile to those who are outside of our circle. Our

⁸ An extract from Rakesh Sinha’s comment from *The Hindu*. Rakesh Sinha teaches political science at Delhi University and he was also the President of the RSS-affiliated India Policy Foundation.

⁹ *The Hindu*, LEFT, RIGHT, CENTRE COMMENT.

¹⁰ *The Hindu*, LEFT, RIGHT, CENTRE COMMENT.

¹¹ *The Hindu*, LEFT, RIGHT, CENTRE COMMENT. Sanjay Srivastava is a professor of sociology at the Institute of Economic Growth.

hostility cannot be compromised by the claim that people who are minority have become intolerant today. When someone is as human as we are, we have no obligation to consider them inferior than us. When one is an Indian by birth and by citizenship, it is in no manner appropriate to question his or her Indian-ness! Be it discrimination on the ground of region, religion, group, caste, creed, race or on the ground of one's economic progress and development, in no circumstance is it ok to discriminate against people. Today, Indians should keep stereotyping aloof from the real world and live in the real world. And to this end, education must become the tool to eradicate racial discrimination and bring equality and harmony into a pluralist society like India.

3. The Narratives of Racial Discrimination Against the Northeastern Indians

In recent times, many NE Indians suffered as victims of racism in India, especially in the mainland cities. No doubt but even the NE Indians do have the same attitude against the plains dwellers whose appearances are mostly darker than theirs. The reason mostly was the outcome of their fear and insecurity before the mainland dwellers. Some of the tribals are still finding it hard to get rid of their deep-rooted village customs and independent behavior, having been born and brought up under the village feudal norms. Therefore, sometimes it is hard for many tribal students and youths to express themselves freely in cities and towns away from their villages. The unlearned aspects of life can be done away in history but what they fear most is the unexpected treatment from their fellow citizens outside of their homes. Most NE Indians faces discrimination on the grounds of their race, that is, for the way they look and by the region they belong. The NE Indians are similar to the Chinese or to the eastern Asians in appearance. Therefore, on many occasions they were misconstrued as foreigners and were subjected to racial abuse, even to the extent of losing their precious lives in some cases.

It is noticed that the first time NE Indians landed in major cities of India was during the 1950s, and they were caught between the extremes of economic inclusion and social marginality. Economically, most NE Indians get themselves established in major cities with the help of their kin and tribal associations. Since they are minority, they also develop

inferiority complex and feeling of insecurity. Their marginal feeling occurs whenever they encounter discrimination and bullying from the mainland Indians. Above this, most racists thought that NE Indians were hostile in nature and were savage and uncivilized. The racists also consider them as insurgents. The NE Indians are mostly highlanders and they were isolated from the plain dwellers for many centuries. Therefore, in the recent time, when NE Indians expressed themselves in the midst of the mainland dwellers, they were targeted and discriminated. The majority Hindu culture defines the tribals as equal to Dalits and Untouchables (the outcaste). Based on this definition, most Indians express their superiority towards NE Indians. To them the term 'Indian' is exclusively built on stereotypes. So, any Indian who turns out to be different from their stereotyping is considered to be a foreigner. And yet, why discrimination? Should anybody be ill-treated because he/she looks different? Should a country necessarily have the same 'national face'? Should anybody be discriminated because of his/her economic standard? Should citizenship be judged by one's appearance? Above all, should any human treat another human as inferior and liable to be discriminated? If yes, then on what circumstances? These are some few questions that should be asked to perpetrators of racism in India.

The following are some of the few incidents of discrimination against the NE Indians in the mainland India, especially during the Covid19 pandemic:

- a) On January 29th, 2014, a young man name Nido Taniam from Arunachal Pradesh was beaten to death in the Lajpat Nagar area of Delhi, for no other reason than because he looked different.
- b) An engineering student from Manipur by name Michael Lamjathang Hoakip was attacked in Bangalore by some men who forced him to speak Kannada or else to get out of their place. They said to the victim that, "If you are eating Karnataka food, living in Karnataka and you don't speak Kannada please get out."¹²
- c) In 2016, two youths from Mizoram were beaten up in Bangalore for not speaking Kannada.

¹² Maya Sharma, Northeast Student Attacked in Bangalore, Allegedly For Not Speaking Kannada, edited by Deepshikha Ghosh, [https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.ndtv.com/india-news/northeast-student-atacked-in-bangalore-allegedly-for-not-speaking-kannada-680166?famp=1&akamai-rum=off\(19/07/2021\)](https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.ndtv.com/india-news/northeast-student-atacked-in-bangalore-allegedly-for-not-speaking-kannada-680166?famp=1&akamai-rum=off(19/07/2021)).

- d) Two students from Nagaland were brutally tortured for hours by the local men in Gorgaon to teach them a lesson that ‘you don’t belong here’. It was reported that they were saying, “If you Northeast people come here, we will kill you.”¹³
- e) An exchange student from the NE was beaten up in a mall at Noida in 2017.
- f) During this Covid19 pandemic, so many incidents of racism against the NE Indians were noticed. Two Naga boys were not allowed to buy food items from a store in Mysore, on the 21st day of lockdown.¹⁴
- g) Former Indian Idol Meiyang Chang was called “Corona” in Mumbai by two bikers.
- h) A landlord in Gujarat told his tenants to vacate their flats just because he thought them to be Coronavirus spreaders.
- i) A couple in their store in Kolkata hid themselves from a northeast woman who came to buy utilities from their shop considering her to be a spreader of Coronavirus.
- j) In Kolkata, some locals forced the NE students to leave their flats and abused them, saying “Go Corona go” thinking that they brought Coronavirus to their town,
- k) Some NE girls were called by the name “Coronavirus” in Delhi.
- l) A Manipur woman was spat on by a man after he called her Coronavirus in Delhi.
- m) In Pune, a woman was attacked at a shopping mall when shopping, with the attackers accusing her of spreading Covid19.
- n) A youtuber from Punjab by name Paras Singh passed racial remarks against the Congress MLA Ninong Ering from Arunachal Pradesh, based on his look and terming his state to be a part of the Chinese land.
- o) A Garo woman from Nagaland was medically neglected by the medical staffs at a hospital in Delhi (Alpha Hospital) where she lost her life. Her brother-in-law was also discriminated against and beaten by the doctor from that very hospital. After the day’s incident, the man (Lt. Samuel Sangma) was found dead hanging. This case is still an ongoing investigation, now under the CBI’s probe.

¹³ Archit Sharma, “Why Northeast India Face racism in its own country?”, in Times of India, [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/wakeup-india/why-northeast-india-face-racism-in-its-country-20390/\(19/07/2021\)](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/wakeup-india/why-northeast-india-face-racism-in-its-country-20390/(19/07/2021)).

¹⁴ @Viralbollywood YouTube channel reported on 30/03/2020.

There are many more incidents which show racial discrimination against the NE Indians. Many youtubers have shared in their videos reporting cases of racism against NE Indians. India Times (19/06/2020) reported that the NE Indians are labeled as “*tum lok*” instead of “*aaplok*” by many mainland Indians. The terms Chinky, Chinese, Momo, Mongoloids, Dog eaters, Nepali dandewala, and so on are some common terms used to discriminate against NE Indians. The Print (28/03/2020) reported that, over Coronavirus, stories of racism against NE Indians are far worse. The usual racial assaults for the NE Indians are mostly noticed in the form of linguistic terms and social acceptance. The Bollywood film “Axone” (pronounce as ‘Akuni’) of 2019 which is directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, is a drama/comedy which depicts the presence of discrimination against NE Indians in mainland India, where their kind of food is not even accepted by their neighbors. Some hotels denied giving them entry just because they don’t look Indian enough.¹⁵ It is most likely that because of the enmity between India and China, and with the NE Indians possessing similar looks as the Chinese or the eastern Asians, there is an increase in the discrimination against the NE Indians today.¹⁶

4. Christian Response to Racism and the Call for Egalitarian Society in India

India is a pluralistic country where diversity is the color of the society. Democratic values are sometime infringed due to party politics based on region, religion and culture. We have overcome the colonial powers but have not been able to undo the racial color within its society. Political freedom is achieved but the economic freedom and freedom of livelihood is not. Today one can rightly point out that independent India makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly, for it did not improve the status of women, the working class, the Dalits, and the tribals. Therefore, Indian postcolonial attitude does not necessarily possess the egalitarian standard but continues to remain as another form of colonialism.¹⁷ This is exacerbated by the presence of religious fundamentalism, caste hierarchy, racial

¹⁵ Archit Sharma, “Why Northeast India Face racism in its own country?”.

