



National
Council of
Churches
in India



NCC REVIEW

Vol. CXLII

No.1

January - February 2022

The National Council of Churches Review (NCC Review)
The Organ of the National Council of Churches in India

UGC approved Journal

Formerly published as "The Harvest Field" since 1862

Vol. CXLII	No.01	January - February 2022
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Views expressed in the NCC Review do not necessarily reflect the official position of the National Council of Churches in India

Registration No. 33/2019

EDITORIAL

Impositions should not restrict convictions...

The principles of John Locke, a British philosopher and enlightenment thinker, have been influential in the development of democratic systems of governance in administrations around the world. Particularly in dealing with the question of religion and the state, he asserted that the inward persuasion of an individual leads them to select their religious affinity. Therefore, the state has no power to pass judgement on a person's convictions, rather it has the responsibility to ensure an individual's freedom of conscience. For Locke, the cornerstone of liberty is religious freedom because for him the pursuit of happiness springs from the individual's own inner convictions.

The observations of Locke have to be taken seriously in India since religion plays a major role in the public and private life of every individual here. Religion in India goes beyond just convictions and plays a vital role in determining one's own identity. Highlighting the responsibility of religion to create an atmosphere for spiritual development, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar stressed that if any religion undermines an individual, then that individual should consider changing that religion. Coupling spiritual development with affirmation of the dignity of people, Ambedkar even argues for material progress as part of one's religious life.

Dr Ambedkar, in one of his speeches at Mumbai (1935) titled 'What Path to Salvation', discussed at length why he and people of his caste must convert to another religion. He explained his search for another religion as being a result of his bitter experiences within Hinduism, where he had been treated as an untouchable. He highlighted conversion as a tool for progress for the untouchables. He went on to say: "...for you, for spiritual as well as for material gains conversion is must. Some persons mock and laugh at the idea of conversion for material gain. I do not feel hesitant in calling such persons as fools".

Exposing elite-driven religions, Ambedkar opined that the religions which speak only of the predicaments of souls may serve the leisure of the rich, offering very little to the downtrodden communities. Religion, for him, should have a social responsibility to support their adherents' aspiration for liberation, which is significant in today's context. When the meaning of conversion, which has sociological and theological significance in many religions, is being reduced to a means for material gain, Ambedkar reminds us to recognize that it is a narrative cooked up by the elites.

While the concept of conversion has widely been used by interested groups to polarize and consolidate religious communities, it has also been used by subaltern communities to establish their distinctive identity as part of regaining their self-respect and dignity. The church in India is caught in the middle of these overarching binary approaches, where an elitist communal narrative of conversion is getting upper hand. Additionally, the church in India carries a guilty consciousness of not being able to ensure a casteless church. Therefore, it is in a situation where it is compelled to opt for silence.

Powerful expressions of the church are an urban phenomenon while in rural areas the powerless and the vulnerable people form the church. The church in India is largely vulnerable in nature and is a fellowship of common people. This vulnerability can easily be victimized by the elitist state and political parties, as they use all kinds of polarizing tactics to misrepresent the community.

In this context, the church can only offer an invitation to 'come and see', as was the response of Jesus when people doubted his identity in the Gospel of John chapter 1 vs. 39. Since the percentage of Christians in India is negligible and remains at 2.3 percent, it is difficult to understand why the Church continues to be targeted, especially in the states where its presence is below one percent.

Mahatma Gandhi writes in his weekly newspaper, *Harijan*, "Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and

who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israels, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus. Free India will be no Hindu raj, it will be India raj, based not on the majority of any religious sect or community but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion”.

Free India cannot tolerate impositions by the state which restrict our inner convictions and their expressions. May God enable all of us to lead a life of coexistence in India, without compromising our convictions.

Rev Dr Abraham Mathew
Managing Editor

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CHRIST'S LOVE MOVING THE WORLD TO RECONCILIATION AND UNITY

*-Abraham Mar Paulos**

Introduction

The World Council of Churches is gearing up, hopefully, to meet for the 11th Assembly in Germany during 31 August – 8 September 2022 which was originally scheduled to have assembled in 2021, but had to be rescheduled because of the Covid19 pandemic. This postponement marks, in a small way, the innumerable postponements the world had to bear because of the 'lockdown' which in turn had crippled human lives and world systems in various ways. The rescheduling of the Assembly marks, on the other hand, a resolution of hope and resilience of faith of this global Christian community to come together at the earliest possible opportunity to reaffirm our reliance in the Triune God who alone is our refuge, the One to look up to for peace, grace and guidance in all situations of life, including the pandemic. As part of joining the WCC conversation, this article is an offering made in love and solidarity from our lived context of India to the deliberation on the Assembly theme, 'Christ's love moving the world to reconciliation and unity'.

