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EDITORIAL**Democratic Dilemmas Exposed...**

“We have decided to repeal all three farm laws and will begin the procedure at the Parliament session that begins this month,” declared India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday, the 19th of November, informing us of his government’s decision to scrap the three controversial farm laws. It is being considered a historic victory of the common farmers of India. “At last, all of our hard work paid off ... I salute the farmer brothers who were martyred in this battle,” said Rakesh Tikait, the farmer leader.

The resilience of farmers against the bill and the way they overcame several hardships and challenges over the last one year is inspirational. They braved the cold winters and summer heat in addition to all the different hurdles created by government machinery and the media- the false narratives, their being branded as anti-national so on. Even tear gas, barricades, lathis and water cannons could not dampen their spirits. Their solidarity for a cause and optimism in their togetherness made it possible for them to win their battle.

However, it has been highlighted by many that the Prime Minister’s decision to roll back the laws and make a rare public apology is tied to the upcoming state elections in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, where farmers form a crucial proportion of the “vote bank”, and farmers’ unions hold significant power and influence. This exposes the possible and dangerous flip side of democracy. If democracy is all about electoral politics and factors influencing it, then democracy shrinks to the level of mobocracy. The powerless and less influential will not get the required consideration in democratic governance, resulting in democracy being solely an affair of majoritarian communities.

It is to check this tendency within an electoral democracy that the architects of our constitution included Article 15(1) & (2), which prohibit discrimination against citizens on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. The spirit behind the inclusion of these articles along with other articles which ensure the minimum guarantee of a dignified life for minorities could very well have emerged from their foresight about the tendency of majorities to acquiesce in the

marginalisation of minorities. The Constitution reminds us that those who cannot influence electoral politics should also have rights which ensure dignity of life in a democratic set up.

“The claim of a country to civilization depends upon the treatment it extends to the minorities” opined Gandhiji. Such experiential expert opinions might have inspired the United Nations to bring forth the “Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities” which was adopted by the General Assembly through a resolution on 18th December 1992. Apart from affirming the dignity and worth of every human being, it also called upon the state to protect the existence of national, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities and enact appropriate legislations to achieve this end. Based on this concept we see the formation of National Commission for Minorities in India in the year 1992.

Following a brief discussion of minority rights, emphasis has been placed on the promotion of a harmonious community which fosters common brotherhood and sisterhood among all the people of India transcending religious, gender, linguistic, regional or sectional diversities. Therefore, preserving our rich heritage of composite culture has to be considered as the primary duty of every citizen. No one should be protected at the cost of others and so a culture of coexistence has to be enhanced and promoted.

The month of November every year is significant for the National Council of Churches in India since in this month the Dalit Liberation Sunday and the Disability Advocacy Sunday are observed along with 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. These observations are meant to affirm the dignity of every human being and a call to the churches to end any kind of segregation and marginalisation. The diversity in creation is the design of God and hence celebrating ‘many’ness is imperative as part of faith expression. Let us strive for a better world where we all learn to live with differences.

Rev Dr Abraham Mathew
The Managing Editor



Caste Identity and Paul

- *Dias Rajasekaran A**

1. Introduction

The theme of caste and Christianity raises the broader issue of the relationship between caste and religion, each in itself a difficult term. The Indian caste system is a complex social structure wherein social roles like one's profession became 'hereditary,' resulting in restricted social mobility and fixed status hierarchies. The idea that caste is a matter of religion, that it is a Hindu institution if not a part of Hinduism, has had extraordinary influence. There is discrimination on the basis of caste system. The same kind of struggle is also found in the New Testament times and Paul addresses it on various occasions. Hence this paper is the study of caste identity in India and the struggles of the people, the Church's position on the social evil of caste-based discrimination and an attempt at assessing the issue in the light of the theology of the Pauline writings.

2. The Complexity of Human Identity

Human identity is very complex. While modern science can explain human identity based on the theory of evolution, religions cannot. Science often reduces the human being to anatomy. Anatomy itself is an act of dividing anything, corporeal or intellectual for examining its parts. As a result, in the modern scientific age there are many reasons and opportunities for people to lose their identities as individuals. However, one's physical relationships comprised of food, clothing, housing, as well as geography, determine one's identity. Likewise, one's family, friends, community, government, managers and co-workers as well as enemies also contribute to one's identity. Modern science as well as materialism cannot exclude these factors.

Even so, Semitic religions do not advocate evolutionary theory for understanding humans or the world. Almost all religions treat humans as individual persons with unique personalities and characteristic

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features. In religions humans are significantly important beings compared with other living beings. In some religions, such as Judaism and the Christian faith, the human being is considered as the crown of creation. In Hindu religions such as Saivism and Vaishnavism, humans have unique identity with God. For the most part, in all religions, humans are considered not to have evolved, but to be created and sustained by a personal God. A human being is a person, which is an idea deriving from the concept of the existence of a personal God, and is therefore capable of making conscious moral choices. Hence, religion and culture provide people a basis for their identity.

In the context of India, culture and religion overlap. Cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's group or culture. In India groups could refer to people groups, castes, clans, tribes, extended families, kulam (A kula is defined as a group of people belonging to the same God (Kula — Devta) and following similar rituals) and Gothrams (Gotra is considered to be equivalent to lineage.). Culture refers also to the religious customs, rituals, practices, languages (sacred/secular), values and world-views that define social groups, such as those based on nationality, ethnicity, region or common interests. Therefore, for Indians, cultural identity such as Dalit, Dravidian, Aryan, etc. are important for people's sense of self and how they relate to others.¹

3. Caste System in India

People in general belong to many social categories that could either be achieved, such as one's profession, or inherited, such as one's gender. The consequences of social categorizations are often not only seen in the dynamics of social interactions, but also in the way social status is represented. For the present research, the Indian/Hindu caste system is of interest, which is an integral feature of the Indian societal structure. The caste system provides a hierarchy of social roles that hold inherent characteristics and, more importantly, remain stable throughout life. An implicit status is attached to one's caste, which historically changed from being merely social roles to that of hereditary roles. This created status hierarchies on hereditary basis with limited social mobility. For instance, individuals born into the highest caste, that is, the *Brahmin*

¹ Samuel Jayakumar, "Towards a Theology of Human Identity," *ERT*, 40, no. 3 (2016): 232-234.

caste have usually been priests and scholars. Individuals born into the *Kshatriya* caste have been warriors and kings. Individuals born into the *Vaishya* caste have been merchants. Finally, individuals born into the *Shudra* caste have been labourers. Besides, there was an additional ‘out-casted’ group called the *Dalits* or the ‘untouchables’ who occupied the lowest step of the social ladder.² In modern India, the Indian government introduced a categorization scheme in which the untouchable castes were categorized as scheduled castes (SC), the backward tribes were categorized as scheduled tribes (ST) and the disadvantaged castes as other backward castes (OBC). The Forward caste (FC) community generally constitutes the upper caste group. The SC, ST, and OBC comprising the historically disadvantaged groups, were provided job opportunities by the government through affirmative action.³ The FC has historically been and, continues to be, in a strong socioeconomic position with the highest status in society. Thus, one of the main objectives of the present research was to examine how status is cognitively represented in the Indian society because of the way caste is perceived. Even now, people in India continue to define their self-identity by means of the caste they belong to and the social group that they find themselves in. Caste membership is thus embedded in society and there is considerable reason to claim that caste, as a type of social identity would probably be one of the most salient identities in the Indian context.⁴

3.1. Caste Pride and Discrimination

Caste identity gives the ‘high castes’ a sense of pride, inherited privilege, power and status.⁵ Before conversion to Christianity, the untouchables of Tamil Nadu had a poor self-image. For instance the Nadars and Paraiyas were described by the upper caste Hindus as

² D. Pick and Dayaram K, “Modernity and Tradition in a Global Era: the Re-invention of Caste in India,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 26/ no. 7, 8 (2006): 284–294. In doi: 10.1108/01443330610680380

³ J. Dreze and Khera R, “The Battle for Employment Guarantee,” *Frontline* 26, no.1 (January, 2009) in <https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl2601/stories/20090116260100400.htm>

⁴ Sindhuja Sankaran, Maciek Sekerdej and Ulrich Von Hecker, “The Role of Indian Caste Identity and Caste Inconsistent Norms on Status Representation,” *Frontiers*, (March, 2017) in <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00487>

⁵ Jebamalai Raja, “The Problem of Caste within the Church,” *Journal of Dharma*, 42, no. 1 (January – March, 1999): 31.

untouchables, a polluting class, outcastes, panchamas (fifth caste), Paraiyas, Shanars, Illapajathi (lowest caste), Kalla (thieves), panaiyeri (Palmyra tree climbers), and so on. They were identified as people who were not entitled to receive mantras, or Brahminical prayers, and were denied access to the Vedas and Scriptures. They did not worship Hindu gods, nor were they served by Brahmins or had any Brahmin priest at all. Moreover, they had no access to the interior of ordinary Hindu temples. They had come to accept that they were nobody. They came to believe what they had been told so often, namely, that they were untouchables who were fit only for slavery and servitude. These are examples of what created the negative identity that the Brahminical Hindu social order had given to the Dalits. Furthermore, they were a people who could not secure profitable and dignified jobs. Unable to own land they were forced to be content with hard and sometimes dirty and degrading labour. They were illiterate because they were denied education. This was always controlled by Brahmins and the upper castes. They were forced to develop their own social customs and manners which were not consistent with the accepted social behaviour of the upper-caste society.⁶

3.2. Prisoners of Social Structures

Caste, poverty and religiosity are the three main factors which play a vital role in affecting the life of the people in India and in determining the role and function of each Indian. Among these, caste has a prime role to play in specifying the status of each person by one's birth. The contempt and humiliation meted out to the outcastes was legitimized by the Hindu Code of Law called Manusmriti which provided each caste with an identity. Manu wrote,

Give a name to a Brahmin which invokes in others the idea of reverence and respect; give a name to a Kshatriya which invokes in others valour and courage; give a name to a Vaishya which invokes in others the idea of wealth and prosperity; give a name to a Sudra which invokes in others the idea of contempt and humiliation.⁷

Hence, it is obvious that while all other castes were given an identity, the so-called panchamas or fifth caste were not given an identity at all

⁶ Jayakumar, "Towards a Theology", 242.

⁷ G. C. Houghton, *Manava Dharma Sastra: The Institutes of Manu* (Delhi: AES, 1982), 275.

in the Brahminical social order. Wherefore, if an untouchable tried to lead a life with human dignity and honour it would be looked upon as an act of rebellion, and an issue of law and order.⁸

The Brahminical tradition designates the minority, powerful high caste people to rule over the majority, powerless low caste through its caste hierarchical system. Dalits are the people who struggle for a real and decent human life within a lifelong imprisonment of the caste hierarchical society. They painfully experience impoverishment, lack of freedom and recognition as human persons, are often in bondage, are always watched, controlled, used, tortured, threatened and treated as animals. Their life is always at stake. All through their life, they are kept in physical and mental agony due to the oppression and exploitation by the powerful caste groups. In short, Dalits are a typical marginalised group of India, characterized by convergence of multiple marginalities and cumulative inequalities.

The laws of Manu reveal the caste arrogance of the higher caste towards the lowest castes. Such laws are religiously coloured and imposed on the oppressed. Hinduism helps to create an understanding that “untouchability is a notion of defilement, pollution, contamination and ways and means of getting rid of that defilement”⁹ The theory of pollution has a highly religiously flavoured caste character created by Brahminism.

3.3. The Church and Casteism

The Church traditionally accepted the same unjust hierarchical caste system and was able to tolerate it without seriously questioning the insidious practice against the dignity and equality of all people. The Indian Church consists of 24 million Christians. This includes 3 million tribals and 15 million Adi Tamils, Adi Andhras, Adi Karnatakas, and these fifteen million Christian Dalits form part of the 155 million Dalits of India. Out of the total number of Catholics in

⁸ Vasantmoon, ed. Ambedkar *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 7 (Pune: Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 71.

⁹ Max Muller ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*. vol. 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 249.

Tamil Nadu (26,78,640), 65% are Dalits (17,41,116) according to the TNBC, 1988 and they are facing discrimination based on their caste identity. Such as

- 3.3.1. The construction of two chapels, one for non-Dalits and the other for Dalits. In some parishes liturgical services are conducted separately.
- 3.3.2. Separate seating arrangement within the same chapel. Dalits are usually seated at the two aisles. Even if there are benches or chairs, the Dalits are required to be seated on the floor.
- 3.3.3. The operation of two separate queues to receive the Sacred Body of Christ. In some places, the Dalits are required to receive communion only after the non-Dalits have done so.
- 3.3.4. The existence of two separate cemeteries and two separate hearses to carry the dead.