¹⁶ An explanation given in the North East India YouTube channel, 3/3/2021.

¹⁷ Selva Rathinam, SJ, “Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation for India”, in *INDIAN THEOLOGIES: in Search of Methods and Models for Theologizing*, Edited by Mathew Jayanth, SJ, (Pune: Christian World Imprints & Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2017), 62.

discrimination and gender favoritism. The division of occupation on the basis of caste superiority or inferiority is the sign of the degradation of democratic values in Indian society. However egalitarian the constitution may appear, it is only a facial advertisement and a defense mechanism for the few 'haves' and the politically powerful group to prove more opportunities for personal gain. Where is equality in the country where its citizens are hated and discriminated in their own country? Where is justice when some of the citizens are killed and their cases are closed without giving peace and contentment to the victim's family? Is India a free nation for its citizens to exercise their fundamental rights? India is getting infamous for its gruesome behaviors towards Dalits, women and tribals. It is recorded that many Dalits were killed even in the post-independent India; 42 Dalits were killed in Tamil Nadu in (25/12/1968), 11 in Bihar (27/5/1977), 14 killed in Bihar (26/2/1980), 37 in Rajasthan (5-9/6/1992), around 20 in Tamil Nadu during the years 1997 and 1999, and so forth. It is said that crimes against the Dalits and the like have increased up to 16,000 to 18,000 per year in the recent times.¹⁸ Many NE Indians are now getting themselves established in mainland cities by occupying some job niches but sadly they are not able to fit themselves properly into the social fabric of the so called "proper Indian"¹⁹ society as imagined in the mainland. The pervasiveness of racism in India is simply demonstrated in the common use of the word "chinky", a common pejorative label to refer to the NE Indians in the mainland. This usage clearly emphasises that there is some hidden racial ego in the minds of the persons using it. Even children will be found calling the NE students as "chinky bhaiya/didi" and their parents would never discourage them for such behavior. These few outlines define the need for an egalitarian mindset in Indian society.

Mithra G. Augustine pointed out that, 'theology teaches and values human worth and quality of life and tirelessly seek to facilitate, through individual and instrumental efforts, restoration of right relations, justice and peace among people and nations.'²⁰ His words are very

¹⁸ Gabriele Dietrich and Bas Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society* (Kottayam: Christava Sahitya Samithy, 1997), 131.

¹⁹ The term used by IliyanaAngelova in her article "Building a 'Home' Away from Home: The Experiences of Young Naga Migrants in Delhi, PDF.

²⁰ Mithra G. Augustine, "Introduction" in *Theology for our Time*, No. 4, January 1997, 8, cited by Shimreingam L. Shimray, *PUBLIC THEOLOGY: Religion, Human Rights and Politics* (Ukhrul: Shiren Publications, 2016), 158.

relevant for social transformation and for restoring the right relationship for Indians today. There must come a concern from within the context in which we live today. And this concern, like K.C. Abraham said, must call for a paradigm shift in theological thinking within the Christian community first and in the whole Indian society. The Bible does not teach the idea of an uneven social system but speaks enunciatively about the egalitarian society of the “New Heaven” and “New Earth”, where God’s creation will partake equal share. Therefore, human rights or the call for equality for livelihood is the realization that all people are created in the Image of God. To allow the full exercise of one’s God-likeness is to allow them to exercise their human rights/fundamental rights. And denying this human right is to deny the Image of God in him/her. This is also to deny the purpose of God’s creation.²¹ Thus, it is right to say that, criticizing the injustice meted to one individual by another individual based on his/her color, race, region, economic and political privileges must be challenged stringently. In the words of Winston Njongo Ndungane, cited by Shimreingam L. Shimray, “The doctrine of human rights . . . is an attempt to establish a social condition where there is (Sic) harmonious and peaceful relations among the people of the world, and where people are able to realize their full potential that exists between the notion of human rights and the Christian doctrine of (hu)man.”²² The Church must act as an alternative community in which God’s creations would find their full existential potentiality. For this to happen, Christian theology should not escape the contextual realities in India. Indian Christians should engage in critical reflective analysis on social praxis based on the Scripture. As Gustavo Gutierrez has rightly pointed, ‘theology is not, and should not be, detached from social involvement or political action’. If Indian theologians are hesitant to get involved in the social affairs of their society today, then they are shying away from the liberative gospel that Christ has introduced into this world. Failure to participate in building an egalitarian community would cause the right-thinking person to endorse the unfair social realities where racism and discrimination would prevail. However deep the cultural principles of one’s society are, if they are not rooted in the egalitarian landscape, then that is deemed not the beauty of culture but rather a worldview that is deserving of condemnation.

²¹ Shimreingam L. Shimray, *PUBLIC THEOLOGY: Religion, Human Rights and Politics* (Ukhrul: Shiren Publications, 2016), 159.

²² Shimreingam L. Shimray, *PUBLIC THEOLOGY*, 159

Conclusion

In a society like India where pluralism is supposed to exist and a rainbow culture is supposed to flourish, one must learn to respect things that does not belong to him/her or to his/her domain. Racism is against humanity. It veils the expression of human rights. Our rights should be exercised in harmony with rights of others. Civil society should see that each person enjoys his/her right to live freely and express themselves freely within the domain of one's own country. The old understanding of the 'White Men's Burden' and the idea of 'Kill the Indian, Save the Man' or the 'Big Brother's Role' should not be encouraged anymore. Christian theology should engage in social liberation today. In any society where racial discrimination is seen, the emphasis should be on the notion of structural sin, since it is the society, rather than individuals, that is corrupted and requires redemption.²³ Some churches in India still practice the caste system and in such believing communities, one does not find the Gospel of Christ which seeks to free the captives and came to accept the marginalized people. The message of the Cross portrays that God is our co-sufferer and that He partakes in our affliction. But when there is no acceptance in the society, where is the room for the messianic gospel? Should there be two different essences of humanity? Should a creature devalue its own kind? Under what ground is 'life' categorized for discrimination to prevail? Should the Image of God be further categorized for racial subjugation? In no way is it acceptable for one human to treat another human as something less valuable than him/her. Somehow, it is seen that the government of India has set aside a few constitutional guards for the NE Indians in order to protect their human rights violation. During the Covid19 pandemic and the subsequent increase in racism against NEI, Government of India-Ministry of Home Affairs Northeast Division issued a warning letter against the perpetrators of racial crime against NE Indians with regard to Coronavirus. The Government of India's (GOI) policy like the infamous AFSPA is only set to destroy the exercise of one's human rights and create fear psychosis in the innocent public. The armed forces that are there to give security to the citizens are not welcomed but feared. The feeling of losing one's freedom of life is a daily

²³ Liberation Theology emphasis that sin should not only be levelled to individual's periscope. The Latin American Liberation Theology used this hermeneutical approach to counter social injustice.

phenomenon in states like Manipur, Nagaland and in some parts of Meghalaya and Assam. Many NE youths today long to venture out into mainland cities but are psychologically captivated and mentally disturbed. This notion is created only from the worry about becoming prey in the hands of the racists. For how long will Indians be devalued in their own country by their own countrymen? Many Indians are too busy educating their children for competitive exams, only to find themselves forgetting to teach them the geography of India, particularly the Northeast region of India, which is popularly known as the ‘Green Zone’ of India. Of course, it must be said that not all Indians are racist but quite a few are. So, it is not too late to change the mindsets of the significant number of citizens of our country who harbour racial prejudice, many of whom are perhaps doing so out of ignorance and lack of education, and lead them to take the egalitarian route towards a better India. With racism eliminated, there will be mutual respect and dignity for all Indians, from every nook and corner of this great nation. May a genuine egalitarian ethos emerge in this country.

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The Church and its Embracing of a Disciplined Member: A Christian Theological Response

-Ruthla Aier*

Introduction

Humans are created for relationship with others, created for a life in relationship that mirror or correspond to God's own life in relationship.¹ Life on the other hand never ceases to give lessons through experience. It helps us to be motivated, critical, and more aware of things around us. Educators, be it from the secular or religious field, have worked hard to build the world into a better place. Yet in doing so, one cannot deny that certain images are destroyed out of compulsion, custom and traditions, ignorance, cultural impiety, cultural milieu, etc. This article focuses on attitudes towards those persons who are mostly ignored and discriminated against because of their having sinned in the domain of *Porneia* (Physical sexual immorality.²) This particular word is used in this article to draw attention to church's response and disciplining act in such situations.