An overview of the Assembly Themes

An overview of the themes of the General Assemblies of the World Council of Churches held so far in the last seven decades would be of relevance to place the 11th Assembly theme in its overall context.

- 1948 Amsterdam : Man's Disorder and God's design
- 1954 Illinois : Christ, the Hope of the World

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- 1961 New Delhi : Jesus Christ- the Light of the World
 - 1968 Uppsala : Behold, I make All Things New
 - 1975 Nairobi : Jesus Christ: Frees and Unites
 - 1983 Vancouver : Jesus Christ- the Life of the World
 - 1991 Canberra : Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation
 - 1998 Harare : Turn to God and Rejoice in Hope
 - 2006 Porto Alegre : God, in Your Grace Transform the World
 - 2013 Busan : Encountering the God of Life
 - 2022 Karlsruhe : Christ's Love moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity
1. A cursory look at the Assembly themes reveals that, on the whole, the Assemblies were deliberating on faith affirmations. From 1954 to 1983, the themes were specifically and continuously Christo-centric affirmations. The Canberra Assembly In 1991 marked a change both in the nature and content of the theme, as it had, for the first time, chosen a prayer instead of a faith affirmation and moved the focus from Jesus Christ to the Holy Spirit by deliberating on 'Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation'. Thereafter the themes had become trinitarian for the next three Assemblies. This time, the focus is turning back to Christological affirmation as it began in the Illinois Assembly in 1954.
 2. While risking the possibility of repetition, almost all the Assembly themes had placed the transformation of the world as a predominant concern. The very first Assembly at Amsterdam in 1948, which was held in the aftermath of the Second World War, imbibed the mood of the time and deliberated on 'Man's disorder and God's design'. Later this relation between God and man's world was re-imagined

to include the whole creation as it is apparent from the successive Assembly themes. While the relationship between God, humans and cosmos were brought into the ambit of Assembly deliberations, it is interesting that despite being an association of churches, the World Council of Churches is yet to deliberate specifically on the 'Church' in any of its assemblies and one may hope that in the coming assemblies this may also be considered.

3. Even though Christ was the major focus of the majority of Assemblies, the 11th Assembly for the first time has the word 'love' as part of the theme. In this sense, rather than the person of Christ, it is Christ's love that becomes the focal point of the assembly deliberations and the biblical basis for the theme comes from 2 Corinthians 5:14; "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died." What is missing in this affirmation, however, is a reference to the historical 'Jesus' who gave his life to exemplify love in the world. Jesus Christ's love is a mover to reconciliation and unity.

As Indian Christians, how shall we understand, express and practice this love is the crucial question, especially since there has been increasing fears about the proposal of Oneness and Unity.

Mantra of Oneness and the mirage of Unity

It goes without saying that India is not just a piece of land, or a group of people occupying the land. India, as a nation, is a vision, imagination and dream. Our founding fathers like Mahatma Gandhi and great visionaries like Rabindranath Tagore and scores of unnamed great sons and daughters of this land were pursuing a dream called India as an experience of truth, freedom and fraternity. In the twenty first century, it is our duty to cherish these ideals and to make our country a better and beautiful one to inhabit and enjoy. In another way, we are to hope and move to the stage of being a renewed and reconciled India. Even though we are geographically and politically united as One Nation, are we One in the spirit, love and life is the question.

It is of course not an easy task. There are numerous challenges that fracture the fragile unity in India, including those tendencies and forces that distort the democratic texture of our nation and fracture the harmonious coexistence of people of different faiths, religions, races and regions. There is an ominous stream rolling of a major or unitary narrative with an aggressive articulation and systematic popularization of a pan Indian identity with a new mantra of One-ness. This imaginary construct of One-ness is packaged as the most glorious future for every Indian and the Indian nation, where there is the fantasy of One nation, One id, One Aadhar card, One Ration Card, One culture. It may, one might apprehend, in the long run, get extended to One language, One diet and perhaps, One religion and perhaps more ominously, One leader. Our great challenge is to desist this oligarchical, authoritarian and all-consuming Oneness and to hold on to the foundational narrative of our nation; 'Unity in diversity' which is to be enshrined in our personal, social and national life more than ever before. This had become trickier with the increasing fundamentalism and identity politics. Both these phenomena had originated partly as an aggressive response to the proposed unifying agenda of globalization.