These are some of the problems faced by the Dalit Christians within the church.¹⁰

4. Social Hierarchy in the Roman Society

The Roman empire was organized into provinces and client kingdoms. Provincial governors were Roman men of senatorial or equestrian rank sent out for a limited term to govern the province in the interests of Rome. The governance of such provinces did not require a standing army stationed in the province. Provinces of a more volatile disposition and on the borders of the empire were governed by a legate or prefect of equestrian rank supported by one or more legions permanently stationed in the province.¹¹ The elite classes that ruled the empire, including the emperor and the imperial family, the senatorial and equestrian orders, and the curial classes in the empire's many

¹⁰ Raja, "The Problem of Caste", 32, 33.

¹¹ Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime and Paul Andre Turcotte, *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (New York: Altamira Press, 2002), 9.

cities, depended on the production of their estates for the revenues that maintained their social and political privileges.¹²

The patriarchal hierarchical nature of Roman society is evident in its social structure.¹³ In the Roman world, most people lived as subordinate and dependent members of a household with an in-principle-hereditary-male-head (oikodespotes or paterfamilias) who had comprehensive legal powers over family members, employed retainers, and slaves.¹⁴ The social relations and social structure of the Roman world of the first two centuries of the Empire also showed little change. Social stratification continued to be a prominent feature of Roman society.¹⁵ Years of warfare during the expansion of the Roman Empire resulted in an influx of wealth that created a group of “new men” who moved from lower to upper strata. The association of household management with stability of state, the importance of subordination of the lower parties of the dyads for the prosperity of household, and the moral values of modesty of women all indicate the far-reaching power of the unwritten laws. The submissiveness of the inferior parties of the dyads was assumed. As the early Christian church emerged, they must have been familiar with written and unwritten laws regarding household management.¹⁶

5. Identity Issues During Paul’s Time

Paul wanted his recipients to know the doctrine of soteriology (Salvation) as the gospel of Christ.¹⁷ He also wanted to explain the relationship between Jew and Gentile in God’s overall plan of redemption. Since the Jews followed their laws and the sacred days, the gentiles rejected them and hence Paul wanted to unite them all in Christ. In addition, the Jews considered the Gentiles as unclean as they

¹² David S. Potter, *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 298.

¹³ Géza Alföldy, *The Social History of Rome*, trans. David Braund and Frank Pollock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 5.

¹⁴ Nicholas Taylor, “Liturgy and Identity: Conversion-Initiation in Galatians 3: 26-29,” in *Anaphora*, 6/ no. 2 (2012): 5.

¹⁵ Alföldy, *The Social*, 96, 106.

¹⁶ Shi-Min Lu, “Woman’s Role in New Testament Household Codes: Transforming First-Century Roman Culture,” in *Priscilla Papers*, 30, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 9, 11.

¹⁷ Mays, James Luther, *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1996,) 197.

were uncircumcised and they were unhappy with the Gentiles in the church. There existed a social order that promoted slavery as well.¹⁸ Paul wanted to encourage Jews and Gentiles to be well disposed to each other and he urged his audience to participate fully in God's harvest of all people.¹⁹

6. Paul's Teaching

Paul wanted equality for all Christians and he wrote about this in his letters. Paul evokes the union in Christ and unity as Christians as the basis of ultimate identity and destiny shaped not by physical birth but by a shared spiritual rebirth. And he used some of the following arguments to bring about that equality in the churches.

6.1. God does not show Partiality

An eternal truth is that as God deals in judgement without favoritism, likewise He deals in salvation without favoritism. Respect of persons *prosōpolēmpsia*, (“lifting the face”) simply means partiality. God is impartial because He does not change His pattern “to the Jew first,” whether righteousness or unrighteousness is involved.²⁰ Paul's description of God's wrath has in view humankind as a whole, Jew as well as Greek. Here it has been more clearly implied that not only the Jew stands under God's judgment, but also that he stands in the first rank of those who are to be judged. Those who follow the law will be judged based on the law.²¹ Jewish priority (in the history of salvation) is also a priority in judgment first to receive God's wrath as well as first to receive his blessing. As far as judgment is concerned, Jewish priority does not mean a priority of privilege. As Paul points out God has no favourites (Rom 2:11); he shows no partiality between Jew and Gentile.²²

¹⁸ Charles Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Michigan: Baker Academics, 2007), 155,156.

¹⁹ Walter B. Russell III, “An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (April-June 1988):174-184.

²⁰ Thomas Nelson, *KJV Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 2213.

²¹ James Massey and Monodeep Daniel, *Dalit Bible Commentary: New Testament*, vol. 6, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans and Galatians* (New Delhi: Subaltern Studies, 2008), 37, 38.

²² James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1992), np.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of partiality among humans, even in the best of courts, but there will be none in God's Day of Judgment. Because of His perfect knowledge of every detail and because of His perfect righteousness, it is not possible for His justice to be anything but perfectly impartial. Such things as position, caste, community, education, influence, popularity, or physical appearance will have absolutely no bearing on God's decision concerning a person's eternal destiny.²³ Therefore, God does not favour one person over another. For those who have been born again, they are all His children and as such, they are all going to inherit eternal life.

6.2. New Identity in Christ

"Neither Jew nor Greek" depicts the key distinction among humans from the Jewish perspective: between those who were chosen to be God's people and all others. "Greek" is basically equivalent to "Gentile" in Paul's vocabulary. In terms of origin, the verse is usually linked to a baptismal context.²⁴ The claim that distinctions between Jew and Greek had been erased in Christ is key to Paul's argument in Galatians, undercutting the agitators' insistence on law obedience, and is thus perfectly fitting in this context. Paul's claim that believers who have been baptized into Christ "have put on" Christ is probably part of the traditional complex of ideas that Paul is working with in this passage. However, since "slave" and "free" are found in other parallel texts, (1 Corinthians 12:13, Colossians 3:11) it could be that Paul includes the removal of distinction within the two most important social classes in the Roman Empire simply because he is following the tradition.²⁵

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul utilizes a *Haustafeln*²⁶ discussing three pairs of relationships: wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters (Ephesians 5:22–6:9).²⁷ Masters, who are just. He mentions first, what is just, by which term he expresses that

²³ John MacArthur, *Romans*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 136.

²⁴ D. Francois Tolme, "Tendencies in the Interpretation of Galatians 3:28 since 1990," *Acta Theologica* 19, (2014): 107.

²⁵ Douglas J. Moo, "Galatians," in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, ed, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 253, 254.

²⁶ Household codes.

²⁷ Stanley E. Porter, ed. *Paul and His Theology*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Boston, 2006), 307,308.

kindness, as to which he has given injunction in this Epistle (Ephesians 6:8). But as masters, looking down as it were from above, despise the condition of servants, so that they think that they are bound by no law, Paul brings them under control, because both are equally under subjection to the authority of God. Hence that equity of which he mentions. And mutual equity. Some understand it otherwise, but Paul here employed *ισότητα* to mean analogical or distributive right, as in Ephesians, *τὰ αὐτὰ*, (the same things.) For masters have not their servants bound to them in such a manner as not to owe something to them in their turn, as analogical right to be in force among all ranks.²⁸ The preceding argument still leaves the modern reader with a business organizational chart that assumes patriarchy and slavery. At this point a second hermeneutical move must be made: one must distinguish between what Christians did and advocated in the short term and what Christians achieved and are achieving over the long haul. Neither Paul nor Peter advocated the destruction of the Roman social order and its replacement by another. A thorough understanding of how individuals were subject to overlapping categories of identity and how they, especially as slaves, could live out multiple identities, can help us to appreciate the nature of household code discourse as highly idealized discourse.²⁹

6.3. Breaking Down the Wall – Erasing Enmity

For centuries, there had been bitterness and tension between Jews and Gentiles, mainly because of the way proud Jews looked down on Gentiles. Jews had circumcision as the sign that they were God's people; Gentiles did not. Because they were not God's people, Gentiles enjoyed none of Israel's privileges through the covenants and promises. They had no hope for a Messiah and no knowledge of God (11–12). The Jews, having been chosen to receive God's law, considered themselves close to God but the Gentiles far from him. They did not even allow Gentiles into the holiest part of the temple. It was as if a solid wall separated the two.³⁰ This alludes to a wall in the

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Philippians Colossians and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 198.

²⁹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Reading the New Testament Household Codes in Light of New Research on Children and Childhood in the Roman World" *Studies in Religion* 41/3 (sage: 2012): 383.

³⁰ Donald C. Fleming, *Concise Bible Commentary*, (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1994), 531.

temple that partitioned off the Court of the Gentiles from the areas accessible only to Jews. Paul referred to that wall as symbolic of the social, religious, and spiritual separation that kept Jews and Gentiles apart.³¹ The “middle wall of separation” refers to the Mosaic Law, but may be symbolized by the wall in the temple, which separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Jews, the wall beyond which no Gentile was permitted to pass. Stone markers, engraved in Hebrew and Greek, warned Gentiles against crossing the line on pain of death.³²

God had put a difference between Jews and Gentiles so that His purposes in salvation might be accomplished. However, once those purposes were accomplished, there was no difference. In fact, it was His purpose that these differences be obliterated forever, and they are eliminated through reconciliation³³ by the blood of Christ (2:13–16). He showed how believing Gentiles had entered into the family of believing Israel by faith, so that there was, as a result, one people of God united in the one body of Christ.³⁴ That peace has its source in, or, even stronger, is embodied in, Christ.³⁵ Here peace is reconciliation, the abolition of the enmity between Jews and Gentiles, so ‘us’ is inclusive.³⁶

It was this lesson that was so difficult for the early church to understand. For centuries, the Jews had been different from the Gentiles in religion, dress, diet, and laws. Until Peter was sent to the Gentiles (Acts 10), the church had no problems. However, with the salvation of the Gentiles on the same terms as the Jews, problems began to develop. The Jewish Christians reprimanded Peter for going to the Gentiles and eating with them (Acts 11), and representatives of the churches gathered for an important conference on the place of the Gentiles in the church (Acts 15). Must a Gentile become a Jew to

³² W. A. Criswell, *Believer's Study Bible*. Electronic edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Eph 2:14.

³³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), Eph 2:13.

³⁴ Robert B. Hughes and Laney, J. Carl, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 593.

³⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 140.

³⁶ Robert G. Bratcher, and Nida Eugene Albert, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 55.

become a Christian? Their conclusion was, “No! Jews and Gentiles are saved the same way—by faith in Jesus Christ.” The enmity was gone!³⁷ This identification of Christ with the blessings of salvation that he brings can be found in other places in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 1:30; Col 1:27; 3:4).³⁸

The cause of that enmity was the Law, because the Law made a definite distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The dietary laws reminded the Jews that God had put a difference between the clean and unclean (Lev. 11:44–47). However, the Gentiles did not have these laws; therefore, they were unclean. Ezekiel the prophet reminded the priests that their task was to teach the Jews “the difference between the holy and the profane” (Ezek. 44:23). The divine ordinances given by God to Israel stood as a wall between the Jews and the other nations³⁹ but Christ, through his death broke down this wall, abolished the offensive law and commandments, destroyed the hatred and made peace.⁴⁰

7. Identity in Christ and Application to Caste

Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”⁴¹ “In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile”.⁴² So also is Christ; for in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews, whether Gentiles, whether bondmen, whether freemen. In all three of these passages, we see the reference both to “Jew and Gentile” and to “bondman and freeman.” The particular mention of these two forms of outward classification was suggested by the circumstances of the Christian Church generally at that time. Paul is talking about the full equality of Humanity, in other words in Christ there is no discrimination based on Caste, Race and Gender, as he/she is a new creature. Christian life and witness is expected to be radically different from others’ view and way of life. The visible expression of this oneness is – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one Faith, one baptism and one God. While the Brahmanic ethic emphasized the

³⁸ Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 140.

³⁹ Wiersbe, *The Bible*, Eph 2:13.

⁴⁰ Fleming, *Concise*, 531.

⁴¹ Galatians 2:20.

⁴² Galatians 3:28.

graded differences in the society anchored on discrimination and fake unity, the ethic of Jesus Christ offers equality of all. Whatever their social status may be, there is an authentic unity and oneness of humankind. The marginalised are for a genuine unity of the society, provided they are not enslaved. Moreover, this is what the ethic of Jesus Christ offers – the emancipation and liberation of all.⁴³ Paul concludes that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith treats all people equally: “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith”. Both Jews and Gentiles receive God’s gift by believing the gospel.

Conclusion

Committed Christians have involved themselves in the struggle of the Dalits for justice and identified with their struggling brothers and sisters even as God is involved in history, as Jesus has identified himself with humankind.⁴⁴ But a large number of Indian Christians have learned to live with an obvious contradiction: being Christian and being casteist. The Church, which claims its roots from the life, actions and values of Jesus, has aligned itself with the upper castes and for centuries, has created polices that justify and maintain the unjust caste hierarchical system. The practice of casteism is an outright denial of the presence of God in humanity and especially in the Church. Dalits have been persecuted through caste discrimination, selfish motives, wealth, institutions, power, pride, possessions etc. This context urges the church to remove these barriers and to do justice to Dalit Christians. The emerging Dalit movements make the oppressed become more human through their liberative struggles. They awaken them and equip them with a strong determination to resist any sort of dehumanization. The process involves the humanization of Dalits and the Dalitization of non-Dalits that is, an attitude of solidarity with Dalits and their struggle for dignity. The unity we have in Christ should have consequences in the social world. Slave-owners and slaves, to use Pauline terms, have equal status with God, and that should affect the way that they treat

⁴³ Busi Sunil Bhanu, Monodeep Daniel and Indukuri John Mohan Razu, *Dalit Bible Commentary: New Testament*, vol. 8, *The letter of Paul to the Ephesians, The letter of Paul to the Philippians, The letter of Paul to the Colossians, The first & second letters of Paul to the Thessalonians, The letter to the Hebrews* (New Delhi: Subaltern Studies, 2009), 44.