1. Human Sexuality

Human sexuality is a fundamental modality of the manner in which we relate to ourselves, to all other people and to God. We exist and function as sexual beings; at no time has our sexuality not been a part of us. Human sexuality is as old as human history. The sacred meaning of love and intimacy is now challenged and has attained equal meaning with sex.³

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¹ Mano Emmanuel, *To Faith Add Understanding- An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Kohuwela: CTS Publishing, Colombo Theological Seminary, 2009), 170. (Hereafter, Emmanuel, *To Faith Add Understanding...*)

² John Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationship in the Modern world- A Crucial questions Book*, Vol. II. (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1978), 170.

³ Phanenmo Kath, *Human Sexuality-endangered morality in Cybersonic Era* (Mokokchung: The Tribal Development and Communication Centre (TDCC), 2010), 19. (Hereafter, Kath, *Human Sexuality...*)

God has given the gift of sex to human beings with specific purposes. But because of sin in the world (Romans 3:23) sex has been misused and abused (Romans 1:24-25). Scripture condemns and warns against any misuse of sex (1 Corinthians 6:13-18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Genesis 9:21-23; Leviticus 18:6-18, 20, 22, 23; 20:13 and Deuteronomy 23:17-18)).⁴

The contemporary world is confronted with sexual deviation such as: cyber-sex, pre-marital sex, extramarital sex, incest, fetishism, pedophilia, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, rape etc. The intended purpose of God's creation of human sexuality becomes distorted by means of human forces. Rather we should create a world of healthy relationship, respecting each other as sexual beings, governed by love.⁵

2. Church's Response Towards Misuse of *porneia*

The idea of disciplining via suspension of members from the fellowship of the church is found in only a few New Testament statements, but in later times, it became an established ecclesiastical procedure. Its roots go back to the Old Testament ban applied to those who violated the Mosaic Law and consequently placed themselves outside the covenant relationship (Ex. 30: 22-38; Lev.17: 4).⁶ Excommunication is said to have originated with the teaching of Jesus on binding and losing (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23). It came to be seen as a responsibility of the true church derived from the Lord. The procedure for disciplining sinners and the three steps to be taken prior to excommunication were also delivered to the church by Jesus. The straying one is first to be corrected privately (Matt. 18:15), the object being his reclamation, not the purity of the community of believers. If they do not listen, they are to be corrected before witnesses (Matt. 18:16). Thirdly, the unrepentant offender is to be brought before the society of believers (Matt. 18:17), who are to sever all ties with them if they remain obdurate.⁷

⁴ Mahendra, *A Christian response to Pornography*..., 43.

⁵ Kath, *Human Sexuality*..., 20.

⁶ Donald Guthrie, 'Ex Communication,' *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed., Everett. F. Harrison (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1960), 240.

⁷ F. S. Piggin 'Excommunication,' *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed., Walter A. Elwell (Michigan: Baker House Publication, 1984), 392. (Hereafter, Piggin 'Excommunication,' *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*...)

The practice of the church up to the sixth century emphasized the close connection between excommunication and repentance. From the seventh century a form of excommunication developed apart from the sacrament of penance. The strict requirement that all excommunicated persons should be avoided was relaxed. The Council of Trent also addressed the problem of abuses in the practice of excommunication within the Roman Catholic Church. Bishops were asked not to allow themselves to be made tools of the state, excommunicating according to the wish of temporal rule. They were also enjoined to be moderate in the use of excommunication, for the widespread use of the penalty for slight offences, created new problems.⁸ In course of time we see, the procedure changed for the better, thus, even at present one cannot confine oneself to old laws and traditions, and if necessary, changes should be made.

Disciplining in the worldwide Baptist Church tradition is originally done with an aim to promote 'Spiritual improvement, usefulness, and efficiency.' In terms of excommunication, rarely are members excommunicated apart from sexual 'offence'. The disciplined ones are deprived of little or no association with the Churches. And if they die before being included in the Church, a cross is not allowed on the grave.⁹

The church must continue to embrace the disciplined parents (who have produced offspring out of wedlock) and give equal treatment so that they will not go astray. Every human needs love and needs to belong somewhere, and when they do not receive love or it is not felt at home, they tend to go where love and belonging can be found. This must first be understood or it creates division and builds up grudges against each other. The church should not build up a wall but break the wall and welcome everyone.

When it comes to excommunication, it seems to be directed much more at those persons who have practiced *porneia*, there seems to be no valid

⁸ F. S. Piggin 'Excommunication,' *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*..., 393.

⁹ EyingbeniHumstoe, 'Baptist Polity with Reference to Churches with Nagaland Baptist Church Council [NBCC]: Dilemmas and Concerns: A Theological Approach,' *Clark Journal of Theology-Wholeness in Christ: 40th Anniversary Issue*, ed., A. Temjen Jamir. Vol. II.No.2. July-December 2012 (Mokokchung: Clark Theological College, 2012), 79.

response as to why; some defend it by saying we excommunicate only those who ask. By surveying the present practice of the church, a person who practices *Porneia* seems to be considered as having committed the highest degree of sin and so they are asked indirectly or encouraged to come forward to seek forgiveness. Sin does not have a degree; it is humans who put in the gradations. One should stop grading sin. On one hand, the parents who come forward are disciplined and forgiven and brought back into the folds of the church, while on the other hand the child born out of such a relationship is discriminated against for no apparent fault of his. The Church should work towards having an inclusive community as practiced by Jesus Christ.

3. Theological Response

Sexuality is one of the most sensitive and difficult subjects, almost all the churches in our country consider it a taboo to talk about sex and sexual issues. In order to address this issue seriously, one has to understand sexuality as a divinely ordained nature. It needs to treat sexual issues as religio-theological issues.¹⁰ We are justified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and the gifts of the spirit are equally available to all persons. Our sexuality is not a mysterious and alien force of nature but part of what it means to be human. It is a power to be integrated fully into one's selfhood and to be used in the service of love.¹¹

We accept the Church's teaching on chastity, divorce yet sometimes it takes on a negative attitude to a great physical urge. There are occasional sermons on marriage at weddings or during a mission. the need for modification in the church's moral code of Law seems mandatory, not that it would lead to more adultery or divorce, but surely there is room for more tolerance towards those struggling with very powerful instincts that is apparently always warring with very powerful principles which seem unable themselves to stem the upsurge of the passions.¹²

¹⁰ Mahendra, *A Christian response to Pornography...*, 29-30.

¹¹ James B. Nelson, *Embodiment-An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 188. (Hereafter, *Nelson, Embodiment...*)

¹² R.F.Trevett, *The Church and Sex* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961), 7-8.

Clement of Alexandria wrote in the second century: ‘we should not be ashamed to name that which God was not ashamed to create’, and Tertullian put the Christian attitude very well: ‘Nature should be the subject, not shame, but respect.’ The church should give sex education which gives respect for the proper order of human existence, not silence but teaching all that concerns sexual life.¹³

It is a sad tendency of modern being to either do the right thing in the wrong way or to do wrong thing in the right way. We either hold to the truth obnoxiously or we hold to a lie graciously. We are either a rude angel or a polite devil. Often what poses as a cruel orthodoxy is defeated by what poses as a kind heresy. It is not enough to simply assert that Christians do what God wants them to do-in the church, in the state, and in the home. They must be what God wants them to be as well at all times.

According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the church must be organized around sound doctrine, where the church must teach, exhort, nurture and highlight it in all that it does in both its evangelism and its discipleship, from its worship to its societal presence, the church must have honest answers to honest questions. They must be carried out, and perpetuated in gentleness, openness, kindness and helpfulness. Within the church there should be abundant evidences of true *Koinonia*. At the same time, relations between the church and the community should show forth service, tenderness, understanding, empathy and compassion.¹⁴

According to Paul, those baptized into the church and fall into sin and refuse to repent must be disciplined. But the Church must also practice restoration as well, of those who have been excommunicated but then repent. There are at least three steps. Firstly, the sinner is to be forgiven. It must not be stored away as the basis for a grudge. The case must be closed,¹⁵ secondly the church must ‘comfort them.’ Finally, the repentant person must be formally reinstated to fellowship in the Church.¹⁶ The Churches are uncomfortable to talk about sexuality as it

¹³ George Grant and Mark Horne, *Unnatural Affections- The Impuritan ethic of Homosexuality and the Modern Church* (Tennessee: Legacy Communications, 1991), 90-91. (Hereafter, Grant, *Unnatural Affections*...)