Unity of the 'Global Village'

The globalization project of late modernity had promised 'One world' as it had come about towards the last decades of the twentieth century which incidentally had witnessed the decline of the cold war in a supposedly bipolar world. With the prospect of a global market and new media, a new myth of 'One World' was fabricated. There was no dearth of glamorous advertisements to reinforce this notion of a unified and homogenised world. For instance, the new world was said to be marked by free flow of information, free trade, borderless travel, free market and the emergence of a 'global village'. This global village was imagined as uniformity without distinctions, discrimination and diversity. The grand offer of its twin brother 'global market' was unity, albeit in consumption of the same brand of products anywhere in the world, the products that would look the same everywhere, taste the same and above all was available anywhere in the world.

The unity and uniformity in consumption was not limited to consumer products but perhaps more importantly was extended to media consumption best exemplified by the audience and fan formation for a football or cricket match across the global village. The grand narrative of this global village and global market was about the open entry offered to all without any caste, creed, country or colour distinctions and thereby imagined a world of 'Unity and Reconciliation' of all humankind. Money, Market and Media were considered the triune power, moving the world to unity and oneness.

This utopia of a homogenous world and homogenous human, however, was short lived as the folly of homogenization was quickly recognized as a project of making one particular race, class and gender as the norm for everyone and as making all others invisible and insignificant. The global village, global market and global media were also recognised as a cause for increasing the already existing gap between the global north and global south, rich and poor, man and woman, humans and the rest of creation. In other words, rather than unity and reconciliation, what resulted was a deeper and wider divide, not to forget the latest entrant in this series of divisions, namely, the digital divide. Moreover, the world-wide opposition to this globalisation drive had brought in a twin edged sword of identity politics and religious fundamentalism.

Resurgence in religious fundamentalism

Critiques and opponents of the globalization project had described it as a project of the 'Western' capitalist economy and there was concomitant resistance in an effort to go beyond its proposed homogeneity by affirming local and differential identities. In some corners, globalisation was given the religious tag of Christianity as well.

The penchant of Globalisation for subsuming all identities under the guise of homogenization paved the way for a resurgence in religious fundamentalism. To begin with, it was an effort to puncture the narrative of homogenization and to affirm local and varied identities based on ethnicity, race, region and religion.

Though religious fundamentalism is an old phenomenon in many parts of the world and globalization cannot be considered as the sole reason for its resurgence in the latter parts of the twentieth century, the war of identities initiated by religious fundamentalists and globalization have various shades of interrelationship.

For these and many other reasons and complex inter relationships, the world appears to be more divided and fractured than ever before. Our lived context of India is eulogised for its wonderful culture of harmonious living, but recent reports indicate the rise of hate speech and the intolerant sensitivity about one's own religion which carries the tag of 'highly inflammable material.' Any critical portrayal of one's religion incites a pressing of the panic button among self-appointed guardians who claim to have ownership on gods, scriptures and religious perceptions. Depicting a cartoon about a prophet, or god or symbols often provokes a communal and aggressive response. At the same time hate speech and xenophobia are perpetrated through subtle and not so subtle caricatures, entertainment products and shameless propaganda campaigns to exhort particular groups to be proud of their identity and conversely, to serve a warning note to others.

At the time of this writing, the controversy raging in some parts of India is on the religious marking of food and restaurants. How do we understand and respond to particular branding of food items on caste and religious terms? In a public space how much should we proceed to make religious marking on our personal body, domestic space and public places? While affirmation of each one's identity is to be affirmed, the concerted effort to paint the 'other' as a traitor or terrorist is fracturing the basic unity of humanity. In almost all countries in the world the minority groups are under pressure and threat to toe the line of the majority community.

The human projects of unity and homogenisation has brought in more collision and collusion of identities. In this context, it is a challenging task for the church to present Christ's love moving the world to unity and reconciliation. How, therefore, should the Church meet this challenge? While not prescribing an answer the

attempt here is to seek some light on the invitation of the love of Christ.