⁴⁴ George Soares, *The Christian Response to the Indian Situation: Human Liberation in the Indian Context* (Pune: JDV, 1983), 157.

each other. If slave-owners realized that believing slaves were family members whom they should love as themselves, then the slave-owners would free the slaves. A person's status in the church should not be limited by the status an unbelieving society puts upon them. Today the Church has to join hands with the emerging peoples' movements like Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, Secular Dalit Movement etc., to translate its Christian vision into practice.

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Encountering Caste in the Church and Society: James Massey as a Text

- *Y.T. Vinayaraj**

Life of a Dalit is a revolt against caste. Caste is a practice of injustice and discrimination legitimized by certain dominant religious and cultural knowledge. Brahmanic Hinduism formulated it and inscribed it into the Indian social body at large. Eventually, it got transmitted to other religious and cultural traditions including Christianity. However, visionary Dalit theologians envisaged Dalit liberation by developing alternative knowledge and resources from both Christian counter-cultural resources and Indian indigenous resources. Dr. James Massey was one of those visionary theologians in India who defined, defended, and expounded the pathos and ethos of the Dalit Christian life for liberation. His contributions to Dalit theology in terms of his writings and speeches make him indispensable for the Indian church and theological academia in their journey towards a de-casteist Christianity in this country. Of course, his death on 3rd March 2015 was an irreparable loss in the educational ministry of the church in India and the ecumenical movement over the globe.

The Rev. Dr. James Massey was an ordained minister of the Church of North India (CNI). He was born in a Dalit family on 11 May 1943 in Punjab. After completing his B. A and M.A. from the Punjab University and B.D Degree from the Serampore College in 1967, he went for his Ph.D. studies in Germany. He was awarded Ph.D. on the topic 'The Doctrine of Ultimate Reality in Sikh Religion' by the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Germany in 1990 and a Postdoctoral degree was also awarded by the same University in 1995 on the topic 'Dalits in India: Religion as Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians.' In 1977 he joined the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCCK), Delhi as its Publication Secretary. He served this institution as the General Secretary for eleven years from 1985-1996. In 1996 he was appointed as a member of the National Commission for Minorities for three years (1996-1999). He was also the founder-director of the Community Contextual Communication Centre (CCCC) an NGO committed to working among Dalits, women, and slum dwellers. He started the Centre for Dalit Studies (CDS) in 2001 to promote writings in Dalit history, theology, and hermeneutics. He continued as the founder-

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director of CDS and CCCC till his death on 3rd March 2015. Dr. Massey is survived by his wife, Mrs. Kalawati Massey, and daughters, Jyoti, Kiran, and Ujwala.

Dr. Massey had a close association with the national and the global ecumenical movement. He served as the director of the WCC Dalit Solidarity Programme under the auspices of the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation program of the World Council of Churches from 1992. He was the Secretary of the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC) for two terms (2005-2011). He was a member of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission, WCC (1999-2006) and the chairperson of the NCCI's Communication Unit from 1998 to 2004. He gave leadership to the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) as its Chairperson. He served as the treasurer of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) from 1990 to 1996. He taught at Nav Joti Post-Graduate & Research Center (NJPGRC), Faridabad, and the Vidya Jyoti Seminary, Delhi. Dr. James Massey has authored or edited several books and numerous articles in various journals. His monographs such as *Roots: A Concise History of the Dalits* (1991); *Introducing Dalit Theology, Towards Dalit Hermeneutics* (1994), *The Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity, and Liberation* (1998) are considered as the foundational works on Dalit Theology in India. Under his initiative, the Centre for Dalit Studies (CDS) has brought out a 30-volume Dalit Bible Commentary.

Taking the Dalit issue as the core of his intellectual engagement, Massey identified the lack of historical roots as the major problem of Dalits in India. For him, a people without history cannot exist in the era of identity. Following Ambedkar, Massey demands the rightful position of Dalits in modern India and urges them to be conscious about their history of agitation against racial discrimination and economic exploitation in this country. Massey analyses why caste is still prevalent in Christianity despite its teachings on equality and freedom. Why do the Dalits continue to suffer oppression and discrimination even after joining a very egalitarian religion like Christianity? Massey thinks that neither the Western missionaries nor the national Christian leaders who lead the Indian church after the missionaries were eager to bring about equality or cast outcasts or lead Dalit Christians toward gaining their rights in the country due to their other-worldly theological moorings and the inherent discourses on individual salvation.

James Massey's contribution to Indian Christian Theology in the process of providing a strong historical foundation to Dalit theology is noteworthy. Initiating a radical terrain for Dalit theology, he argues that Indian Christian theology has ignored the life experience of more than 80 percent of the Indian people, which includes the Christian Dalits who form more than 70 percent of the Indian church. He contends that the Dalit concerns have not been attended by the dominant theology in India and thus it has to focus on the history, experience, and language of the Dalits in India to have an authentic Indian Christian Theology. According to Massey, Dalit Theology as the expression of Dalit pathos and hopes is to be born out of the struggles of Dalits for their human dignity and respect. Dalit Theology has two foci: one, a God who always expresses God's agency through the identification with the marginalized and oppressed; two, Dalits who derive their agency from the faith in a liberator God who is a Dalit in terms of his passion for justice and freedom. Thus, in Dalit Theology, Dalits are the subjects of their history, subjectivity, and salvation. Massey was convinced about the role of Dalit Theology in mobilizing Dalits in constructing a common ideological platform whereby the fragmented people can come together and have a solidarity relationship in between.

James Massey was a prophet of the Indian Church who dared to challenge the authoritarian ecclesiology and the power to envisage the vision of a church of the excluded and the marginalized. Massey urged Indian Church to renounce its Christendom model that frames it as the Church of the elites and the oppressors and thereby nullifies its call and the commission. Instead, he wanted the Church in India to follow the solidarity model to stand in favor of the weak and the vulnerable. This radical vision of mission makes Massey indispensable for the Indian theological academia and the Indian ecumenical movement forever. Let us thank God for gifting him to this land to offer a genuine Christian witness through his life and thoughts. The memories of James Massey will remain with us forever. Whenever there is a passion for theologizing the agonies of the excluded and the disposed of, his energizing presence will inspire us to bring divine salvation as a political reality today in the process of regaining human dignity and respect for the excluded.



Role of Christian Missionaries to Spread Education among Dalit Namasudras of Bengal: A Study to Unearth an Unknown Chapter of History

- Joylal Das* &
- Kulanand Yadav**

Introduction:

Christian missionaries in India have had a positive impact throughout the country, as I want to demonstrate in this article. Those who are impoverished, underprivileged, exploited, and isolated from mainstream culture have been transformed into educationally developed people wherever missionaries come forward to their aid. According to Sujit Kumar Chaudhary, “These missionaries gave hope to these people, they have been trying to help educationally, socially, economically and politically”(180). So, in this article an effort is made to focus on hitherto little known aspects of the impact of Christian missionaries on the educational growth of the Namasudras.

Humanitarian Activities of the Missionaries among the Dalits:

In colonial times, all aspects of Dalit life, including education and health care, were impacted by Christian missionary efforts. In addition to conserving the traditional culture, they also introduced modern life and culture. They had a novel approach to working with lower caste people because they used highly trained and dedicated staff to acquire trust and cooperation, and most significantly, they treated their work as a service. Christian missionaries' humanitarian work in the tribal and Dalit groups appears to have been significantly more successful and impressive than that of the government. It is because they became involved as insiders that they built a sense of belonging among the residents. It is also true that missionaries provided the backward communities education in missionary schools, particularly teaching Christian scriptures to instill a sense of loyalty in the subjects. Missionaries distributed booklets in bazaars and public areas to spread

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Christianity. According to M. Doss, “They work wholeheartedly as insiders thanks to whom they have developed a community feeling with the local population. However, it is also true that missionaries offered this community education in missionary schools, primarily teaching Christian scriptures to make them loyal subjects. Missionaries propagated Christianity widely...”(Doss 7).

Role of Missionaries to Spread Education among Dalits:

As long as the status quo of an egalitarian society can be maintained, the Christian missionaries will remain committed to treating all people equally. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made the observation in a speech that the Christian missionaries had made a significant contribution to the development of tribal and Dalit people. The Christian missionaries went to various tribal areas and some of them spent virtually all their lives there. Nehru says, “The Christian missionaries went to various tribal areas and some of them spent practically all their lives there....I do not find many instances of the people from the plains going to the tribal areas ...Missionaries did very good work there and I am full of praise”(qtd. in Chaodhary 183).

It has been both qualitative and quantitative that the Christian missionaries have made a significant contribution to contemporary education in India. As far as efficiency and management go, Christian educational institutions were right up there with the very best. The Indian government was relieved of a significant burden when these missionaries assisted the Dalits in making the transition from savagery to modernity. The Christian missionaries in India have done a tremendous amount of work in the education of the country's young people. Christian missionaries have created several elementary, secondary, and tertiary educational facilities for the country's youth, regardless of sex, creed, colour, or caste (Chaodhary 185).

Deprivation of the Dalits like Namasudras from Education:

Christian engagement in India, despite the country's vast Hindu population, was well-entrenched throughout the country. That's all for one simple reason. The educational institutions in ancient India were mostly for upper castes in Hindu hierarchical systems or for castes that had been “twice born”. Lower castes and tribal have historically been

marginalized, mistreated, and denied educational opportunity. According to S. Choudhary, “The only reason was that the educational institutions were meant only for the upper caste of the Hindu hierarchical system or only for twice-born castes under the Varna system, especially in Ancient India. Historically, the lower castes and tribals were marginalized, exploited and deprived of educational opportunity”(50) .Thus, they were excluded from all aspects of society. As a result, Christian missionaries were able to recognize and serve the people of India since they had first-hand knowledge with the Indian society's hierarchical structure. Some other areas of society benefited even more when they began serving these folks.

For generations, Namasudras were denied education because of their caste. Varna Hindus in Bengal viewed them as Shudras. Varna Hindus, according to the Hindu social structure, were the only ones entitled to education. As punishment for anyone who learned anything or said anything from the sacred scriptures that flouted social rules, the Shudras would be severely chastised. Before the colonial era, it had been common practice in the region. According to this social order, the Namasudras were not allowed to participate in schooling. Education in India was governed by religious *gurus* who faithfully adhered to the teachings of ancient religious books. Besides denial of education, the Namasudras were also subjected to severe social norms and rituals.

For the sake of their social status, they were confined to menial labour. For centuries, they were denied their rights, resources, and lived on the verge of marginalization. Their exploitation and persecution began during Ballal Sen's reign in the sixteenth century when the Namasudras were labeled as Sudras and exiled from the light of education. According to Naresh Chandra Das, “They were compelled to be backward due to exploitation and oppression which was started during the time of Ballal Sen in the sixteen Century, from when they had been branded as Shudras and were banished from the light of education”(125).

Educational Reform Movement of the Namasudras and Role of Christian Missionaries:

In the colonial era, education was introduced to the lower castes in order to rectify this social order. Under colonial control, initiative of

spreading education was started by Christian missionaries. This initiative opened the eyes of the Namasudras to become aware of their lack of educational opportunities and alternative options. According to Rohidas Mandol, “The beginning of education, in Bengal, paved the way for the Namasudras to be conscious of their deprivation from education and lack of other scopes” (91).

The educational reform movement of Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937) aimed to improve the lives of Bengal's underprivileged citizens. First, he organized the despondent people into a mass education and government employment campaign, which he later expanded upon. In 1872, under the leadership of Guruchand, they staged their first uprising, demanding mass education and government jobs. All of Bengal's lower castes were invited to join Guruchand's educational reform effort. His first and foremost slogan was ‘either take food or not, no misery, but you must educate your children’(Haldar VI).A meeting was held in Dattadanga, a village in the Mollarhat police station of Khulna district in 1881, under the leadership of Guruchand. Guruchand presided over the event. He sketched out a plan for the community's future development and spread of education (Bandyopadhyay 51).