¹⁴ Grant, *Unnatural Affections*..., 70-71.

¹⁵ Grant, *Unnatural Affections*..., 63-64.

¹⁶ Grant, *Unnatural Affections*..., 64-65.

has often been associated with sin, and it is precisely due to this nexus which we've conjured up ourselves, people suffer violence and injustice. So it is only imperative that we respond at a time such as this.¹⁷

The history of the institutionalized church is the history of wall-building to exclude and to excommunicate communities who transgress the "natural" norms of human life, calling them infidels, sinners, immoral, impure, and heretics. Church is essentially an inclusive community, and our attempt to erase its diversity is nothing but new avatars of Babel tower imposing the dominant norm of homogeneity and hetero-normativity as "divinely ordered norms" for all. Here it is imperative on the Church to regain its call to become an inclusive community of hospitality, fellowship, and solidarity.¹⁸

Gustavo Gutierrez, in a homily preached at a Vatican gathering recently challenged the Church to become a Samaritan Church, a church of the compassionate, a church known more for the people we love than the sins we condemn."¹⁹

The Church being specialized in providing ritual markers and rites of passage at birth, marriage and death, needs to devise appropriate rituals for helping people to live in dignity, compassion and hope for the future. Selecting one individual as the scapegoat for guilt and pain experienced by everyone is unrealistic and unhelpful.²⁰

The Church should be the first community in which class stratification and a 'them-us' mentality must be overcome,²¹ or embracing sinners

¹⁷ Arvind Theodore, 'Theological and Ethical Reflection on Human Sexuality,' Editorial, ESHA Team, *National Council of Churches in India, NCC Review* no CXXXVI, no.06, July 2016. 44 (Maharashtra: National Council of churches in India, 2016), 31. (Hereafter, Theodore, *Theological and Ethical Reflection on Human Sexuality...*)

¹⁸ Zachariah, 'Introduction,' *Disruptive Faith, Inclusive Communities...*, xxix.

¹⁹ Zachariah, 'Introduction,' *Distributive Faith, Inclusive Communities...*, xxix.

²⁰ Sue Walrond-skinner, 'Creative Forms of Family life: Can the Church let it Happen?' *Mirror to the Church-reflection on Sexism*, ed., Monica Furlong (SPCK: Great Britain, 1988), 76-77.

²¹ John Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationship in the Modern world- A Crucial questions Book*, Vol. II. (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1978), 71. (Hereafter, Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationship in the Modern world...*)

by categorizing sin by putting a degree to the extent that their children are victimized because of no fault of theirs. For, all human beings, though fallen, have an inborn sense of dignity and justice.²²

There is hardly any preaching or sharing of any sermon related to human sexuality because they believe there are also many larger issues to be dealt with, while some have said that they have indirectly done so, during marriage, Christian family week. Money, sex and power are the most powerful thing that tempts Christians, and when it is not used carefully, it destroys self, family and creates problem in society and church as well.

Even from the life of Jesus Christ we see that he brings a different approach, sweeping aside quibbles about the Law, and his open relationship with all manner of people. He confronted the Pharisees because they judged him on seeing a prostitute weeping on his feet (Lk. 6:47). And embraced the adulterer who was to be put to death by stoning her, as per the Law of Moses (Jh. 8). It was the practice of Jesus to be concerned for the despised and the morally sick.²³ The law of the Old Testament which was followed rigidly by the people of God was transformed by the practice of peace and by embracing sinners and not rejecting them.

Schineller declares that the Church must be willing enough to examine and if necessary, change the passed-down traditions.²⁴ And in order to achieve this the truth must be communicated, which has been used by authors, transferred to the readers that seek to understand the meaning encapsulated in those words and forms, so as to pass that understanding to those of yet another worldview.²⁵ When the Christian ministers around the world are emphasizing on an optimistic approach of ‘I am good you are also good’, where counselors are trying to show the effected, dejected, abused and discriminated people the greener side of

²² Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationship in the Modern world...*, 71.

²³ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 209.

²⁴ Warren G. Ison, *The Cultural Compromise- An Application of the Hegelian Dialectic to the Church-Cultural Interface*, Christian Heritage rediscovered-28 (New Delhi: Christina world Imprints, 2016), 8. (Hereafter, Ison, *The Cultural Compromise...*)

²⁵ Ison, *The Cultural Compromise...*, 10.

life, the church as the mother and nurturer of all this has to play a vital role in building up the relationship between human beings as God has in creating man to be His companion, in making the world a better place to live.

Only in Human Fellowship with other people is the human person truly an image of God (Gen. 1:28). In fellowship before God and with others, the human being is capable of acting for God and being fully responsible to God. The rights of human beings to life, freedom, and self-determination arise together with the human community's claim upon people.²⁶ On the larger perspective we see the restoration of the dignity of human being has been initiated by the society and the world. Humans are basically social beings with fellowship as means to attain full growth and development. What each human being needs in order to grow and become self-actualized cannot be forced out of others.²⁷

When society is trying to find ways to inculcate duties in order to affirm human dignity, to be in solidarity with the people, the church should reconsider the practices that prevent human beings from living a dignified life. A human being is created as a relational creature. One should respond to the creator and develop a living of mutual and peaceful relationship with God and their fellow human beings. Human beings do not exist for the sake of the rule; rules, rather, exist for the sake of human beings.²⁸ The Church should leave the judgment part to God, and embrace the Children regardless of how they were born. And introduce the hope of salvation to both the parent and the Child, which means not only of 'the saving of souls' or going to heaven but responding to Jesus' call and living a new life in the light of Jesus' teaching. It involves a lifelong process of growing in the likeness of, and witnessing for, Christ.²⁹

²⁶ Paul R. Beaumont, ed., *Christian Perspective on Human Rights and legal Philosophy* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 18-19. (Hereafter, Beaumont, ed., *Christian Perspective on Human Rights*...)

²⁷ John R. Saches, *The Christian Vision of humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville: the Liturgical Press, 1991), 37.

²⁸ Beaumont, ed., *Christian Perspective on Human Rights*..., 22-23.

²⁹ Laldingluaia, *Judgment According to the Deeds- An Appraisal of Article X of the Presbyterian Church of India's Confession of Faith*, *Christian Heritage Rediscovered*-24 (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2015), 114.

Conclusion

Cultural restoration doesn't happen overnight. Peace isn't won in a day. So, the sooner we get started, the better off we'll be. The sooner we get started, the quicker the victory will come. In order to get from here to there, we need to set out upon the road. There will never be an ideal time to begin the work that God has set before us in maintaining the integrity of the Church- on the issue of sexual morality or a thousand others fronts. Our commission is not dependent upon conditions and restrictions. Our commission is dependent only upon the unconditional promises of God's word. God has called us to peace (I Cor. 7: 15), to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9), "so then let us pursue the things that make for peace." (Rom. 14:9).³⁰ The present practice of the church is an age-old tradition, which was made with a goal for peace and harmony, and it is well respected thus far. But with the change of time and circumstances, context when people are moving forward, age-old traditions can be improvised or discontinued if they do not have a biblical basis and if it only creates division which is not the purpose of any church. The language of love, peace, and unity should not only be spoken words in the pulpit but must be put into action.

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³⁰ Grant, *Unnatural Affections...*, 88-89.

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“De-link Social Exclusion, Caste and Race from Religious Ethos and Values.”

*-Franklin Caesar Thomas**

“...Unfortunately, in some regions the State authorities have yielded to the pressures of these extremists and have passed unjust anti-conversion laws, prohibiting free exercise of the natural right to religious freedom, or withdrawing State support for those in scheduled castes who have chosen to convert to Christianity.”

Pope John Paul II on 3 June, 2003

Address of John Paul II to the Bishops of India
on their Ad Limina visit.¹

“Continuing the practice of caste-based discrimination and untouchability affecting such a large number of people in so many ways must, therefore, be confronted. It is unfortunate that the practice of caste-based discrimination exists in some churches in India. The Dalit Christians in India are also discriminated against by the state, which denies them certain rights and privileges ascribed to other Dalits as part of its affirmative action. It is becoming increasingly evident that the similar features of the South Asian caste system that are a product of inherited social exclusion and discrimination are shared with a number of other geographically and culturally disparate societies. Asserts its conviction that “caste-based discrimination is a crime” and that “casteism is sin” because it contradicts the Christian teaching that all are created in the image and likeness of God.

World Council of Churches,
Statement on caste-based discrimination
Dated on:02 September 2009.