Christian Unity as an act of love and response to love

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches had suggested four aspects of Christ's love as part of unpacking the assembly theme with a poignant question "What's love got to do with it?" According to him,

- Our identity and mission as Christian churches are defined by Christ
- Christ's love is the source, the heart, the centre of everything in our fellowship and in our mission
- This love of Christ has changed the world and has the potential to move the world
- The task of our fellowship is to enable the world's moving toward reconciliation and unity.¹

The Bible portrays Christ's love as the maker, mover and mode for unity and reconciliation. Ecumenism, therefore, can be imagined as an act of Christ's love and as a response to Christ's love. In other words, any endeavour for human unity and reconciliation cannot be just a project or programme, but a passionate commitment propelled by the love of Christ. We shall reflect on this through a brief overview of the gospel of John and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

John's gospel posits love as a mover at the very beginning of the gospel. He says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's love for the world is not a just a feeling, but a moving force that caused God to send his only begotten Son to the world. The motive for incarnation which paved the way for the reconciliation between God and

¹ Olav Fykse Tveit. "What's Love Got to Do with it? The Ecumenical Future of the Churches". Inaugural Michael Huffington Lecture. 3 April 2019. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/whats-love-got-to-do-with-it-the-ecumenical-future-of-the-churches>

human beings is explicitly shown as God's love. Even though the creation account in the very first chapter of the Book of Genesis does not explicitly state the motive of God for creation, the Johannine gospel makes it abundantly clear that the new creation in incarnation is the handiwork of God's love.

Further, Jesus proclaimed love as the basis of his unenviable and unique unity with his father and his distinct relation with the disciples. John quotes Jesus numerous times as referring to love as the basis of God's relationship with him, his relationship with the father and his disciples. Jesus minces no words in expounding the multidimensionality love on the basis of which he was forming a new community. It is no surprise therefore that he made love a commandment. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). If love is considered as a subjective feeling or choice, it would have escaped the mandatory stipulations of a command. By making it a command, Jesus was redefining love as the distinct making and marking of a new human community; both united and reconciled with each other and with God in Christ.

John ends his gospel with a poignant description of how Jesus foregrounds love as a prerequisite for reconciliation. "When they finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs"" (John 21:15). To an apparently estranged Peter who denied Jesus three times, Jesus has offered a new leaf of reconciliation by asking him to affirm his love for Jesus. It is in the context of enquiring and affirming an ultimate love for Jesus that Peter was reconciled and given the responsibility to lead the community of faith.

John picks up and continues his penchant for love in his epistle as well where he categorically declared that love is a gift rather than our subjective feeling. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 John 3:1). The basic connecting link or uniting mortar between the disciples of Christ is love and love alone, which

is a gift from God and response to God. He further makes it abundantly clear that love for the other will alone distinguish the children of God from others; "The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters" (1John 3:10). A community of love thus becomes a witness for unity and reconciliation in the world.

Obviously, love should undergird the conduct, correlation and community building in the world. However, one of the barriers for unity and reconciliation between people and communities is fear. As mentioned before, phobias of different kinds creep into human relations, leading to cleavages, clashes and wars. Phobia is also created at times in order to build fortresses, both materially and otherwise, and even as a potent weapon to annihilate another section of people or communities. Fear cannot be expelled by a command or by the force of law or the show of might. John proposes an almost unimaginable antidote for fear by declaring that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1John4:18). If fear creates division, destruction and demonization, love is a trumpet call to a different and less travelled road of embracing the other, paving the way for unity and reconciliation.

As with St John, it is inspiring to recognize that St Paul had portrayed love as a command and commitment. His poignant poem on love (1Corinthians 13) to the community in Corinth reveals this conviction. The Corinthian church was in disarray. The community was divided as different groups and with different identities. They also had stumbled on justice, stooped down in moral and ethical values, and were dragging their divisions even to the public space. Paul had chosen such a divided and battered audience to receive his love song. Paul seems to have realized that love and love alone can cure the malaise of disunity and phobia in the community and can make them into a united and reconciled model community of faith and life.

Paul does not mince words in declaring that lack of love cannot be compensated for by anything else, not even by angelic speech,

powers, knowledge or even the magical power to move the mountains. In other words, Paul was exhorting his audience to abandon any notions of gaining anything worthwhile by compromising on love; that it is not worth giving up on it for the sake of anything else, regardless of how much the other gifts may appear to be logical, legal or laudable. On the other hand, Paul through his poignant picturisation of love characterises its tenacity in holding relationships together and ushering in reconciliation in the world. He ends his poem with a mind-blowing placement of love on the pinnacle of everything else, including faith and hope; “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1Cor. 13:13).

For John or Paul or any other writer in the New Testament for that matter, love is not an abstract concept or something that can be conceived independent of the lived life of Jesus Christ in their description of it as a maker and mover of the world. For all of them, love is originated in God, revealed in Jesus Christ and offered to one and all. Christ’s love is life giving and life affirming and he offered it to the point of giving his life on the cross. This costly and sacrificial love would defy logic by not calculating its cost or even its effect. Love cannot be an occasional luxury for the community of Christ; it has to be a permanent mode. Love needs to be understood, embraced and employed as a command and commitment rather than a comfortable and convenient feeling. Christ’s love moves us beyond the cold logic of rationality to the heart of God’s passion for relationality. This relationality breeds unity and reconciliation. It is endearing that the kingdom of God is also referred as kin-dom of God to underline it as a community of kins, not enemies, a community of embrace rather than exclusion.