That Education could not be extended among the Namasudras without the help of the British aristocracy and this was realized well by Guruchand Thakur. An event in his life that occurred on February 5, 1910, can be used as an example of this. Orakandi was visited by Samuel Nathan, the regional departmental commissioner at the time. Samuel Nathan was informed by Guruchand Thakur of the genuine predicament of the Namasudras and their urgent need for educational assistance. Namasudras are of low social status. Their lack of education stems from the fact that they are poor. They are the workers of the land. They are self-assured, bold, and incredibly strong. They've been blessed by God with a strong body. They have a lot of potential. It's time to shed the light of education on their life. If this large group of Bengalis were able to read English and engage in the administrative functions, the country as a whole would progress in a true sense. He appealed to the commissioner:

Sir, those who you see here are low-caste Namasudra people. They are poor and illiterate, rather illiterate

because they are poor. They are peasants, the productive class. They are modest, fearless and have immense physical strength. God has given them a good physique. They are bright people. Why don't you help to make the light of education shine on their lives? If this huge group of people from Bengal read English and participate in the administrative services, it would lead to progress in the real sense-progress of the country as a whole. (qtd. in Biswas 253).

Matua Sect and Missionaries: Their Joint Venture for Education:

Guruchand Thakur assumed the responsibilities of his father Harichand Thakur after his death, hoping to meet the social requirements of a newly formed peasant community. In his efforts, he aimed to spread three ideas:

- a. Educate as much as you can
- b. Make a profit and
- c. Treat others with respect.

Guruchand Thakur himself realized that only education could make the Namasudras a human resource because education helps to earn income, which is important to rise in the social ladder. In 1880, a *pathsala* was established in Orakandi in order to fulfill the objective of educating the Namasudras. Toward the beginning of the 20th century, Christian missionaries aided in the process, but the progress wasn't up to the mark. In 1901, just 3.3 percent of Namasudras were literate, and by 1911, this figure had risen to 4.9 percent (Bandyopadhyay 10).

The Matua sect's adherents were not interested in converting to Christianity or any other religion, only in embracing liberal ideas and human values they preach. Mead assured the leaders of Orakandi that he would assist them in whatever way he could, as long as they converted from Hinduism to Christianity. The Namasudras were illiterate and had superstitious beliefs that made it impossible to convert them without first providing them with an education. So, Guruchand thinks, "his people were in the darkness of illiteracy and superstitions and conversion without education would be in vain; rather he should first make arrangement for their education" (Mondal 90)

Role of Guruchand Thakur and Mead to Spread Education among the Namasudras:

Guruchand Thakur was the one to urge the British to put this plan of spreading education among the Namasudras into action. Eradicating illiteracy and launching adult education programmes were also his mission. According to Manohar Mouli Biswas:

The man who took the initiative to push the British rulers to implement this programme was Guruchand Thakur. Eradicating illiteracy and starting adult education were made part of this programme. Evening classes were held to teach illiterate peasants to write. Those who could read and write participated in the programme and helped teach illiterate people to write. As volunteers they came to the class every evening and taught people in the mild flame of a kerosene lamp (259).

In 1906, under the guidance of Australian Baptist missionary Dr. C. S. Mead and Miss Tuck, he opened an English school in Orakandi. Teachers were also appointed with their assistance, when a higher English school was founded in 1908 (Thakur 57). Miss Tuck also founded a day school and a Sunday school for girls (Bandyopadhyay 56). This movement against social injustice and inequality was sparked by missionary teaching during this time. There were no more obstacles in the way of their efforts to transform themselves and their support for colonial rule. Additionally, the missionaries' liberal social ideals and beliefs had an impact on the backwards. After receiving liberal ideas and democratic concepts from the missionaries, the Namasudras were more confident in their ability to rise beyond the social norms of their country. According to Rohidas Mandal,

During this time missionary education played the role of match stick to ignite the movement against the social injustice and inequality. All the barriers before them started to be swept aside because of the effort of reformers among them and support of colonial rule. The missionaries also influenced the backwards with liberal social ideas and values. The Namasudras, getting the liberal values and democratic concepts from the missionaries, became courageous to move upward despite traditional social orders(91).

Some of the Namasudras converted to Christianity, but this was not the majority. Their leaders, on the other hand, were devoted to upholding Hinduism's noble ideals. One of their leaders, Sasibhusan, expressed his concern to his father Guruchand for the first time about the embarrassment of converting from Hinduism to Christendom. When Dr. C. S. Mead promised to help them in every way in exchange for their conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, Guruchand was able to settle the problem without losing missionary support. As Rohidas Mondal writes:

Guruchand explained that his people were in the darkness of illiteracy and superstitions and conversion without education would be in vain; rather he should at first make arrangement for their education then conversion. Guruchand also told Dr. Mead that if his community would get chance to take education they would be grateful to him. Consequently, Dr. Mead made an arrangement for their formal education, and built several primary and secondary schools for them as well as other backward communities of Bengal (Mandol 96).

The Missionaries as the Messiah to the Namasudras:

The Namasudras have never been able to fully connect socially or culturally with the high caste Hindus in their background. The Namasudras, like the Muslims, had already evolved a unique social and cultural identity from that of the Hindus. Even if they were a minority, they were made aware of the social and economic disadvantages they had faced in the past. Instead, the colonial government was perceived as more transparent and fair. Because of this, they developed a new view of history. Unlike the nationalists, who viewed the colonial era as an improvement over the country's pre-British past, the Namasudras saw the British rule as a return to a golden age. Because the Hindu *rajās'* repressive and contemptuous rule had ended, the Vedas could now be studied by the lower castes as well. Equal opportunity and legal protection were offered to all citizens, regardless of rank, by the kind English. As a result of this egalitarian norm, anyone can gain an education, accumulate riches, and thus increase in social status. The blind Hindu monarchs who ruled over Hindu civilization had put them to sleep, as described in a Bengali

journal, *Pataka*. Because of the generosity of the mighty British, who believed in human equality rather than in caste, the Namasudras had emerged from that slumber. In *Pataka* it was written, “We had been put to sleep by the blind Hindu kings who ruled over Hindu society. Today we have woken up from that slumber through the grace of the mighty British, who believe in the equality of men and not in caste.” (qtd.in Bandyopadhyay 13).

Many of the Namasudras’ attachment to colonial power may be traced back to the Christian missionaries, who had long sought to bring hope to downtrodden groups like the Namasudras through charitable endeavours. As the well-educated upper castes lost faith in the potential growth of Christianity, it was the lower castes that assumed dominant roles in such missionary endeavours. The marshy areas of Faridpur and Bakarganj in Eastern Bengal were particularly hard hit during the famine of 1906. The peasants with no land or ploughs to call their own were the worst hit. Aswini Kumar Dutta-led Swadesh Bandhab Samiti provided aid to famine-stricken districts. The *swadeshi* relief fund was primarily used for the benefit of the *bhadralok* classes. Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, worked together with government officials to help the Namasudra peasants of the *biltracts*. As a result, the missionaries and Namasudras grew closer. Dr. C.S. Mead, an Australian Baptist missionary, was arguably the closest to them all. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay:

This feeling of attachment to the colonial rule was also to a large extent due to the influence of the Christian missionaries, who had long been trying through their philanthropic activities to win over such depressed communities like the Namasudras...In Eastern Bengal, during the famine of 1906, the areas which were most affected were the marshy regions of Faridpur and Bakarganj. The worst sufferers were the poorer classes of peasants who had no ploughs or land of their own. The Swadesh Bandhab Samiti under the guidance of Aswinikumar Dutta organized relief work in the famine-stricken areas. But while the *swadeshi* relief fund, as it has been alleged, was largely used for the benefit of the *bhadralok* classes. The Christian missionaries both Catholic and Protestant, did excellent work among the

distressed Namasudra peasants of the *biltracts*, in co-operation with the government officials. This naturally brought the missionaries closer to the Namasudras (Bandyopadhyay 13).

When Guruchand first built the Orakandi School on property granted by him, the local Kayastha *zamindars* refused to help out financially, but Guruchand stepped in to help out. Thus, Mead, who was stationed at Faridpur's district headquarters, received a letter of appeal. The missionaries felt that Orakandi, the most powerful centre in the Namasudra civilization, should be occupied. Mead vowed to help and petitioned for land at an Orakandi conference in early 1905 in order to open a school and a mission.

This missionary was hesitant and distrusted by the older Namasudras, but Harichand Thakur stayed fast and donated property on which Mead began his mission in a tent in 1906, despite their skepticism. Mead started a benevolent dispensary in addition to preaching the gospel to the Namasudras under the guidance of Rev. H. Sutton. As a result, a total of 200 boys from various towns scattered over marshes and rivers attended the elementary school that had been elevated to the level of a high school. Miss Tuck supervised the opening of a day and Sunday school for girls. At Orakandi, nurse Thomson cared for Namasudra widows at the Widow's Home, which provided them with a safe haven. Kamala Bose, a young Bengali Christian woman, has been striving to improve the lives of Namasudra women in Gopalganj (Bandyopadhyay 14)

Conclusion:

In promoting English education and social services, the Christian missionaries displayed democratic ideals. Through the use of English education and social service, they attempted to achieve their goals by disseminating their own culture and religion throughout the colony. They emphasized the importance of a democratic approach to all aspects of society, regardless of caste or gender. When missionaries saw the status and progressive attitude of the Namasudras, they supported their efforts to ensure education for both boys and girls. The missionaries appeared to the Namasudras as light bearers and a significant role was played by Mead. As a result of the local support he

obtained from Guruchand and his followers, Mead was able to establish himself in an area populated mostly by members of an untouchable caste who were dissatisfied but ambitious. Thus, Mead admitted that in the varied activities of his missionary life, Guruchand had made possible many things that without his backing could not have been carried through. However, the gratitude was reciprocated. Because of this, Mead positioned himself as a benefactor of the Namasudras, garnered their goodwill, tried to secure their loyalty to the government, and served as a bridge between the two on numerous occasions. So, the missionary activities under the leadership of Mead for the upliftment of the Namasudras appeared to them as an oasis in the desert and the Namasudras considered Mead as their Messiah.

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My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34

- *Samuel Mall**

This saying of Jesus, even though said on the cross, relates to the message and mission for which he was sent for in this world. Even though we are approaching the advent season where Christian communities prepare themselves for the coming of Christ, this saying of Jesus becomes significant to understand the purpose of his coming. The feeling of abandonment that is expressed in this verse said by Jesus on the cross shows his disappointment with the way his life is ending. Why was he disappointed? Did he die as a disappointed messiah who was not able to complete his mission on this earth? What insights do we get from this verse about the mission of Jesus? To answer these questions, we need to understand a few things about Jesus' life.

The principle that governed the life of Jesus life was characterized by the message of "Kingdom of God." This kingdom did not belong to any king, it was not solely for anyone particular person, but, for everyone. It did not belong to the rich aristocratic class but, to the poor and the oppressed. It was not only a futuristic kingdom that people would attain after their death but, something to be realised in the present. Why was speaking of the kingdom in this way significant? The social world of Jesus was a divided society. It was a society that was divided in two sections. The rich aristocratic class, who were rulers and the poor peasants; there was no middle class. The rich and aristocratic class was 5% of total population and since they controlled both the political and the economic domains, they oppressed the majority of the population for economic and political gains.

It was in such a context that Jesus announced that his manifesto was to preach good news to the oppressed and to set the captives free. It was the oppressed/ poor who found place in the kingdom of God. Through the message of the Kingdom of God, Jesus stood against the oppression and exploitation of people like women, widows, lepers, children and many more in his own context. Jesus saw Himself as the one who was intervening on behalf of God to actualize the vision of the Kingdom of God. In the context of oppression, the kingdom of God stands for life in its fullness. In the context of death and oppression Jesus was preaching and practicing life in its fullness.

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When we try to understand Jesus' death, we often remain fixed with the thought that God had already decided to sacrifice his Son. Very often we understand meaning of Jesus death from the perspective of our life. This is to say, Jesus died for our sins, our sins are taken away. However, we don't see Jesus' death from the perspective of Jesus' life. We don't see what Jesus' death meant in the context of his message of God's kingdom.

Looked at from the perspective of the life of Jesus, what becomes evident is the consideration that the religious hierarchy was in no mood to hear the message of Jesus. The message of the Kingdom of God had become a threat to their status quo. So they hatched up a plan to kill Jesus to save their position in society. Therefore, Jesus' mission was not to die but to initiate the Kingdom of God in this world. Jesus did not want to face the cross, as that was not his mission; because he was sent into this world so that people may experience life in its fullness. That's why Jesus prays "remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." Luke 22:42. Jesus would have probably expected a violent death not because it was preordained by God but because of the conflicts that his teaching and actions created.

His words, "My God, why have you forsaken me" show that death was imposed on Jesus and he remained faithful to his mission of kingdom of God, even till the point of his death. Jesus was committed to his mission and sacrificed himself willingly. His cry, "My God why have you forsaken me," actually shows that Jesus did not die as a disappointed messiah. He died with the conviction that not even his own death would not stop the mission of the kingdom of God. Jesus' words were the testimony that the kingdom of God is even greater than his own life. At the cross Jesus believed that if the kingdom of God meant his own death, he would accept the bitter cup and drink it.

Therefore, Jesus' death was one part of a larger work of Jesus for the kingdom of God. The death of Jesus proclaims the truth that imitating Christ involves struggles for the reign of God. When we struggle for the actualization of the reign of God here on this earth, we become a new creation because in the Kingdom of God, Jesus' and God's love is made known.