“Missionaries feel they have done their duty when they convert an untouchable to Christianity. They do not look after their political rights. I find this is a big fault in Christians because they have not

* Adv. Franklin Caesar Thomas, is a Dalit activist and an advocate. The opinions made in this article are by the author in his individual capacity as the victim of a caste ridden society. This article is written not to influence the court or judicial system since the author is a petitioner and an Advocate. This article is just for information. The author can be contacted in Mobile No: 9818805668, E Mail Id: franklincaesarthomas@gmail.com

¹ The word Ad Limina is from the Latin ad limina apostolorum (“to the threshold of the apostles”). An ad limina visit is an obligatory visit made by all bishops to Rome during which they pray at the tombs of St. Peter and St. Paul.

entered into politics until now. It is difficult for any institution to survive without political support. We, Untouchables, though are ignorant and illiterate, we are in movement. That is why we have 15 seats in the Legislative Assembly. Students are getting scholarships, there are government hostels. Such is not the case of Christian students. If an untouchable student getting scholarship gets converted, his scholarship is stopped though his financial status remains same. If you were in politics, things would have been opposed."

An excerpt from the speech by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar delivered to Indian Christians of Sholapur and published in 'Janata' on 05.02.1938, reproduced from 'Dnyanodaya'

"Whether the Harijan is nominally a Christian, Muslim or Hindu and now Sikh, he is still a Harijan. He can't change his spots inherited from Hinduism so called. He may change his garb and call himself a Catholic Harijan or a Muslim Harijan or neo-Muslim or neo-Sikh, his untouchability will haunt him during lifetime. It is one and the same thing whether you call numeral after five, half a dozen or six. Not until untouchability is removed from Hinduism will the taint be removed from Harijans, no matter what label they adopt. Therefore, Harijans have it in their hands either to save Hinduism or to destroy it, as caste Hindus have it in theirs. It is no doubt easier for Harijans to change labels than for caste Hindus to change their hearts, but it may be easier for Harijans to rise superior to every earthly temptation and be consciously steadfast in the faith in which they have been denied by their fellows the most elementary humanrights. It is no doubt difficult for anybody to resist the temptations to which Harijans are exposed today. It will therefore be a marvel if they prove true and cling to their ancestral faith with determination to purify it by conscious supreme effort. They can do this as they could not before for they know that there is a growing body of caste Hindus who are making common cause with them and making reparation for their own past wrongs and the continuing wrongs of fellow caste Hindus. Thus viewed, the Kumbakonam incident is as much a shame of the Roman Church as it is of Hinduism."

Gandhiji in 'Harijan' on 26.12.1936².

² Please see the writing of Mahatma Gandhi concerning with the caste discrimination faced by the Christians of Scheduled Castes Origin/ Catholic Christians at Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu in the Church. It was reported that during Sunday service in St. Mary's Cathedral at Kumbakonam, caste Catholics withdrew from the service when Catholic Harijans entered the Cathedral and seated themselves among caste Catholics, instead of occupying the position intended for them. Commenting on the incident, Gandhiji wrote in Harijan on 26.12.1936.

1. The Issues Exposed

The Paragraph (3) of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 issued in exercise of Article 341(1) of the Constitution of India, says; "Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste" but this is unconstitutional and void, being violative of Articles 14(equality), 15(non-discrimination), 16(non-discrimination in employment) and 25(religious freedom) of the Constitution of India.

The above said order deprives 17 Million Christians of Scheduled Castes Origin people/Convert Christian Members of the enumerated Castes people (simple non-constitutional term is Dalit Christians) the right to avail the Scheduled Castes status as per Indian Constitution 15(4)-getting special privilege in education from the State, 16(4)(A)(B)- getting special privilege in employment from the State, 17-abolition of untouchability, 46-special privileges given to Scheduled Castes, 243D-right to contest from the reserve constituencies of the Village Panchayats, 243T-right to contest from the reserve constituencies of the Municipal Panchayats, 330- right to contest from reserve constituencies of the Indian Parliament/Lower House, 332-right to contest from reserve constituencies of the State Legislative Assemblies, 335-availing privilege in employment of the State, 341 (1) & (2)- finding the Scheduled Castes names and doing amendment for inserting/deletion of the Castes names from the Schedule, 338 (9)-National Commission for Scheduled Castes intervention, 366 (224)- defining the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989 amended in the Year 2018-to get legal protection when Christians of SC Origin people are victimised because of the practice of untouchability.

The order has been justified by the Government of India saying that only Hindu religion recognises the caste discrimination, and hence the Christians of the Scheduled Castes Origin are not entitled to avail the Scheduled Castes status.

2. Government and its Double Standard Revealed

Within this context it is imperative to assert that social exclusion is different from religious dogmas and the following observations and

reports of different departments and agencies of Government of India can be considered to support this reality.

High Power Panel on Minorities, SCs, STs and other weaker sections says;

“The Christians and the Neo-Buddhist need the same kind of concessions for their converts from the scheduled castes as are offered to Hindu and Sikhs. And their plea, we have recommended, should be fulfilled with utmost sympathy. They too suffer from the same economic handicaps and social neglect and isolation as the Hindu Scheduled Castes, as is amply illustrated by us in our report elsewhere.”³

The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders (Amendment) Bill, 1990, the Statement of Objectives and Reasons of the Bill dated on 02.03.1990 says as follows:

“Various demands have been made, from time to time, for extending all the concessions and facilities available to the Scheduled Castes to them also on the ground that change of religion has not altered their social and economic conditions. As a matter of fact, non-statutory concessions of the Central Government available to the Scheduled Castes have been extended to Neo-Buddhists.”

Union of India, Ministry of Welfare’s Note for the cabinet, No. 12016 / 30 / 90 – SCD (Cell), paragraph 25 puts it:

“...The High Power Panel on Minorities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections, in their 1983 Report referred to at Para 12, had also found that earlier disabilities continued even after leaving the Hindu fold. The National Commission on Minorities has also recently recommended the extension of statutory benefits to SC Christians (as also to Muslim converts from these communities) as Scheduled Castes. Taking these factors into consideration, the Ministry of Welfare proposes that the demand be accepted. This will require amendment, by an Act of Parliament ...”

³ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Report on Minorities – Volume (I), 14th June 1983), Page No: 8, Point No: 12.

On 11th March 1996, the then Union Minister for Welfare had proposed one Bill (No: 17) to be discussed in Parliament of India by giving the following statement of objects and reasons:

“Converts to the Christian religion who are of the Scheduled Caste origin are precluded from the statutory benefits and safeguards applying to members of the Scheduled Castes. Demands have been made from time to time for extending these benefits and safeguards to the Christians of the Scheduled Caste origin by granting them recognition as the Scheduled Castes on the ground that change of religion has not altered their social and economic conditions. Upon due consideration of these demands, it is proposed to amend the relevant Constitution (Scheduled Castes) orders to include the Christian converts from the Scheduled castes as the Scheduled castes therein.

Based on the above responses of the Government of India, the Supreme Court of India has made an observation in the case of *A.P. Dairy Development Corporation Federation Versus B. Narasimha Reddy & Ors*⁴:

“In the matter of Government of a State, the succeeding Government is duty bound to continue and carry on the unfinished job of the previous Government, for the reason that the action is that of the “State”, within the meaning of Article 12 of the Constitution, which continues to subsist and therefore, it is not required that the new Government can plead contrary from the State action taken by the previous Government in respect of a particular subject. The State, being a continuing body can be stopped from changing its stand in a given case, but where after holding enquiry it came to the conclusion that action was not in conformity with law, the doctrine of estoppel would not apply. Thus, unless the act done by the previous Government is found to be contrary to the statutory provisions, unreasonable or against policy, the State should not change its stand merely because the other political party has come into power. “Political agenda of an individual or a political party should not be subversive of rule of law”. The Government has to rise above the nexus of vested interest and nepotism etc. as the principles of governance have to be tested on the touchstone of justice, equity and fair play. The decision must be taken in good faith and must be legitimate.”

⁴ *A.P. Dairy Development Corporation Federation Versus B. Narasimha Reddy & Ors.* (2011) 9 SCC 286, Page No. 306, Paragraph No. 40.

3. Realities Revealed

How is social exclusion different from religious perception, advice and teaching? By birth the Christians of Scheduled Castes Origin people inherit the accusation of impurity because of their lower Castes nature and nomenclature. Although African-Americans of America and the Whites were both Christians, racism continues to be practiced by the Whites. Therefore, it is true that Racism is a form of social exclusion which does not have any link with religious perception. Similarly in India casteism has been in practice based on one's birth and profession and which may find some religious legitimisation. However, it is a fact that any form of social exclusion is necessarily not based on religious orientation but there are other cultural aspects also attached to it. The religion one has converted to may disapprove of segregation but if social exclusion is seen as independent of religious values and teaching, then the practice of untouchability persists.