Conclusion: Whose unity and reconciliation?

The World Council of Churches wants to proclaim to the world a bold assertion that Christ’s love moves the world to unity and reconciliation. How honestly and credibly can the churches make such a claim is a moot question. When churches are divided and in need of reconciliation, would the present state of the churches lend credibility to this affirmation about Christ’s love? While

one cannot exhaust Christ's love, the credibility of our bold assertions will entirely depend on the extent to which churches can showcase Christ's love moving the various churches to unity and reconciliation. It is interesting to look again into the Pauline teaching from which the Assembly theme is taken. St Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14; "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died." One significant omission from the theme is the word '**us**'. Paul points to the persuasion and compulsion of Christ's love on the community of faith or the church, calling out to it to be united and reconciled. While affirming that Christ's love moves the world to unity and reconciliation, the onus is on the churches to be a sign and sacrament of this unity and reconciliation.

Deliberation is also needed on the question of the stakeholders in this unity and reconciliation ambit. The practical implications of this unity and reconciliation are to be experienced and explicated. When notions of purity and pollution still rule the roost in most parts of the world, including the caste-ridden India, how can reconciliation be possible and plausible? What is the cost involved in it? While appreciating the ecumenical journey of the last century and the fruit of reconciliation and unity expressed wonderfully in many contexts, these questions are only to prompt us to walk the way with more vigour and passion. Of course, Christian unity is not merely for the church, it is for the good of the other and for the glory of God. May our prayerful and purposeful endeavors become a beacon of promise for making our nation and the world better and more beautiful than the way they are at present.

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M. K. GANDHI ON SPIRITUALIZING POLITICS

*-Banyllashisha Kharbuli.**

Abstract

M.K. Gandhi is considered one of the greatest humans in the 20th century. Not only was he a well-known political leader but also a very great ethical thinker and a moralist. For Gandhi, life as a whole is bound up with morality, each aspect of life cannot separate itself from the moral law or morality. With this view, Gandhi had construed that even in the political field morality had a part to play. Gandhi strongly believed that politics plays a very crucial role in human lives, so politics needs a medium to be purified and so he believed that only religion can make politics pure through the introduction of religion into politics.

This paper has been designed to bring out Gandhi's idea of religion and the interconnection of religion and politics. Gandhi believed that politics under the influence of western tradition has become mostly corrupt and evil and as such it fails to serve its purpose in the truest sense. Gandhi, who was always concerned with the welfare of the citizens, wanted to clean politics by infusing spirituality into it so that it could break free from the influence of materialism.

Key words- Gandhi, religion, politics, spiritualizing, purification.

Introduction

M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948) was one of the most dynamic thinkers in Indian history. Gandhi's life was moulded by religious teachings. There is no part in Gandhi's life in which religion did not play a significant role and this included his view on politics. The world of politics according to Gandhi is such that it cannot be isolated from the world of religion; politics and religion for Gandhi are inseparable. According to Gandhi the relation

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between religion and politics is more like that of the part with the whole. According to Gandhi, politics is as essential as religion, but if it is divorced from religion, it is like a corpse fit only for burning. In his autobiography, Gandhi claimed that it is his faith and devotion in religion that had drawn him into politics. Gandhi was concerned with the purification of politics and political life, and that could not happen without the introduction of religious ideals.

In the Indian political scenario, the relation between politics and religion is one that is highly complicated to explain. The relationship between the two is such that at present one cannot conceive of one without the other. In India, it seems like politics and religion cannot part ways; this inseparable relation is not something that emerged in the present era, but it has been there since the time of India's struggle for independence and is continuing till the present-day political affairs. Religion in India is one of the most fragile or sensitive components that can either bring together people of different societies or break the harmony amongst people. In India religion is at the heart of nearly every citizen and it plays a vital role in the life of almost every Indian.

Gandhi's View of Religion

At the very outset, it is important to note that Gandhi was regarded not only as a political leader but also as a social reformer and a spiritual philosopher. He was a devoutly religious man and he held the belief that it is his religion that shaped his view of life in different spheres of his life. According to Gandhi, religion was the breath of his life and it is through religion alone that everything else was connected throughout his life. Gandhi was strictly against the view that religion should not be mixed with politics and asserted that politics and religion are interconnected. According to Gandhi, to be weaned away from religion is to be separated from the source of light and life. Politics cannot altogether be separated from religion. "Politics is a part of our being and not separable from the rest of life."¹ Gandhi had a unique conception about the interconnection between religion

¹ Ragahvan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 40.

and politics. Unlike many other politicians who regarded religion as a means to attain political goals, Gandhi regarded religion as an end in itself whether in the sphere of politics or at any stage of life.