However, Jesus' death is not separated from his resurrection. Both, death and resurrection are one event in Jesus' life. In the first half of the event, Jesus was crucified. In the second half, Jesus walks beyond the cross. Therefore, our belief in resurrection makes the cross a powerful

symbol giving us the hope that the cross is not the end, but through resurrection there is still hope.

God did not send Jesus to die, but to establish Kingdom of God. When death was imposed on Jesus, God acted in such a way as to extend Jesus' mission into defeat over death itself. Jesus' death and resurrection are symbols of love and hope. This love and this hope are extended to everyone. Hope and love refer to involvement, participation and action for the realisation of Kingdom of God, where oppression and suffering will be no more. We will resurrect above everything that negates life and experience Life in its fullness.

In our own social context, Dalits continue suffer not only because of caste discrimination but also through neo-liberal capitalism and its collusion with caste. Dalit women continue to suffer even more as they are at the bottom of caste and gender hierarchy. The message of the Kingdom of God makes us aware that Jesus extends to all humanity (people in His historical realm too) the possibility of salvation as a gift, as the Kingdom of God belongs to all, irrespective of one's social location or standing. He pointed out that the reign of God is made up of outcaste and strangers. The Christian church that is not able to envision with Jesus the vision of the reign of God, cannot preach Jesus. For the church, the kingdom of God should become a message that entails hope for liberation. It should be seen as liberating people from legalism, authoritarianism and the forces that dominate and oppress. Through the message of the kingdom, Jesus points out that God's face is the face of the outcastes. The Church is a visible sign of God's Kingdom, which fosters equality and justice. The Kingdom of God becomes a realised eschatology, a future reality which is being realised in the present through human action.

Questions to ponder and discuss

1. Why is the image of crucified Christ significant to challenge discrimination in our world?
2. Why was Jesus disturbed by the social conditions of his time?
3. What are the commonalities in the suffering of the oppressed and the suffering of Jesus on the cross?
4. What are the advantages of seeing Jesus as a social prophet?
5. How can we see Jesus' resurrection as a present reality in the midst of a discriminated world?
6. What is the identity and the call of the church?



Empathetic Listening and Suicide Prevention - Community Support

- Anushka Anand* and Ahana Sharma**

Suicide is defined as the act of intentionally taking one's own life.

Throughout history, suicide has been both condoned and condemned by societies. A report by WHO, published on 17th June this year, states that, globally, more than 700,000 people die due to suicide every year. That's one person every 40 seconds. Due to the stigma associated with suicide and the fact that it is illegal in some countries, this figure is also likely to be an understatement, with some suicide being classified as unintentional injuries.

In the year 2003, The International Association of Suicide Prevention (IASP) came together with World Health Organization (WHO) and World Federation of Mental Health (WFMH) to host World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD). Since then, the 10th of September, every year is observed as an awareness creation day called World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD). The key aim of this day is to promote discussions about mental health and the capabilities of various countries to develop national policies for suicide prevention. It aims to reduce risk factors pertaining to suicide and also to strengthen prevention aiding factors, especially in adolescence.

World Suicide Prevention Day highlights the need to de-stigmatize mental health, increase the availability of mental health resources and reduce barriers in accessing care. Data says that 79% of suicides worldwide occur in low and middle-income countries. These statistics are concerning enough to take proper measures to prevent suicide from happening. According to WHO, suicide is responsible for around half of all violent deaths in the world. One major reason for suicide is mental illness; however multiple factors can contribute towards increased pain and reduced coping resources, leading to death by suicide.

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(Sources: Wikipedia; WHO, IASP)

During this global pandemic, mental health issues have become quite prevalent. It is common to find a person to be suffering from anxiety, depression, isolation and more, in minor or severe form. The taboo around these issues makes it difficult to come forward and talk about how one is feeling and coping, this in turn contributes to furthering mental issues, which may lead to suicide.

All of us, who are going through some form of mental illness, need the proper help and support, to reduce the intensity of perturbation and distress felt.

What can we do about the severe rise in mental health issues? In India, most of us are neglectful towards our own mental health and also the mental health of the people around us. There is an urgent need for a call for action, to address mental health problems and prevent suicides in our country.

World Suicide Prevention Day

This year's theme for World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD) is "Creating Hope Through Action".

Samaritans Mumbai came together to create hope with the National Council of Churches in India and talked about the importance of awareness in mental health. This event aimed to de-stigmatize the taboos around suicide/suicidal ideations and mental health in general. The focus of the session was about how emotional support is a big factor in anyone's life, for them to cope with the issues they are facing, and how Samaritans Mumbai is a safe listening ear to anyone who needs someone to talk to.

About Samaritans Mumbai

Samaritans Mumbai provides an anonymous, confidential and non-judgemental safe space for anyone going through a difficult time, to talk about it, openly and freely. Samaritans Mumbai has been actively working in the field of mental health and striving to support those in need, since 1968. It is a fully qualified member of Befrienders India and consequently under Befrienders Worldwide. Samaritans Mumbai was the first branch of The Samaritans UK that was formally

established outside of England earlier known as Samaritans Bombay and Samaritans Sahara.

There are various issues that affect people, related to loneliness, sadness, grief, anxiety, issues at the home front, marital issues, work-related conflict, etc. We provide emotional support to anyone feeling depressed, distressed or suicidal.

Our callers range from high school students to retired persons, who feel they have no one to open up to regarding matters that may be highly stigmatised, embarrassing, shameful, or alien to their close ones. 50% of our callers are below the age of 30.

Apart from our helpline service, we work to raise awareness and ensure that the conversation and discussion around suicide, emotional distress and mental health never stop. We do this through our social media platforms and outreach programs in various segments of society, organisations and institutions where our goal is to create awareness regarding empathetic listening, emotional support and suicide.

In 2020, when the pandemic hit all sectors of life, it affected us immensely too. With the physical centre now closed, we had to find ways to offer emotional support to callers remotely, at a time when circumstances were taking a toll on everyone's mental health. We moved to remote befriending in March 2020 and had to tackle various challenges, just like everyone else in the world was doing too. In 2020 we received close to 6,000 calls and 5,000+ emails and had 52 outreach programs in the form of talks, articles and other digital collaborations. We trained over 100 volunteers through 10 training sessions, all this virtually.

Emotional Distress and Emotional Support

Let's understand what emotional support and distress mean.

Simply put, any kind of distress experienced (external pressure and/or internal conflicts) may be accompanied by high levels of emotional distress. Prolonged, sudden and unresolved emotional distress can deplete our resources that we use to cope with them on the daily. When the pain experienced by the individual exceeds their ability to cope, a person can experience emotional distress.

Finding a space where one can be offered non-judgemental receptivity, willingness to listen, empathy and even willingness to explore the emotions that they are experiencing, can help with emotional support. In addition, assuring confidentiality and anonymity can further help someone feel safe with talking about their emotional distress. Active Listening is an important tool and Samaritans Mumbai aims to provide the same.

Active Listening and Barriers to Listening to Others

There are a lot of listening barriers when we try to share our thoughts with anyone near us. Often people may be judgmental or prejudiced towards certain situations, especially if it is related to mental health. Listeners often make assumptions about your issues and what help you might need, and think of your situation from their perspective rather than thinking about what you may need or want. One can also have fear that the person they talk to might tell everyone about what they are suffering with. In situations like this, Samaritans Mumbai provides an anonymous listening ear, which is both confidential and non-judgmental. They create a safe space for the callers to open up fully without any barriers and give full priority to the caller at hand.

There are some ways through which you can be an aid to someone too. If someone in distress does reach out to talk to you, listen to them with empathy, patience and non-judgement. Build and maintain trust, while conveying care and warmth. Rather than telling them what to do or how to think, check with them what they want or need. At this point any pressure such as false hope, platitudes, solutions, trivialising can make the person feel worse. Do encourage them to seek additional support including professional help. And remember to take help yourself when supporting someone, so you don't feel burdened or overwhelmed. When listening to someone in distress, there are some phrases we should avoid, such as "I know exactly what you're going through, I've been there..."; "Before you go any further can you clarify exactly what your problem is..."; "If I were you..."; "Do you think the other person could have been right?"; "You've got the rest of your life to look forward to"; "That sounds horrible, was it as bad as that?"; "It will look much better in the morning"; "One of your options could be..."; etc, instead you can opt for a more open approach by asking things like "How did you feel about that?"; "You mentioned earlier that... Do you

still feel this way?"; etc. This way rather than speaking or questioning from our perspective or our need, or invalidating the speaker's feelings, we give them an opportunity to truly tell us how they are feeling and coping.

If you want to lend a listening ear to someone and go deeper into a conversation, there are some phrases you can use like "What are you thinking now?"; "Tell me more about..."; "How do you feel about...?"; "Do you mean that ...?"; "It sounds to me as if you are saying ... "; "I wonder if ... "; "Could it be that ... "; "I'm rather confused about ... "; "Could you tell me more ... "; "What do you think about ... "; "What do you plan to do?"; "What would you like to do ...?"; "Have you come to any conclusions?"; "What do you think is standing in your way?"; "What does that mean to you?"; "How do you feel you could deal with that?"; and so on. Phrases like these can reassure the other person that you are there for them and are listening and trying to understand things from their perspective.

Self Harm

Another related area that comes up in these conversations is - Self-harm.

Just like suicide, there are a lot of myths and misunderstanding about self-harming behaviour. Self-harm is not attention-seeking, it is not done because it is a fashionable or cool thing to do, and it is not something that can't be cured.

Self-harm is quite common, 1 in 10 teenagers self-harms and it is not done because they enjoy the pain. At times someone may engage in self-harming to feel relief, in control and/ or mentally/emotionally calmed. For others or at other times, it is so that the person feels alive or has something that feels real.

The relationship between self-harm and suicide is complex. Keeping an open mind and being non-judgmental will help a lot in providing emotional support. Self-harm is not suicide, but it may become suicidal. Being compassionate, empathetic and non-judgmental towards someone in distress, helps in these situations. There is an urgent need to reduce stigma around suicide and have more sensitivity

around conversations about suicide. This includes even media reporting about suicides. While there is a lot of work to be done in the mental health sector in India, being aware and empathetic can go a long way in helping someone who is experiencing emotional pain.

We hope this article has shed some light and the topics of suicide and self-harm and helps you have a more empathetic conversation with anyone feeling distressed.

If you or anyone you know is experiencing distressing thoughts and feelings, please call or email Samaritans Mumbai: Phone: +91 84229 84528 / +91 84229 84529 / +91 84229 84530, available daily from 5 PM or 8 PM

Email: talk2samaritans@gmail.com

Together let's work towards an India that loses fewer people to suicide.



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Modern Servitude and the Myth of Jewish Connections: Two Waves of Migration and the Formation of Mizo-Kuki-Chin Diaspora in USA and Israel

- Moses Kharbithai*

Modernization and Mizo Society

The emergence of the Mizo diaspora in the recent past is, on the one hand, the result of the development of a modern western-style education system in the state along with the upsurge of unemployment, and, on the other, the significant emphasis of folklore and folksongs for ethnic identity assertion among the peripheral minority communities in India. The colonization of the Mizo Hills by the British from 1895 onwards coincided with the arrival of Christian missionaries working in the Khasi Hills. The first such exploration of the Mizo Hills was made by William Williams, a missionary working in the Khasi Hills, on the 20th March 1891.¹ This process was continued by the arrival of J. Herbert Lorrain and Frederick W Savidge in Mizo Hills on the 4th January, 1894.² Finally on their request, the Welsh Calvinistic Mission for the first time sent D.E Jones, who arrived on 31st August 1897 as a full time missionary along with a Khasi evangelist Rai Bhajur and his wife. This marked the beginning of westernized modernity in the Mizo Hills. The arrival of two batches of Lorrain and Savidge and later D.E Jones and his accomplices laid the foundation for the transformation of Mizo society. This took place through five important aspects. First, the reduction of Mizo language into written form using Roman script; second, the opening of the first school on 1st April 1894; third, the translation of the gospel of Luke, John and the Book of Acts into Mizo language; fourth, composition and translation of English songs into Mizo and fifth, the completion of the first Mizo Primer on 22nd October, 1895.³

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¹ Lawmsanga, *A Critical Study on Christianity Mission with Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, Unpublished (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, UK, 2010), 83, accessed on August 24th, 2013, Available at <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/767/1/Lawmsanga10PhD.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*, 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

In 1903 when the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) took over the South Lushai Hills, J.H Lorraine and F.W Savidge were requested to return to Mizoram as missionaries of the BMS and after their arrival in Lunglei on 13th March, 1903, they started their active mission work by opening schools, hospitals, a printing press and other social development projects that not only brought missionaries closer to the people but also allowed the Mizo people to get exposed to modern development through education, healthcare, and press. The immediate after-effect of the arrival of two missionary groups was that this led to the first ever division of the society as Mizos who converted to Christianity found themselves in one of two denominational faiths, namely Presbyterian in the North and Baptist in the South of Mizoram. However, despite the denominational division in the society, in a span of less than a century, the Mizo Hills which is now the Mizoram state, had transformed itself into one of the states in Northeast region where a majority of the population (around 87 percent) were Christians and is today one of the most literate states in India. In view of the growth in education, quite a large number of Mizos have been migrating within India and abroad, especially in the post-liberalized economy where global job markets demanding English speaking professionals have come knocking on the doors of India's large reservoir of labour.