4. Caste discrimination is seen detached from the religious values/teaching in the precedent judgments of the Supreme Court of India

There are a number of judgements highlighting the existence of caste discrimination cutting across religious affinities or its teachings. In a case of Mohammad Sadique (Appellant) Versus Darbara Singh Guru (Respondent) the judgement remarks of Justice Prafulla C. Pant is interesting to be noted. The judgement says; "...It is settled law that a person can change his religion and faith but not the caste, to which he belongs, as caste has linkage to birth..."⁵ In another case of M. Chandra (Appellant) Versus M. Thangamuthu & Anr. (Respondents) Justice. H.L. Dattu & Justice. D.K. Jain observed that;

"Hinduism appears to be a very complex religion. It is like a centre of gravity doll which always regains its upright position however much it may be upset. Hinduism does not have a single founder, a single book, a single church or even a single way of life. Hinduism is not the caste system and its hierarchies, though the system is a part of its social arrangement, based on the division of labour. Hinduism does not preach or uphold untouchability, though the

⁵ The Supreme Court of India, Civil Appellate Jurisdiction, Civil Appeal No. 4870 of 2015, April, 29, 2016.

Hindu Society has practiced it, firstly due to reasons of public health and later, due to prejudices.”⁶

(Copied selectively from the book *Facets of Hinduism* by Sri Swami Harshananda).

In *Kailash Sonkar v. Maya Devi* 3 (1984) 2 SCC 91, which arose out of election from a reserved Assembly constituency in Madhya Pradesh, another three-Judge Bench of this Court examined the question - whether the loss of the caste is absolute, irrevocable so as not to revive under any circumstance. After deriving the history of caste system, this Court observed the following guiding principle to determine the question in paragraph 28:

“Where a person belonging to a scheduled caste is converted to Christianity or Islam, the same involves loss of the caste unless the religion to which he is converted is liberal enough to permit the converttee to retain his caste or the family laws by which he was originally governed. There are number of cases where members belonging to a particular caste having been converted to Christianity or even to Islam retain their caste or family laws and despite the new order, they were permitted to be governed by their old laws. But this can happen only if the new religion is liberal and tolerant enough to permit such a course of action. Where the new religion, however, does not at all accept or believe in the caste system, the loss of the caste would be final and complete. In a large area of South and some of the North-Eastern States it is not unusual to find persons converted to Christianity retaining their original caste without violating the tenets of the new order which is done as a matter of common practice existing from times immemorial. In such a category of cases, it is obvious that even if a person abjures his old religion and is converted to a new one, there is no loss of caste. Moreover, it is a common feature of many converts to a new religion to believe or have faith in the saints belonging to other religions.”

“For instance, a number of Hindus have faith in the Muslim saints, Dargahs, Imambadas which becomes a part of their lives and some Hindus even adopt Muslim names after the saints but this does not mean that they have discarded the old order and got themselves converted to Islam.”

⁶ The Supreme Court of India, Civil Appellate Jurisdiction, Civil Appeal No. 7284 of 2008 Judgement on September 07, 2010.

In the case of K.P. Manu (Appellant) Vs. Chairman, Scrutiny Committee for Verification of Community Certificate (Respondent) the judges highlighted the following in their judgement:⁷

“It is no doubt true, and there we agree with the Madras High Court in G. Michael case that the general rule is that conversion operates as an expulsion from the caste, or, in other words, the convert ceases to have any caste, because caste is predominantly a feature of the Hindu society and ordinarily a person who ceases to be a Hindu would not be regarded by the other members of the caste as belonging to their fold. But ultimately it must depend on the structure of the caste and its rules and regulations whether a person would cease to belong to the caste on his abjuring Hinduism. If the structure of the caste is such that its members must necessarily belong to Hindu religion, a member, who ceases to be a Hindu, would go out of the caste, because no non-Hindu can be in the caste according to the rules and regulations. Where, on the other hand, having regard to its structure, as it has evolved over the years, a caste may consist not only of persons professing Hindu religion but also persons professing some other religion as well, conversion from Hinduism to that other religion may not involve loss of caste, because even persons professing such other religion can be members of the caste. This might happen where caste is based on economic or occupational characteristics and not on religious identity or the cohesion of the caste as a social group is so strong that conversion into another religion does not operate to snap the bond between the convert and the social group.”

In the case of Bramchari Sidheswar Bhai & Ors. etc. (Appellants) Vs. State of West Bengal etc. (Respondents), the judgement, on 2nd July 1995, mentioned that;

“When we think of the Hindu religion, we find it difficult, if not impossible, to define Hindu religion or even adequately describe it. Unlike other religions in the world, the Hindu religion does not claim any one prophet; it does not worship any one God; it does not subscribe to any one dogma; it does not believe in any one philosophic concept; it does not follow any one set of religious rites or performances; in fact, it does not appear to satisfy the

⁷ The Supreme Court of India, Civil Appellate Jurisdiction, Civil Appeal No. 7065 of 2008. Judgment delivered by: Justice. Dipak Misra and Justice. V. Gopala Gowda on February 26, 2015.

narrow traditional features of any religion or creed. It may broadly be described as a way of life and nothing more.”

5. Observation of Church/ Church Organisations

Archbishop George Zur, Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to India in his inaugural address to the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, (CBCI) in the meeting held in Pune during December 1991, made the following observations:

“Though Catholics of the lower castes and tribes form 60 per cent of Church membership they have no place in decision-making. Scheduled caste converts are treated as low caste not only by high caste Hindus but by high caste Christians too. In rural areas they cannot own or rent houses, however, well-placed they may be. Separate places are marked out for them in the parish churches and burial grounds. Intercaste marriages are frowned upon and caste tags are still appended to the Christian names of high caste people. Casteism is rampant among the clergy and the religious. Though Dalit Christians make 65 per cent of the 10 million Christians in the South, less than 4 per cent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests. There are no Dalits among 13 Catholic bishops of Tamil Nadu or among the Vicars-general and rectors of seminaries and directors of social assistance centres.”

Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India, An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities, CBCI DALIT POLICY, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, Published by CBCI Office for Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes, New Delhi-110001, December, 2016 in the Chapter, Status of Dalit Christians, paragraph No, 25, Page No. 15 says as follows:

“...There is wider acceptance that the practice of untouchability and discrimination against Dalits exists in the Church and there is need to address these issues urgently...”

National Council of Churches in India XXVIII Quadrennial Assembly, held at Jabalpur from April 27 to April 30, 2016: Resolution on Public Issues

“Churches must seriously implement the campaign of NCCI “No one can serve Christ and caste”, and actively take measures to end caste-based discrimination within their bodies.”

However, it is important to establish the evidences to prove the socio

and educational backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability since the court has observed the following in *Soosai V. Union of India*, (1985) Supp SCC 590.

“To establish that paragraph 3 of the constitution (Scheduled castes) order, 1950 discriminates against Christian members of the enumerated castes it must be shown that they suffer from a comparable depth of social and economic disabilities cultural and educational backwardness and similar levels of degradation within the Christian community necessitating intervention by the state under the provision of the constitution. It is not sufficient to show that the same castes continue after conversion. It is necessary to establish further that the disabilities and handicaps suffered from such caste membership in the social order of its origin – Hinduism – continue in their oppressive severity in the new environment of a different religious community...”

6. Some evidences/testimonies which prove the socio and educational backwardness of the Christians of Scheduled Castes Origin people.

1. Report of the Committee on Untouchability (Parliamentary Committee), Economic, Educational development of the Scheduled Castes and Connected Documents Year 1969, Government of India, Department of Social Welfare - Present Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (L. Elayaperumal Commission Report), headed by Mr. L. Elayaperumal. Page No: 32, “The Committee found during tours that all Scheduled Castes who got themselves converted to religions other than Hinduism should be given all concessions which are available to Scheduled Castes. This is because the committee found during tours that they suffer from the same disabilities, which the Scheduled Castes suffer.”
2. NCRLM (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities) recommendation to Union of India on 21.05.2007. NCRLM Report volume I, page 154, part 16.3.5 declares as follows: “In view of what has been said above, we recommend

that Para 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order 1950, which originally restricted the scheduled caste net to the Hindus and later opened it to Sikhs and Buddhists, thus still excluding from its purview the Muslims, Christians, Jains and Parsis etc. – should be wholly deleted by appropriate action so as to completely de-link the scheduled caste status from religion and make the scheduled castes net fully religion – neutral like that of the Scheduled Tribes.”