Gandhi's understanding of religion is different from the usual meaning given to it. "Gandhi's religion is a religion of morality and spirituality. It is not the religion of ritualism and dogmatism."² According to Gandhi, religion is the basic need of man as it gives a moral and ethical direction in life and answers the spiritual questions. "Gandhi's religion is not the religion of merely uttering the name of God. To him, religion is not pride, pedantry or sophistry. He did not mean this or that religion, a denominational faith, or a creed or a sect. His religion is the science of soul and God."³ Gandhi emphasized that his religion was essentially that of love, tolerance, ethics and morality. "Gandhi's religion lays stress on morality."⁴ It is important to note that for Gandhi the term religion did not mean the Hindu religion alone, he had clearly mentioned in his autobiography that he had respect for all religions and advocated for equality of religions.

"Gandhi's religion may be characterized as ethical spiritualism. To him, any religion without a moral foundation ceased to be a religion. Religion and morality were two faces of the same coin wherein neither of them could be separated from each other. He held the view that religion was to morality what water was to the seed sown in the soil. He found the essence of religion in morality or ethics."⁵ Gandhi asserted that religion is that force which gives man the realization of one's duty as there is no religion which does not prescribe the performance of actions or duties in accordance with the prescribed morals. "According to Gandhi, the true religious attitude meant the voluntary acceptance and

² K. S. Bharathi, *Thoughts of Mahatma: The Philosophical Foundations of Gandhian Thought*, Vol.1 (Nagpur: Dattsons, 1995) p. 31.

³ Ibid p. 60.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid p.56

fulfillment of one's duties that naturally came one's way or what we call Swadharma. The religious spirit implies observance of one's duties not out of fear of penal sanctions, but borne from a sense of inner compulsiveness generated by compassion and love for human beings. Therefore, his advocacy of ethical and religious approach to politics is based on the view that human history bears witness to the conquering power of religious consciousness."⁶ When Gandhi spoke of religion, he was more concerned with the values and the fundamental ethics that forms as the foundation of all religions and not the dogmatic religious beliefs of any one religion. For Gandhi, "religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in the ordered moral government of the universe. He referred to the religion which transcends Humanism, which changes one's very nature which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies."⁷

Religion in Politics: Spiritualizing Politics

One should understand that Gandhi's view on religion has a great resemblance to the ancient concept of Dharma. Dharma has been defined as a set of moral and ethical values which governed the life of man and at a broader level that of the society. The definition of dharma also includes rights, duties, conduct, law and order. The concept of dharma as an ethical principle was introduced first by Gandhi in nationalist politics. He was concerned about the lack of moral principle in politics, so Gandhi stressed on one of the seven ills, as described by him, "politics without principles." From this understanding of dharma, Gandhi held that every individual in every field, especially in the field of politics should perform one's own duty or dharma without any desire because each and every individual and everything else is governed by this eternal law or the moral law. According to Gandhi, "Religion was essential to prescribe norms and values in politics as it regulated the political activities of politicians as well as the masses. He felt that politics without religion was akin

⁶ K. S. Bharathi, *Thoughts of Mahatma: The Philosophical foundations of Gandhian Thought*, Vol.1 (Nagpur: Dattsons, 1995) p. 33.

⁷ Anil Dutta Mishra, *Fundamentals of Gandhism* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1995) p. 37.

to a life without principle. He believed in the religious aspect of politics.”⁸

Gandhi believed that as religion was the fundamental principle in his life, so religion has to pervade all stages of life. It was with such a conviction that Gandhi approached politics with a spiritual attitude. “I felt compelled to come into the political field because I found I could not do even social work without touching politics.”⁹ In Gandhi’s philosophy, politics is regarded as one of the most crucial phenomena concerning the welfare of humans in general. According to him, politics is the most crucial aspect in building a great society, politics is that which no one can get rid of because it pervades all lives. However, politics as it is the basic regulator of lives of people is bound to be corrupt and necessarily evil, therefore Gandhi emphasized the purification of politics. By purification of politics, Gandhi meant the cleansing of politics and that can be done only through the introduction of religion into the field of politics. However, it is crucial to note that by the term introduction of religion into politics, Gandhi did not mean doctrinaire religion; rather he intended to bring politics within the ambit of religious principles and values.