As pointed out, modernization in the Mizo society as much as all other tribal societies in the Northeast region of India took place primarily due to the contribution of the Christian missionaries. The Kuki and Chin communities living in the periphery region of the present state of Manipur and across the border in Bangladesh and Myanmar also benefited from the same Christian missionary project. In fact, the Mizo-Kuki-Chin, although today known by their different ethnic groups, belong to the same ancestral roots and their separation had taken place due to the initial British occupation of the Mizo Hills in 1875 when the region was demarcated as per their administrative convenience. As a result, the community today finds itself classified into Mizo, largely living in the state of Mizoram, Kuki in the present state of Manipur and the Chin, sparsely spread across Myanmar and the border of both the above Indian states as well as in Bangladesh.

Mizo-Kuki-Chin Diaspora in the United States

The history of the Mizo diaspora in the United States traces its beginning to the year 1935 when the first Mizo youth set foot in the

United States. His name was Lalthanliana, son of Reverend Dala, one of the earliest Christian pastors among the Mizo community who arrived there for missionary programme. After that pioneering entry by this Mizo family, there was no other Mizo who had went to America until the post independent period, when, between 1948 and 1962, another group of Mizo Christians was sent to the United states as part of the testimony to the growth of Christianity in Mizoram. Rev. Sakhawliana, Rev. Lalngurauva, Rev. Rochung Pudaite, Pi Thanzami and a few others were some of the members of this group. Among them only a few remained to seek permanent residence while the others returned home. After this, there have been other Mizos who went there for religious related activities as well as for studies but it is not clear even among the senior Mizo diaspora as to the certainty of their identity and profile.⁴ However, in 1964, another Mizo family that went to America was that of Mr. Darrikhuma who was to become an important individual in the formation of Mizo community in the United States through their active role in the Mizo Society of America (MSA). From that time onwards until the early 1980s, very few Mizo-Kuki-Chin people from the present Mizoram state as well as Manipur have been migrating abroad.⁵ In the post- 1990 period, the flow of Mizo people to the United States started again, but this phase is marked not any more by Mizo people going there for religious related activities. This new group started going to USA as young educated professionals who moved away after having migrated to various parts of India for education and other training that enabled them to compete for the global job market that America was offering. Most of these new Mizo professionals who migrated to the USA in the post 1990 period were highly skilled professionals. Some of them found jobs in the World Bank, IMF, FDA (Food & Drug Administration) while many others are engaged in other professions like healthcare, information technology, mechanical and chemical engineering, paramedical, legal firm and also other administrative and management jobs in different sectors.

Apart from this skilled labour migration, Mizo-Kuki-Chin diaspora is today one of the most populous communities from the Northeastern region of India. Although, there is still no official figure to ascertain their number, an analysis of the organizational participation, church

⁴ Pastor Rualchhina Vanchia Rtd, e-mail message to author, December 16th, 2013.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

and other denominational data indicate that there are more than 30,000 Mizo-Kuki-Chin diaspora in the United States. Many of those who comprise the semi-skilled and unskilled labour force have arrived in the United States via Myanmar by joining the Chin refugees under the United Nation High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) protection due to their suppression and other repressive human right violation meted out to them by the military regime. Most of them were first sent to Thailand and from there they were brought to the United States as refugees. In the course of time these people gradually got themselves employed as factory workers, as workers in grocery stores, as babysitters, and as restaurant workers, particularly in the Japanese food industry. A large number of the Mizo population is also employed in the plumbing profession. One of them is recorded to even have earned more than \$ 200,000 income per year, which accordingly seems to be the highest record in plumbing work among the Mizos in the US.⁶ Apart from these activities, there are also Mizo-Kuki-Chin people who have settled in the USA as Mizo missionaries working not only among the Mizos but ministering in various American Christian denominations and churches.

From a small group of Mizos who largely settled in and around Maryland, USA, today this population has spread across different American states. The number of Mizo-Kuki-Chins in the United States is already quite visible as they have established a separate Mizo Seventh-day Adventist Church, in Maryland, USA.⁷ This church is a very active denominational institution with full fledged officials and programmes that run throughout the year. Far from being only a prayer group, the community under this church is also actively serving the people by providing services like healthcare, welfare for women, youth, and children and personal and stewardship training.⁸ Then there are the Chin Baptist Churches, USA (CBCUSA) that cater to those Mizo-Kuki-Chins who profess their faith under the Baptist denomination. Like the previous church, these churches are also very active in various activities and missions catering to the need of the spiritual and other aspects of women, youth, and the general members.⁹

⁶ Pastor Rualchhina Vanchia Rtd, e-mail message to author, 19th December 2013.

⁷ The Mizo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Maryland is already a very active church that caters to the denominational need of the Mizo population that professes that faith in that region of USA.

⁸ Details available at <http://mizosdachurch.org/pages/home>

⁹ Details available at <http://chinbaptistchurchesusa.org/index.html>

Apart from this, there is also a congregation of the Mizo Presbyterians which regularly gathers at Gaitherburg, Maryland, USA.

Another important aspect of the Mizo-Kuki-Chin community in the USA is that apart from these denominational gatherings, the Mizo are the only community among the Northeast Indian population in the United States that have established an Interdenominational Christian fellowship among themselves known as Mizo Christian Fellowship (MCF)¹⁰ in different states of USA which initially used to gather regularly on a weekly basis but due to the increase of such fellowship at the local level, when groups of people gather on their own for worship, the frequency has been reduced to a monthly gathering among those who are from around the vicinity. Apart from this, there is also a Mizo-Chin Christian Fellowship (MCCF) which gathers once in a year in the month of September.¹¹

The emergence of all these denominational and interdenominational Mizo identity away from home, is an indication of how deeply rooted the Mizo community have become in Christian faith and at the same time it also reveals how intensely the society is divided on the basis of various Christian denominations. The society that remains proud of their language and identity as Mizo, particularly in the way they identify themselves even in a faraway land through their strong attachment to their own language, is actually divided by the fragmentation of their identity on the basis of their Christian denominations.¹²

Other important institutions that cater particularly to the Mizo community in the United States include the Mizo Society of America (MSA) which has its General Headquarters at Washington DC and with branches in seven states across America.¹³ This organisation takes the responsibility to gather all the Mizos across the continent on a regular basis and is also engaged in philanthropic activities back home.

¹⁰ Details available at <http://www.i-mcf.org/apps/blog/>.

¹¹ Details available at <http://www.zoin.info/mizo-chin-christian-fellowship-usa/>.

¹² Unlike any other community from the Northeast abroad, Mizos have kept their language as very secret to their identity. This is seen particularly in the way in which all the contents in Mizo community websites in the United States and elsewhere are written mostly in Mizo with very limited information shared in English.

¹³ Pastor Rualchhina Vanchia Rtd, e-mail message to author, December 15th, 2013. This information is also obtained from the website of MSA <http://www.mizosocietyofamerica.org/>.

The Myth of Jewish Connection and Migration of Mizo-Kuki-Chin to Israel

Despite the two conventional movements of people from the region to other parts of the world, what is more interesting and significant is the mobility of Mizos due to a growing belief that they have Jewish connections. Starting in the early 1950s when a Pentecostal minister named Challianthanga from the village of Buallawn, claimed that he had a vision in which it was revealed to him that the Mizo people were the descendants of Israelites and should return to their ancient homeland, a section of the Mizo community had started a movement that promoted the idea that they were Jews and as such they should live according to the Old Testament's law.¹⁴ Such belief sparked what is now known as the Buallawn Movement which over the following years spread their movement across the Mizoram and Manipur areas with messages that there are similarities between the Mizo's pre-Christian religious traditions and those of Biblical Israelites. Festival songs like the "Sikpui Hla" also known as the "Red Sea" songs were articulated as some of the important evidence for their assertion for a Jewish past. The Sikpui Hla song runs:

“During the celebration of the great festival,
The great red water dried up.
We were led by clouds by day,
Columns of fire by night.
My enemies pursued me day and night.
Swallowed up by the great sea like a plague.
The birds, onward!
Out of the rock, upon the holy mountain,
That which came flowing, we fetched.”

From their Christian traditions and Biblical readings, Mizos along with their counterparts the Kuki and Chin also learnt about the ten lost tribes of Israel, which according to the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament of the Bible scattered and disappeared while crossing the mythical Sabbath River when around 720 BC the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled the tribes that comprised it. The southern Kingdom of Judah was spared the conquest, and the Jews of today primarily descended from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin,

¹⁴ *The Times of India*, Dated 9th February, 2012

which composed the southern Kingdom. The Jews had split into two entities after the death of King Solomon in 920 B.C. From this time, the myth of the lost tribes was supposed to have started as the post-Assyrian invasion circa 722 B.C during which it was believed that the ten lost tribes were enslaved in Assyria. Later the tribes fled Assyria and wandered through Afghanistan, Tibet and China. About 100 A.D one group known later as the Bnei Menasshes moved south from China and settled around northeast India and Burma.¹⁵ The Bnei Menasshe according to the book of Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament Bible, are the descendants of Manasseh, one of the grandsons of Jacob. According to popular myth among the Mizo-Kuki-Chin community, they are the Tibeto-Burmese speaking people who resemble Mongols in appearance, but believed to be the Bnei Menashes tribes of Israel. According to local folklore of these communities, their Jewish connection goes back more than 1,000 years to a remote cave in China where the scattered remnants of the lost Jewish tribe of Menashe were holed up. They called themselves Chhinlung, after the cave, and over the years they made their way south through Thailand, settling for good in the hill tracts of Mizoram and Manipur.

After the trance of 1952 experienced by the local Pentecostal pastor, some people among the Mizo-Kuki-Chin communities, whose folklore and myth seemed to resemble that of the Jewish tradition, set off for the Promised Land, under the impression that it might just lie around the corner. Some actually reached as far as Assam and Nagaland, but no one quite made it to Israel. This unproductive attempt inspired one of the relatives of one of the travelers to investigate this entire claim.

This relative, Zaithanchhungi, a former teacher, went to Israel in 1983 and met Eliyahu Avichayil, an Orthodox rabbi whose Amishav organization searches the world for descendants of the lost tribes. He showed immediate interest in her story and urged her to return to India to catalogue Mizo history. She came up with a list of perceptible similarities, including the construction of altars, the sacrifice of animals, funeral customs, marriage and divorce dealings, a belief in an all-powerful deity and the symbolic presence of the number seven in

¹⁵ Amotz Asa-El, "The Lost Tribes of Israel" in *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, ed. M. Ehlich (California: ABC CLIO, 2009), 86.

many festivities. There were also apparently other links in things like medical instruments and household practices.¹⁶ According to Shavei Israel, India has more than a million people who are ethnically Bnei Menashes. Since they lived for centuries in northeast India, mingling with local people, many of their Jewish traditions became diluted. Moreover, with the arrival of the Welsh missionaries in the region in the last decade of the eighteen hundreds, nearly all Indian Bnei Menashes converted from their animistic beliefs to Christianity. After the initiative of Zaithanchungi, there was a spate of actual conversions among the Mizo-Kuki-Chin communities and along with that, on July 7th, 1994, the Chinlung Israel People Convention (CIPC), a non religious, non political organisation of the Mizo-Kuki-Chin was formed to push their agenda and in October 28th, 1994 they submitted to the United Nations a declaration that they were the descendants of the Chhinlung Israelites.

In the declaration, they claimed that the people of Kuki-Chin-Mizo/Chhinlung Chhuak ethnic group, inhabitants of the Chin Hills, the Matu areas of Myanmar, the Chittagong Hill tracts and plains in Bangladesh, the Mizoram state and the adjacent areas in Manipur, Assam and Tripura are the descendants of one ancestor.¹⁷ The declaration also says, “We pledge our faith and confidence in the committee and code of the United Nations in the proclamation of our basic human rights in conformity with the charter of the UN. The Kuki-Chin in Myanmar, Lushai in Bangladesh and Mizo in India are the direct descendant of the biblical tribes of the Northern kingdom of Israel of the tribe of Menashe and Ephraim sons of Joseph born in Egypt through his Egyptian wife Asthans – convince that the time has come to declare our true identity that we the Chhinlung Chhuak are the lost tribes of Israel to the world.”¹⁸

One of the most important groups among the Mizo people that promote the idea of returning to Israel is the Chhinlung Israel People’s Convention (CIPC). Because of their efforts, in the last two decades,

¹⁶ “Mizos- The Lost Tribes of Israel in North East India”, available at <http://www.chillibreeze.com/NE-india-articles/mizos-lost-tribe-israel.asp>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ George Haokip, “Kuki-Mizo: The Lost Tribe of Israel”, *Kuki International Forum*, September 10th, 2008, <http://kukiforum.com/2008/09/kuki-chin-mizo-the-lost-tribe-of-israel-2/>.

many anthropologists and other scholars have taken a keen interest in the search for Israel's lost tribes. Among them Myer Samer, an Australian anthropologist, was among the earliest and the first to have extensively written on Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram. Through his intensive empirical field studies covering Chin Hills, Mizoram and Manipur, he concluded in the affirmative the claim of the communities that they formed the Bnei Menashe clan of the Israel lost tribe.¹⁹ In the last one decade, another distinguished Jewish scholar, Hiller Halkin, who was born in New York, made similar in-depth investigation into the claim of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. According to him, despite the 3000 years sojourn by this community, wandering from Middle East to the jungles of Southeast Asia and then to the current location, there is enough evidence to prove that there is a strong connection between them and the Israelites.²⁰ Through his initiative, a team of physicians from Haifa Technion and the University of Arizona conducted genetic testing to verify this claim. DNA test was done on Hmar, Kom, Lenthang, Changsan, Lunkim, and Hualngao peoples groups (Mizoram) But the result turned out to be negative and no evidence was found that would indicate a Middle-Eastern origin but rather all were found to be within normal Tibeto-Burmese parameters.