3. NCRLM Report volume I, page 141, Sub division ‘a’
“So, the Presidential Order of 1950 is unconstitutional and it is a black letter written outside the constitution introduced through the back door by an executive order Para 3 of the presidential order and is anathema, which disfigures the beauty of the written Constitution of India.”
4. Mandal Commission Report, Report of the Backward Classes Commission, First Part, Volume I & II, Year 1980, Government of India, Page 55 and 56.
5. Report of Backward Class Commission, Volume I, Government of India headed by Kaka Kalelkar, Page. vi, 160.
6. High Power Panel on Minorities, SCs, STs and other weaker sections (Report on Minorities – Volume (I), 14th June 1983), Page No: 8, Point No: 12. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
7. Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders (Amendment) Bill, 1990, the Statement of Objectives and Reasons of the Bill dated on 02.03.1990.
8. On 11th March 1996, the then Union Minister for Welfare had proposed a Bill (No: 17) & the related Cabinet Note for Bill and Ordinance.
9. National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) was wound up on 30-04-2002.

Volume II, Book III, (vii) Pace of Socio-Economic Change and Development under the Constitution- Back Ground Papers.

10. Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: Prime Minister's High-Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, November, 2006. A Report, SC status for Muslim groups, Pages: 201, 202.
11. "Dalits in the Muslim and Christian communities, A status Report on current social scientific knowledge"; Prepared for the National Commission for Minorities, Government of India By Prof. Satish Deshpande (on 17th January 2008) with the assistance of Geetika Bapna, Department of Sociology, University of Delhi in its, Chapter 5, Page: 83, Conclusion summary of findings.
12. By incorporating the following finding, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes had filed its following response in the Supreme Court of India as Co- respondent. Date: 22.04.2010, "In view of the Full NCRLM Report being laid before the Parliament, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes may reiterate its earlier position & fully endorse the recommendations of the (NCRLM- National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities)."
13. On 18.07.2012, the Co Respondent National Commission for Minorities' Affidavit was filed in the Supreme Court of India, which says:
 "That the Commission again its meeting dated 06.05.1997 made a statutory recommendation under section 9 (1) (g) of the NCM Act recommending in continuation of its earlier recommendation for outright removal of the proviso in (Constitution Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950 which confines the SC status strictly to three specified religions to the exclusion of all other religions. It is necessary in the opinion of the Commission to do so in order to fully implement Constitution's stress on the guarantee of equality before law

and equal protection of law and Constitutional prohibition of all religion-based discrimination.”

Conclusion:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar says;

“My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality.”

Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail,

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

As per the parable of the persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8), justice will be verily given to the impoverished daughters and sons of our soil/ beloved Country, the marginalised convert Christian and Muslim members of the enumerated castes people of India.



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BIBLE STUDY

“Finding the ‘Lost’ Freedom”

John 8:31-36

*-Jianthaolung Gonmei**

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’? Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (NRSV)

Knowing the “Truth”

Perhaps John 8:32 is unwrapped from its Christological context and revolved into an abstract commonality. But, in this Gospel, “truth” does not refer to a philosophical ideal or the opposite of falsehood; it is knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus’ own self. Knowing this “truth” is knowing God, God made present in Jesus, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). Jesus makes this clear in 8:36, when he substitutes “the Son” for “the truth,” saying that the Son makes people free. “As “Son” and “truth,” Jesus himself is the very revelation of God (1:18; 5:19-27; 14:8-10).

It is interesting that Jesus does not present himself as a self-evident truth. That is, he does not expect his hearers to grasp the fullness of his claim all at once or to assess its validity through logic or research. He reveals in a way that they will come to know him by experience as “the truth” if they live with him and remain connected to him and his word.

Universal Thirst for Freedom

During the course of human history across the cultures, people have sought freedom. Some have emphasized inner spiritual or emotional

*Mr. Jianthaolung Gonmei belongs to the Baptist Church. Presently serving as Executive Secretary - Youth Concerns in the National Council of Churches in India, Nagpur

freedom, and others freedom from external restraints (such as slavery or political freedom). People indifferent periods of time have also sought dissimilar freedom in view of their time. Different religious practices seek different kinds of freedom in consonance with their doctrinal teachings. Some seek an experience of oneness with the universe that frees them from the illusion of this world of distinction; others seek enlightenment that involves a detachment from desiring anything in this world. Non-believers seek freedom from the constraints of any objective moral rules. There is a universal thirst for freedom in every walk of life.

In the political realm, varieties of liberation theologies have evolved as a movement emerged from the thirst for freedom against the oppressive measures of injustice and inequality in every aspect of life. For instance, Gustavo Gutiérrez's Theology of Liberation, on the political and economic situation in Latin America; James Cone's A Black Theology of Liberation; Palestinian liberation theology, Dalit theology in India, and Minjung theology in South Korea – to develop a theology that identified with the oppressed; and feminist liberation theology that focuses on cultural problems that have limited women's freedom.

Culture of Freedom and Biblical View of Freedom

Generally, many people in our culture believe freedom to be a lack of norms, rules, or laws restraining us from doing what we want to do or be. This cultural belief is a culture of "freedom from". In fact this freedom is limited if God exists, as expressed by Jean Paul Sartre, an atheist existentialist, who argues that if God exists we couldn't be free. God would be like a cosmic overseer who is always looking and watching every little thing in our lives. However the biblical view of freedom is more of a "freedom from in order to be free to" that we are created to experience.

Freedom in the Old Testament was primarily a freedom from slavery, where there is a provision in the Law for the freedom of slaves in the sabbatical year (Ex. 21:2ff). What the New Testament predominantly proclaims is not political freedom but freedom in Christ from bondage to sin, the Law, Satan, and death. It is not that political freedom or freedom from slavery was unimportant but that there was an even deeper bondage that had to be overcome – the bondage of the will.

Understanding True “Freedom”

Freedom in the New Testament identifies the state wherein even if a person is politically free, that person could still be in bondage. The human will is captivated by sin as humans by nature “love the darkness” and “hate the light” (John 3:19:20). Jesus speaks about this freedom in the classic verses in John 8:31-32. “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” The scribes and Pharisees immediately respond to this statement of Jesus by arguing that they are Abraham’s offspring and have never been slaves, so how can Jesus say that “You shall become free?” Jesus responds that anyone who sins becomes a slave of sin, but “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36).

The “freedom” language appears only in this passage in John’s gospel. The freedom Jesus mentions causes offense to his audience – the Pharisees, who proudly insist that they have always enjoyed freedom by birth as offspring of Abraham. Here it is worth mentioning that the Jewish community is ironically living under the Roman Empire, with their ‘king’ Herod as the puppet of Caesar. However Jesus declares that without him they live as slaves. Firstly, they are enslaved to sin and living as oppressed people. Secondly, this slavery relegates them to inferior status (to the Romans); because of it they cannot claim a permanent place or identity in God’s family politically, socially, religiously. Then Jesus successively shifts his parabolic metaphor to suggest that, as “Son,” only he can ensure true perfect freedom and secure membership in God’s family, rather than claiming membership in Abraham’s family. The true perfect freedom is the freedom that has been lost through the fall of humanity. We can begin to see that “the truth will set you free” is not an affirmation of personal independence or autonomy.

Calvin rightly points out that although we have freedom it may not be perfect. He asserts “Freedom has its degrees according to the measure of their faith; and therefore Paul, though clearly made free, still groans and longs after perfect freedom (Romans 7:24).”¹

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Vol. I, Baker House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989, p.342.

From Freedom Within to Freedom Outside World

Even though the emphasis on “freedom” in the New Testament is not political, social, economic, or religious freedom, there is a sense in which we can say, as in the Old Testament, that new inner freedom eventually leads to consequences in freedom of the outer world. The inner freedom that Christ brought to humanity is the ‘lost’ freedom that is to be re-introduced into humanity where other freedoms grow.

Although Jesus did not fight, as some expected the Messiah to do, for a violent revolutionary overthrow of the Roman Empire, there are instances in his movement and teachings that point towards the importance of personal and political, social and economic freedom. Jesus’ teachings, parables, sermons – Sermon on the Mount, association with the ‘sinners’, poor, sick and oppressed people are the indicators for the movement of justice and freedom for all.