Gandhi was by nature a truth-oriented man and therefore he believed in the unity of lives and denied the distinction between the private and the public life, and between the sacred and the profane. Gandhi was of the view that political life is merely a reflection of private life; as one performs selfless duty in one’s private life, in a similar way in the political sphere one should adhere to one’s own duty. As any man would in his personal life perform one’s duty selflessly and unconditionally, just like any father to their child, any child to their parents so in the same fashion even in political life, one should perform one’s duty with utmost sincerity, whatever one’s role may be. Gandhi said that political life must be an echo of private life and that there cannot be any divorce between the two. Gandhi was a selfless man and for this reason he was more concerned with the welfare of all, irrespective of religion, caste and creed. The concern of attaining

⁸ K. S. Bharathi, *Thoughts of Mahatma: The Philosophical Foundations of Gandhian Thought*, Vol.1 (Nagpur: Dattsons, 1995) p. 59.

⁹ www.mk Gandhi.org, chap.8.

or knowing the Ultimate Truth is what made Gandhi to realize that all human beings are equal and as such the welfare of each and every human became his goal in life. It was with this concern that Gandhi brought in the principles of religion into the arena of politics so that political institutions may be guided strictly by such principles and values.

Gandhi propounded the concept of Sarvodaya, which when translated into English as welfare of all or the greatest good of all. Gandhi stood for the welfare of all. The concept of Sarvodaya which he propounded is superior to the Benthamite doctrine of 'the greatest good of the greatest number'; he wanted the greatest good of all. Sarvodaya as propounded by Gandhi aims not at the rise of the few or many or for that matter the rise of the greatest number. It is not utilitarianism which stands for the greatest good of the greatest number. The important essence of Gandhi's Sarvodaya is that it emphasizes not only on the welfare of all but the all-round welfare of all. According to Gandhi, any society or a nation can develop only if its members or citizens have become fully developed and development according to Gandhi means not only intellectual or social development, but most importantly it implies spiritual enhancement. Development of citizens of a nation can happen only when the political atmosphere is healthy and such an atmosphere can only be created by leaders who possess the capacity to visualize and determine the truth underlying the existence of each and every one.

Gandhi was from the first determined to approach politics, as everything else, in a religious spirit, while he had no doubt that his own fundamental concern was with the religious life. In 1938, he told a group of missionaries, "I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole...I do not know of any religion apart from activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities without which life would be a maze of sound and fury signifying nothing."¹⁰

¹⁰ Ragahvan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 41.

As Gandhi was exposed to different traditions of the world, his political thought springs from his understanding of the basic tenets ingrained in different religions; truth is one such tenet which underlies all religions of the world and truth can be arrived at only through treading the way that leads to it. Gandhi did not uncritically accept any particular tradition in its entirety as such, instead he extracted appropriate concepts from all traditions, be they western or eastern as also concepts from ancient texts and applied them to his social and, most importantly, his political experiments. Gandhi was very much firm with his decision of spiritualization of politics because under the influence of the western tradition he opined that politics had become a dirty materialistic game so as to suit the interest of the few. "In a materialistic society, regardless of its religious or humanistic profession, the State and the entire system of government become corrupt. All political institutions become merely instruments for the pursuit of power, whether directly or by the indirect manner in which they maintain and foster the ownership of property and provide the psychological incentives that are connected with power." ¹¹

Gandhi was of the view that power is regarded as the inducement to politics. Power has generally been interpreted negatively, implying that power has the capacity to impose its authority on institutions by coercion. Gandhi wanted to do away with the concept of power in politics but he also contended that power attained by love and service of people is essential as it aids in the service of people by channelizing the various social and political institutions in accordance with ethical and moral norms. According to Gandhi, this idea of power is crucial to politics because it does not imply an end in itself but a means to various other ends. "To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life." ¹²

¹¹ Ibid p. 39.

¹² Ibid p. 42.