Contrary to this, a similar test conducted by the Central Forensic Science Laboratory in Kolkata on 180 blood samples collected randomly from Mizo people in March 2002 indicated that they were the descendants of the lost tribes. The report, upon which the CIPC based their argument for their recognition, says that the mitochondrial configuration of the DNA of some of the blood samples drawn from women match the unique "haplotype"- a genetic sequence code found in Jews of Uzbekistan.²¹ A specific cellular mutation that is sometimes found in Indian Jews was also noticed in some of the samples. Significantly though, studies on the Y-chromosome (for males) did not

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hillel Halkin, *Across the Sabbath River: In Search of the Lost Tribe of Israel*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002). Also see Amotz Asa-El, "The Lost Tribes of Israel" in M. Avrum Ehrlich (ed.) *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, ed. M. Avrum Ehrlich, (California: ABC CLIO, 2002), 86.

²¹ Bhaskwar Maiti, T. Sitalaximi, R. Trivedi, and VK Kashyap "Tracking the genetic imprints of lost Jewish tribes among the gene pool of Kuki-Chin-Mizo population of India," *National DNA Analysis Centre, Central Forensic Science Laboratory*, (Kolkata, 2004).

match the Cohen modal haplotype that is common to most Jewish males around the world, the test revealed.

Despite this controversy, on March 30th, 2005, the Chief of Rabbinate of Israel, the top authority on this issue, officially decided to recognize and accept the Mizo-Kuki-Chin people claim as Bnei Menashe in April 2005 and accordingly sent an official team of rabbis to Mizoram and Manipur in August 2008 to investigate this claim and facilitate their immigration to Israel under Aliyah or the nation's Law of Return for Jews. The Rabbis who visited Mizoram and Manipur from Israel as well as others, who preceded them, were impressed with the Jewish devotion and intensity of the Bnei Menashe community. However, immigration and recognition of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo claims were accompanied with the need for formal conversion to Judaism and education about Jewish culture and tradition due to what the Rabbinate consider a long historical interruption and cultural disconnect.

The Political Issues of the Mizo-Kuki-Chin's Claim of Jewish Origin

Today, there are many people claiming to be Bnei Menashe who live in Mizoram and Manipur with a handful in Assam and Burma (Myanmar). Most of them have undergone conversion waiting to go to Israel – the land of their forefathers. Those who have converted have also changed their names to Jewish names like Elisheva, Azriel, Jeremiah, Makaibai etc., and are actively engaged in synagogue activities in Mizoram or Churachandpur district of Manipur.²² Even some devoted Christians and church leaders too have accepted the Israel /Jewish origin. Ever since this movement has started more than fifty years ago, thousands of men and women have also migrated to Israel and settled mainly in the occupied territories. It took them twenty-five years before the Israeli government acknowledges this claim of the Mizo-Kuki-Chin. After they were recognized, they were allowed to migrate to Israel and settle there after undergoing a conversion ritual to be fulfilled by a Rabbi.

The interior Ministry of Israel has allowed 100 Mizo-Kuki-Chin tribesmen to enter the country each year as tourists. If they were

²² These are the names of people, the author interviewed during the field work in Aizawl, Mizoram.

practitioners of the Jewish faith, they would be allowed to become immigrants under the Law of Return, which grants citizenship to all Jews. According to Israeli Embassy statistics, as of 2012 over 7,232 Bnei Menashe members of Mizoram and Manipur have applied for Israeli visas and an average of 30-50 Mizos make the trip each year.²³ These people are allowed entry in Israel on tourist visa and on their arrival and after their conversion, they are allowed to apply for permanent citizenship and settle down in Israel. In 2006 itself some 1,700 Bnei Menashe had moved to Israel where they settled in West bank and Gaza strip (before disengagement). They arrived in four batches and were initially taken to the Carmiel region and according to Shlem Rei, a worker with Israel Jewish Agency, accompanying the new immigrants, “the area has several similarities with their place back in India and it will be easier for them to adjust”.²⁴ But in actuality these areas were provided to them as they offered cheaper housing and living expenses than some others.²⁵ The location of their settlement in the West Bank has become an issue of political confrontation at the international level as this is a region that has international sanction for the temporary freezing of settlement growth as part of the agreement and a prelude to renewed peace talks between Israel and Palestine.²⁶ Today the Bnei Menashe comprise the largest immigrant population in the Gaza strip, having been settled there before Israel left the area.

²³ *The Times of India*, February 9th, 2012. Also see <http://www.chillibreeze.com/NE-india-articles/mizos-lost-tribe-israel.asp>

²⁴ Harinder Mishra, “Exodus of Indian Jews from North-East to Israel” *Rediff News*, 2006, accessed on December 12th, 2013, available at <http://in.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/21jews.htm>.

²⁵ *Israel National News*. Dated August 24th, also available at <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/123481#.UrF35tW1Oo>. Also see Jonathan Cook, “Lost Tribe’ on Fast Track to Israel” *Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization*, (2010), accessed on December 12th 2013, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/lost-tribe-on-fast-track-to-israel>. Shimon Gante, 33 one of those who arrived at West Bank two decades ago through the help of Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail who worked closely with the people in Manipur, Mizoram and Myanmar areas, has argued that “it is important that the 10 tribes are brought here because the time of the Messaiah is near.”

²⁶ Countries like the United States have constantly insisted on settlement freeze as part of the effort for peaceful settlement between Israel and Palestine. For details please see Jonathan Cook “Israel to repatriate ‘Lost Jewish tribe’ in India”, *The National*, January 17th, 2010, accessed on December 12, 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/asia-pacific/israel-plans-to-repatriate-lost-jewish-tribe-in-india>

These people are compelled to learn Hebrew. While this is difficult for the older generation, the younger members have had more opportunities to learn Hebrew. Some have gained jobs as soldiers, and nurses' aides for the elderly and infirm.²⁷

Controversies over the immigration of the people from Northeast India continue from their forcible conversion to the orthodox tradition to the changing of policies to receive them by the Israel government. While some back home are enthusiastic about their return to what they think is their homeland, many others are skeptical about this migration as they either think being Jews in India is good enough than being subjected to orthodox religious and linguistic rituals on their entry in Israel. Many have also expressed concern over the fact that third world populations are being targeted in conversion and immigration to Israel.²⁸ There are still others, who are concerned about the way in which the immigration of Bnei Menashe was being forced for fast-track approval. Ophir Pines-Paz, the Minister of Science and Technology in 2005 said that these people are "being cynically exploited for political purposes."²⁹ While a section of the Israeli community have questioned what they have called a 'clandestine arrival of the Bnei Menashe, this group of people from Northeast India have over the past few decades of their crusade won two powerful right-wing sponsors: Shavei Israel, led by Michael Freund, a former assistant to Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, and a

²⁷ Harinder Mishra, "Exodus of Indian Jews from North-East to Israel" *Rediff News*, 2006, accessed on December 12th, 2013, available at <http://in.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/21jews.htm>.

²⁸ Abigail Radoszkowicz, "Bnei Menashe aliya Halted by Poraz", *Jerusalem Post*, July 8th, 2003, accessed on December 11th, 2013, available at http://www.shavei.org/communities/bnei_menashe/articles-bnei_menashe/bnei-menashe-aliya-halted-by-poraz/?lang=en. Interior Minister, Avraham Poraz is one among those who are sceptical about the attraction of Third World population and in 2003 he halted this entry of Bnei Menashe from Northeast India. The Chief Rabbinate then sent a Beit Din (rabbinical court) on its behalf to India to formally convert the Bnei Menashe to Judaism. During their visit towards the end of 2006 200 Bnei Menashe were converted by the Beit Din and taken to Israel in the same year. The Indian authorities forced Shavei Israel to stop conversion as that is against the law in India. Because of that, the new system of entry was introduced in Israel where, people were allowed entry on tourist visas and after the conversion rituals they are allowed to obtain permanent citizenship in Israel.

²⁹ *The Palestinian Chronicle*, January, 29th, 2010.

religious group known as the International Fellowship of Christian Jews, which draws on wide support from evangelical Christians in the United States.³⁰

The rapid rise of conversion among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo community in Northeast India has also provoked immense political controversy in Mizoram and Manipur and similarly the Indian state has also questioned the whole process in which people are being largely converted on Indian soil as against the law which restrains forceful conversion. Apart from that, the Government of India has also seen this as highly destabilizing politics in an area which is already characterized by separatist unrest.³¹ Christian leaders in Mizoram and elsewhere in the region have also questioned this mass conversion taking place. Dr Biaksiana of Aizawl Christian Research Centre has argued that “the mass conversion by foreign priests will pose a threat not only to social stability in the region, but also to national security. A large number of people will forsake loyalty to the Union of India, as they will become eligible for foreign citizenship.”³² Due to pressure from the Government of India, the Government of Israel withdrew the team of the Rabbinic Court from India because of this conversion activity. However, in the following years, the policy of allowing entry through tourist visa and then undergoing conversion rituals on arrival was followed for enhancing their status to permanent citizens. In 2007, the Israeli government restricted the approval of travelers’ entry for the purpose of mass conversion and citizenship which made it compulsorily a Cabinet decision than one dependent on Interior Ministry decision alone. Since this was seen as a major obstacle to Shavei Israel’s endeavour in bringing all Bnei Menashe to Israel, they resorted to another approach. According to the new approach, people are first encouraged to migrate to Nepal where conversion rituals would be completed and thereafter sent to Israel for approval for permanent citizenship status in the country.³³ In 2012, Israel passed a resolution to resume allowing immigration of Bnei Israel and within a

³¹ Surya Narain Saxena, “UPA Government goes out to help conversion” *Organiser*, Issue: January 15th, (2006), 1-15.

³² Biaksiana, *Mizo Nge Israel*, (Aizawl: Private Publication, 2004). Dr Biaksiana wrote this book in Mizo language. The excerpt of the book as explained to me through reliable translator argues against the claim that Mizos were Jewish and this quotation is an English translation from that book.

³³ Itamar Eichner, “Members of Bnei Menashe to make Aliyah” *Ynetnews*, August 1st, 2010, accessed on Decmeber 12th, 2013, available at www.ynetnew.com/articles/0,7340,L-383108,00.html.

few months by January 2013, 54 people from Northeast India had already migrated to Israel.³⁴ This number keeps increasing because, with the re-liberalization of entry of Bnei Menashe by the Israeli government, people from Mizoram and Manipur are leaving their homeland for their promised land. By the end of December, 2013, as many as 899 people were already processed for movement to Israel and this is the last group for 2013, which is added to the already migrated figure of 274 earlier during the same year. The majority of those who applied for movement to Israel in 2013 are from Churachandpur district of Manipur with the figure being 730 from Manipur and only 160 people from Mizoram. And these include children and even newborns.³⁵ Those who comprise this wave of migration include most of the sub-tribe of the Mizo-Kuki-Chin such as the Paites, Kukis, Mizo Hmars among others. All those who are selected to go to the Promised Land have been trained in Hebrew, Talmud, Halakha and Torah and also learned the culture and tradition of Jews at the Shavey Israel Hebrew Centre in Republic Veng locality in Aizawl.³⁶

The impact of the call of the Promised Land among these people in the region particularly in Mizoram and Manipur is growing rapidly. It is to be noted that until the society was exposed to the Biblical texts, they were not aware of or even imagined that they were of Jewish lineage. But with the introduction to the Bible, the people realized that the story of their oral tradition and heritage is being referenced so very closely in the Bible and therefore with such an awareness, and in a short period of time between 1950s to the first decade of the twenty first century, thousands of people have adopted the call of Judaism and converted to it. Today in Mizoram and Manipur their population has increased to nearly ten thousand only in Churachandpur district of Manipur and the state of Mizoram. Along with this, the number of Synagogues (worship place of the Jews) only in Churachandpur has increased to twenty just in the last five years, indicating the rapid growth of this population.³⁷

³⁴ “2,000th Bnei Menashe Immigrant arrives in Israel”, *The Jerusalem Post*, January, 4th, 2013. Accessed on December 13th, 2013, available at <http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/2000th-Bnei-Menashe-immigrant-arrives-in-Israel>. Retrieved on 13th December, 2013. Also see BBC News: Middle East, Dated 25th December, 2012. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20841382>. Retrieved on 13th December, 2013.