The prophetic movement of freedom led by Jesus is the call for all to follow suit to “proclaim justice” (Matt. 12:18-21) with mercy and compassion. The foundation planted in the inner freedom gives birth to freedom in public socio-political, economic and religious life – a life with justice, peace, equality and love. We are to be prophetic – proclaiming qualities of Jesus in a world of darkness (I Peter 2:9-10), a prophetic movement in the world where acts of injustice and oppression are carried out systematically against individuals, sects, gender, caste, religion, ideologies.

Redemption, above all, applies to all of life, which is not confined to personal freedom but brings into the new community – the Body of Christ – the whole cosmos. Freedom cannot be restricted to inner transformation but extends to all life. The movement of Jesus does not restrict itself to teachings but reaches out to free inwardly and outwardly – personally and socially. The Christ’s inner freedom is to be experienced outwardly towards political, economic, and religious freedom.

Regrettably this experience of outward freedom is hardly visible in the present Indian context. In the context infested with majoritarianism, bigotry, religious fundamentalism and fascism where voices and opinions of differences in any domain are systematically suppressed,

silenced and persecuted, branded as threats to the so called “sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic”. A society celebrating its 75th year of freedom and independence but accompanied by such intolerance does not possess true holistic freedom as is expected of a society (nation) and individual of the ‘free’ world.

The Church (Ecclesia – ‘called out community’) is called to freedom (Galatians 5:13) and asked to be the vanguard of a “freedom” movement, to restore and renew the freedom that has been lost. We are called to fight against injustice, corruption, persecution and oppression wherever we see it in personal and public life. We are called to fight for the rights and liberty of oppressed, give voice to the voiceless, the Dalits, the Tribals/Adivasis, women, children, sexual and gender diverse community. We are called to renew and restore the ‘lost’ freedom and create a society where everyone can experience the freedom to live and let live.

“Let My Country Awake”

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up

into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way

into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

*Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
thought and action –*

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

- Rabindranath Tagore



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NCCI NEWS

Dr. Bennet Benjamin

Born April 21, 1944 – Died August 4 2021

Bennet Benjamin was the 11th child born on 21st April 1944 to the parents Rev. Job Benjamin and Mrs. Muthabaranam Benjamin in a village in Tamil Nadu (Pre-independent). He did schooling wherever his parents moved for mission work. After his University which aptly concluded with a Cultural History of India and Politics, he began his work in the field of Cottage Industries carrying out research through field studies on Arbovirus Research Centre - A Rockefeller-ICMR-VRC Project (1966-1970) at CMC Vellore. He worked as programme Secretary at Student Christian Movement in India (SCMI). He joined Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) and the Ecumenical Christian Centre (ECC) left the comforts and the extensive luxuries of Bangalore to move to Tirupattur from where he developed his work in the Yelagiri Hills living among the native people. Bennet lived and worked for four decades. He founded and directed the Centre for Rural Health and Social Education (CRHSE) in 1978 and worked extensively in the field of Education & Literacy, Health & Nutrition, HIV/AIDS, Micro Small & Medium Enterprises, Rural Development & Poverty Alleviation, and Women's Development & Empowerment.

Alongside his work in-the field, he successfully completed a full-time Course in Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England, 1982, in Mission Studies. He followed that with a special course in Development Studies in Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England, 1983, in for aid administrators. Still unsatisfied, he pursued a full-time course in Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England, 1983, in Cross-Cultural Communication resources.

His knowledge and insights made him an important resource person at conferences and seminars at local, national, and international level. Many of these were with civil society, but his contributions to the ecumenical movement, including the World Council of Churches, Christian Conference of Asia, National Council of Churches in India, YMCAs of India, and as Senior Friend in the Student Christian

Movement. Busy as he was, he wrote frequently in journals, and other publications through which he influenced social thinking. For, these constituted his various niche areas – Social thought, ecumenical visioning, and Development Alternatives. In the professional arena, he was much sought after in the ecumenical circles and in civil society by numerous organizations that were engaged in questions of development, human rights, inter-cultural studies, labour issues, and youth work. A large portion of his work was grassroots and justice oriented. Bennet was not just a campaigner and advocate for the dispossessed the Dalits, Adivasis and Backward Communities, he combined intellectualism with activism. He emerged as a Development Consultant at the national and global level taking his creative skills and energies to make a better world for those who were poor, disempowered, and requiring to acquire and enhance their capacities for their quality of life. He landed up at each locale where he was needed with all his proficiency and wisdom.

In recognition of his life and work, he was awarded the Doctor of Divinity (Honoris Causa) by the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration, Chennai, India in 2002 for distinguished contribution for the life and witness of the Church in Society. He also received the Doctor of Honours (Social Work) from the Open International University for Complementary Medicines, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2007 for excellence in Social Development and Community Empowerment.

The depth and range of Dr. Bennet Benjamin's experiences brought people to his doorstep and him to theirs. He never, even once, acted like the expert who had come to resolve the issues of people. When he chose a place to work, he would say: "I want to learn what the people know and share with them I know. Together we find ways to transform situations of oppression and disadvantage. It was, in this sense, that Bennet chose the build pathways of justice and dignity for people in the margins and who were submerged by discrimination and prejudice.

His life and witness is multi-faceted and punctuated by manifold accomplishments. For a person so widely accomplished, he remained a humble and most approachable 'guru' to anyone who wanted to enhance their own knowledge.

God chose to take him back on the 4th of August 2021 possibly reckoning that he had done his share of witnessing to God's calling in the 77 years of his distinguished life. Bennet will be hugely missed. But the traces of his work and legacy will remain ingrained in the thoughts and minds of those who encountered for generations to come. We have lost a wonderful person but he now sits in God's garden picked as one of special roses. Sheila, his devoted wife, Anju, his loving daughter, Bobby his gentleman son-in-law and Akshu his wonderful granddaughter will miss Bennet but continue to lead the legacy of his faith, love, care and dedication to build a humane society.

- Representing the Civil Society prepared by:

Cynthia Stephen, Kumar Kalanand Mani, Ranjan Solomon, Pradeep Esteves, Inbaraj Jayakumar, Satish Samuel, Victor Raj, Glory Vijaykumar, Willy D'Costa, Sushant Stanley, Shailendra Awale and William Stanley

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Tribute to Fr Dr Abraham Oommen

Fr Dr Abraham Oommen, the renowned Orthodox Christian Scholar and Ecumenist, from the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, fondly known as Abu Achen, was called to eternity on the 27th of August, 2021. Fr Oommen had served as the Executive Secretary at the NCCI for the desk – Unity, Fellowship and Dialogue from 03 January 1992 to October 1997, contributing much to the NCCI network particularly in the areas of Interfaith dialogue, Unity Octave and as a Board Member of the Henri Martin Institute, Hyderabad.

Born in Kottayam, Kerala, he took up seminary studies in 1981 after being inspired for Mission in North India by the LL Metropolitan of MOSC, Dr Stephanos Mar Theodosius, giving up an illustrious job. He completed B.D. with First Rank from the Senate of Serampore, thereafter completing his M.Th. in New Testament (Gold medalist), M.A. in English and a Ph.D. in English Literature. He also taught at the St Thomas Orthodox Theological Seminary, both in Bhilai and Kalmeshwar, in its initial period teaching New Testament. He served as the Diocesan Secretary of the MOSC, Calcutta Diocese for a long period and served many parishes in the diocese, assisting the Late Lamented Dr Stephanos Mar Theodosius Metropolitan and HG Dr Joseph Mar Dionysius, Metropolitan.

Living a simple and a disciplined life, Abu Achen was exemplary in his spiritual life as a priest and as a loving human being to people irrespective of their faith and religion. He envisioned a dynamic mission of the church in North India, reaching out to the poor and the marginalized. An ecumenist at heart, Achen was an ardent reader and writer in various subjects including mission, interfaith dialogue, New Testament, Yoga etc. His scholarly writings were in the form of the following books that were published, *Amazing Grace* ; *A Christian Outlook on Yoga* ; *Paths to Unity* ; *Ecumenical Praxis* ; *The Crown and*

the Gift: Stephanos Mar Theodosius ; Issues in Hindu Christian Relations ; The Milestones ; Media for Society ; Glory wrapped in Shame.

He is survived by his wife Nirmala Kochamma, children Manu and Mahima, both married with their families. The NCCI expresses its heartfelt condolences to all bereaving family members of Abu Achen.

Fr Thomas Ninan
The Executive Secretary (projects), CSA

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