³⁵ “Promised Land beckons Northeast Jews”, *The Times of India*, October, 23rd, 2013.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Although it is to be seen if this movement will sustain itself, it is noteworthy that the movement of people has been continually gathering pace and with thousands of Mizo-Kuki-Chin having already migrated and settled in different Jewish 'kibbutzes' in the Gaza strip, there is also an increasing desire among these communities to join them in the Promised Land. Like all the Jews in the world, these communities also have kept their faith in the words of the Prophet Ezekiel: "Behold, I will take the children of Israel... and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their land. And they shall be divided into two kingdoms no more".



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BIBLE STUDY

Learn to do Justice: Prophetic Discourse on Justice (Isaiah 1:16-17)

- B. Lalnunzira*

Introduction

Justice is a complex and controversial topic discussed almost every day. It is a popular term, yet difficult to define precisely. There is often disagreement concerning its meaning, as what constitutes a just society is contested. The concept of justice can be different depending on contexts and perspectives, hence making it contextual or cultural, may be even personal.¹ In short, justice relates to fairness, impartiality and uprightness. The Bible contains several discussions on the issue of justice. In this small section of Bible study, I deliberate on prophetic discourse on justice with a special focus on Isaiah 1:16-17 and how the word of God defends the cause of the underprivileged, especially of women. I conclude with a call to act proactively, according to such teachings on justice.

Justice in the Bible

The Hebrew term for justice *mishpat* comes from the root *shapat* which means to judge, to govern in the sense of executing uprightly, vindicating the underprivileged, and condemning and punishing sinners. The Hebrew word *zedek* translated as righteousness is a parallel term that stands for the quality of being morally right or justifiable. Hence, *mishpat* and *zedek* stand for a quality of life and action which is legally and morally just. The Greek term *dikaiosune*, which translates to 'righteousness,' refers to behaviour appropriate to the membership of the 'people of God.'

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¹ Funlola Olojede, "Women and the cry for justice in Old Testament Court Narratives: An African Reflection," *Old Testament Essays* 26/3 (January 2013), 761 (761-772).

In the Bible, justice demands right action acceptable to all sections of society. The Bible is a voice for the powerless and the underprivileged class. The book of Law institutes a society in which justice is an ethical standard stipulated by covenant relationships. Old Testament prophets were great defenders of justice whose main purpose was to create a just society for Israel.

Hebrew Prophets and Social justice

Justice is a quality of life demanded by God upon his people as He is the God of justice (Isa 30:18). Israel's prophetic tradition was permeated by a concern for justice. This tradition, as well as the life and ministry of the biblical prophets, may be traced back along the lines of monarchy. They had close connections with political powers, who were considered guardians of the rights of every individual. Prophets were considered mediators between humans and the divine, who played a role in prevailing the right relationship between God and human beings. Barbara E. Armacost and Peter Enns write: "While it is impossible to identify a single prophetic theology or ethical perspective... the prophets' primary purpose was to call Israel back to obedience to the covenant obligations to which it had agreed at Sinai."²

Since covenant fidelity to Yahweh involves the right relationship with God and with one another, prophets addressed structural, political, governmental and socio-religious issues of their times. They targeted both Israel's rulers and all the community members as responsible for social wellbeing. In their disobedience and infidelity to keep the covenant, the prophets of Israel called for a "return to God," with all its implications for social relations (Is 10:21; Hos 14:1; Amos 4:4-13). The prophets charged the people of Israel for their failure to establish true worship of God concomitant with unjust structures. Isaiah is a

² Barbara E. Armacost and Peter Enns, in "Crying Out for Justice: Civil Law and the Prophets," *Law and the Bible: Justice, Mercy and Legal Institutions*, edited by Robert F. Cochran Jr. and David VanDrunen (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 125.

prophet who explicates a call for justice, who sought to identify a proper understanding of the relationship between worship and morality.

Isaiah: Advocate of Justice

The prophecy of Isaiah has a unifying theme on the title of Yahweh as “the Holy One of Israel.” He is a writing prophet known to have served in the time of Israel’s socio-political and religious turmoil. He was the son of Amoz, perhaps from a family settling around the court of monarchy in the Southern kingdom. He began his ministry in the last days of King Uzziah of Judah (740 BCE) in and around Jerusalem. He was also a contemporary of other great eighth-century prophets of Israel who spearheaded religious and moral reforms.

The context where Isaiah carried out his prophetic ministry was a time of chaos. The expansion of the Assyrian kingdom and the decline of Israel and Aram (Syria) enhanced perplexity for Judean kings. Instead of maintaining a covenant relationship with God, kings of Judah such as Ahaz, Hezekiah, and others made alliances with the Israel-Syria coalition, and then made negotiations with the Babylonians and Egyptians. Confusion in the political sphere and faithless leadership enhanced chaos in the lives of the people. As a result, the societal structure of the time experienced a decline in morality and religion. Worship of God was corrupted; communitarian values of caring for the underprivileged class were ignored. For Isaiah, Israel’s failure to keep the covenant resulted in the judgment of God that the sinful nation had brought the disaster upon itself.

Learn to do Justice: the Mantra of Isaiah (Isa 1:16-17)

Isaiah stands for the renewal of Israel’s covenant relationship with God. In the first chapter of Isaiah, God declares that worship and offerings are “meaningless” and “detestable” if rendered by those whose hands are “full of blood” (Is 1:11-15). After a series of diatribes for their evil practices, the demand for a rightful lifestyle acceptable to the holy God is uttered. Isaiah proclaims judgment of God upon Israel while persuading them to return to God. The demand from God is narrated in a forceful plea for justice (1:16-17). Return to God included

not only right worship but also right living and, in particular, righteousness and justice in one's relationships.³ The divine speech in vv. 16-17 runs as:

Wash yourselves;
 Make yourselves clean;
 Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
 Cease to do evil,
 Learn to do good;
 Seek justice,
 Rescue the oppressed,
 Defend the orphan
 Plead for the widow.⁴

The languages in these verses are instructions Israel has to follow in her worship of God. The instructions are not merely matters of cultic action but an essential element of a righteous living acceptable before God. That obligation is to "seek justice" in social relationships. It is beyond ritual purification, but a transformation of one's own whole life. This is further expressed as: "removing evil deeds and ceasing to do evil," which is repentance and changing the way of life.

The main thrust of the discussion is seen in v.17 - "**learn to do good**," and "**seek justice**." As Gene M. Tucker asserts, "Learning to do good and seeking justice are not empty abstractions; nor do they refer simply to changing one's attitudes. To seek justice is to care for the powerless members of society: the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow."⁵ Here concern for justice is explicitly expressed as a call for "rescue," to "defend," and "plead" for the cause of the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow. Only by doing so, will the sins of Israel be pardoned and the blessings of God will be upon them (vv.18-19). Similarly, we must express the same concern for justice to not only please God but also to maintain social wellbeing.

³ Armacost and Peter Enns, "Crying out for Justice: Civil Law and the Prophets," 126.

⁴ *NRSV Bible*

⁵ Gene M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB* Vol. VI, edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 56.

Women and Justice

The practice of social justice and righteousness is exemplified by the defense of the “widow” and the “orphan” in Isaiah 1:17. Those in power, especially the king, have a special obligation to “defend” and “plead” for weaker sections of society. Prophets stood for the cause of women in several instances. Elisha defended the poor widow from a creditor and saved the lives of her two sons (2 Kings 4:1-7). In a related story in 2 Kings 8, a Shunammite woman reclaimed her estate, which had probably become a royal estate due to seven years of famine in Israel. The restoration of her estate appears to be a result of the role of prophet Elisha. In the New Testament, we find Jesus bringing the widow’s son back to life out of sympathy (Luke 7:11-15), giving the water of life to the broken and rejected Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), and forgiveness and liberation of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). These acts of love and mercy by our Lord Jesus are acts of justice for marginalized women, a practice that we should try to inculcate in our society.

Conclusion

Justice in biblical times and our contemporary world may have different conceptions. However, fairness and uprightness in the socio-political, economic and religious realms are of paramount importance for every individual at any time. Biblical prophets proclaimed that there is no true worship unless justice is maintained in society. To maintain a religion acceptable to God, the cause of the underprivileged, including the poor, orphans, and women, to name a few, must be pleaded. One way we can do this is by reflecting on ourselves, the Church and the social structures we perpetuate. In particular, to establish a true church of India, we must rethink the status and role of women in our church and society. First, we must reevaluate their position in leadership roles, to ensure they receive equitable opportunities. The Church can take the first steps towards this social upliftment that can permeate into society at large. Additionally, we must consider how to give a voice to women, make sure their needs are considered in our social rules as well as in the law. These are only a few examples, but we must achieve justice for all. Let us learn to do justice so that a shalomic community will be established here on earth.



NCCI NEWS

Dalit Liberation Sunday 2021

Dalit Liberation Sunday has become an important feature in the calendar of Indian Churches and Ecumenical movements. Over the years, there has been a positive response in sensitizing the local congregations towards concerns of Dalits, for no longer caste issue is visualized as a sociological issue or an issue outside the purview of church but more seen as an issue challenging the core of our faith and gospel. Thanks to the enormous support received from across the churches, dioceses, parishes and theological institutions in observing this special Sunday.

We are happy to inform you that the Dalit Liberation Sunday will be observed on 14th November 2021 all over India by the Member Churches/ Institutions of the National Council of Churches in India and Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. The theme for this year's DLS is ***God says No to caste discrimination (Acts 10:28)***. Let us as local congregation observe this DLS-2021 in all sincerity and truthfulness to our calling as Christians and sensitize our people to overcome all forms of discriminatory practices of caste across India and initiate uncompromising actions to eradicate such practices in society and thus also within the Christian community.

The **DLS2021 Poster** is available on the link: <https://ncci1914.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WhatsApp-Image-2021-11-07-at-10.03.54-PM.jpeg> and the **Order of Worship pdf.File** can be accessed on the link: <https://ncci1914.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Dalit-Liberation-Sunday-2021-.pdf> which you may circulate among your pastors, lay leaders and department heads.

In Christ

Pradip Bansrior

Executive Secretary

Dalit and Tribal/Adivasi Concerns

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END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN NOW!
16 Days of Activism**

One of the annual observances of the NCCI Women's Concerns is in joining the '16 Days of Activism against Gender-based violence' from the 25th of November (International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women) to the 10th of December (International Human Rights Day). This period also includes observance of some other important days like – November 29 (International Women Human Rights Defenders Day), December 1 (World AIDS Day) and December 6 (Anniversary of the Montreal Massacre).

The 16 Days Campaign is an organizing strategy for individuals and groups around the world to call for the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence against women and to:

1. Raise awareness about gender-based violence against women as a human rights issue at the local, national, regional, and international levels
2. Strengthen local work around gender-based violence against women
3. Establish a clear link between local and international work to end gender-based violence against women
4. Provide a forum in which organizers can develop and share new and effective strategies
5. Demonstrate the solidarity of women around the world organizing against gender-based violence against women
6. Create tools to pressure governments to implement commitments to eliminate gender-based violence against women

The theme for this year is “*Stand against Violence*”. Let me encourage you to take this opportunity to talk about the adversities that are done under the banner of Rape. Rape is not just physical it's mental and emotional. “It's an act of violence to say I Can do whatever I want with you and your body”. Female Foeticide is a murder committed by us when we do not want to have baby girls in our family. In today's time, we don't want to acknowledge it in our homes/churches/society. But it exists. Let's create a safe space for our daughters, sisters, and us as well to enjoy a life that God has given to us without fear and stigma.

“Recent women-led movements such as #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo have indeed helped break the long silence surrounding sexual harassment in the world of work on a global scale and forced a conversation about the need to fundamentally transform the power structures and discriminatory norms that enable gender-based violence and discrimination.

As National Council of Churches in India, it is our responsibility to encourage each other – member churches/ councils/ organizations and agencies to join in the observation of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence and work on a just inclusive environment for the wholesome growth of all. It is time again this year to unite and create awareness for ending violence against women in our country/churches/ homes

For any clarification and assistance please feel free to email me at jyoti@ncci1914.com. You may like to share with us how this campaign was meaningful for you and your people. Pictures and testimonials can also be sent for sharing with others and for mutual encouragement.

Please share this information to all relevant person / people in your organization/ agency so that they can get this done and be connected with us.

Download the *Concept Note* on the link : <https://ncci1914.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/unite-campaign-2021-concept-note-en-1.pdf> and the *16 Days of Activism Toolkit* on <https://ncci1914.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-Femicide-Advocacy-Guide.pdf>

Thanking you,

Rev Jyoti S Singh Pillai
Executive Secretary
Women Concern, NCCI

November 19, 2021



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