During his time, Gandhi realized that the political environment was certainly evil and cruel, he was concerned with the means and ends employed in the politics, he was concerned with the morality of means and ends employed. However, he was certain that in the political arena the morality and credibility of means remained unrecognized and only the ends were aimed at. Hence in order to achieve the political ends, even the most unlawful and illegitimate means would be justified without consideration about the ethics and morals of the means employed. Gandhi was strictly against such a conception of means and ends, for in his opinion the means and ends must be equally pure; no amount of good ends can be justified unless the means employed are good and pure. Gandhi was firmly convinced that it is only through the introduction of religion and its most fundamental principles into politics that actions can be directed by employing only means which are in accordance with the ethics and morality. "Gandhi's view of the morally legitimate means to be exclusively employed in furthering political ends was deeply affected by the doctrine of dispassionate action in the Gita."¹³

According to Gandhi, politics bereft of religion is a death trap which kills the soul; he emphatically asserted this as he was of the view that if politics and religion were treated as watertight compartments then all round development of individuals would be impossible because then values and norms would be completely disregarded, leading to oppression and destruction of the weaker sections. Gandhi was much concerned about all round development as for him this was a prerequisite for the attainment of spiritual perfection and only through spiritual perfection can one be drawn closer to the truth. Gandhi opined that it is only through spiritualism that man can come closer to truth or God. It is important to note that for Gandhi truth is not that which only makes things true, rather he regarded truth as God. Gandhi was very much concerned to bring about a healthy political atmosphere and this could become reality only when a sense of universal morality arose amongst individuals. "It was really Gandhi's intention to protest against

¹³ Ragahvan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 363.

the compartmentalization of human life that had been brought about in the name of the segregation of politics from religion.”¹⁴

Gandhi's whole intention of introducing religion into politics was due to the fact that the modern interpretation of politics, especially the western concept, had reduced politics merely to a game of cynical manipulation based on force, fraud, deceit and self-interest. According to Gandhi, politics concerns every sphere of human lives and as such it is an art by which the greatest service to man can be done to bring about social good. Politics, according to Gandhi is also one of the greatest instruments in the cosmic and spiritual self-awareness of man. Politics according to Gandhi is the platform which can provide the means for the total well-being of people in general, hence it needs a moral and ethical grounding to fulfill the task. Gandhi was clear with his conviction that it is religion alone which can provide the ethical and moral basis for politics, hence he advocated the introduction of religion into politics as a means for the purification of the political sphere. Gandhi believed “morals, ethics and religion are convertible terms. A moral life without reference to religion is like a house built upon sand. And religion divorced from morality is like ‘sounding brass’ good only for making a noise and breaking heads.”¹⁵ Gandhi wanted to bridge the gap between politics and spiritualism, a gap that resulted from the ideology brought in by western thought. In the west, politics and religion were regarded as two divergent paths as it was believed that one was a hindrance for the other because of the constant subordination of the churches by the opportunistic politicians and this hampers the growth and development of both, hence politics and religion were segregated as much as possible. However, Gandhi asserted that religion and politics can never be separated for their relation is like that of part and whole. “Gandhi's view of politics was the consequence of, and not independent of, his view of morality.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Ragahvan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 43.

¹⁵ K. S. Bharathi, *Thoughts of Mahatma: The Philosophical Foundations of Gandhian Thought*, Vol.1 (Nagpur, Dattsons, 1995) p. 56.

¹⁶ Ragahvan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 48.

Conclusion

Religion and politics are two important institutions in India which have a deep-rooted influence and potency to shape the life of each Indian more than any other fact. Hence these two institutions can be used either for the welfare of humanity or for its destruction. It is obvious that the present political scenario in India is tainted with various inhuman acts that are carried out mischievously on the pretext of fulfilling the principles of a particular religion but actually for material gain. The political ideology of Gandhi is opposed to such a destructive spirit of a few selfish politicians. Gandhi thinks that true religious spirit should be used even in politics for the good of humanity itself. For Gandhi every religion deals with truth and it alone should be the ultimate goal for each individual. So truth must be the goal even in politics. Let not religion be used for political gain or vice versa instead let it be used for purification of the mind of selfish politicians so as to create a constructive moral bearing in each citizen and realize Gandhi's vision of religion and politics ultimately. It is noteworthy to state that Gandhi's political thought needs a practical application in the political field because what is seen in the present days is a complete misuse of both institutions by people who are ignorant and opportunistic and do not have a clear understanding of what each institution represents. A very clear understanding of Gandhi's political ideology can pave the way for the betterment of society and since society is comprised of individuals, it implies the betterment of each individual.

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FORGING PEACE IN TROUBLED TIMES: A WOMAN'S NARRATIVE FROM THE KUKI- NAGA CONFLICT

*Hatchingthem Haokip**

During a time when Jews across Europe faced conditions that grew progressively worse, the little village of Le Chambon in south-central France took a stand. France had fallen at the hands of Germany by 1940 and Marshal Philippe Pétain was granted authority to become the Prime Minister of France under the Nazi regime. He revoked anti-Semitic laws, removed French Jews from their employment and put them in internment camps. Under the German occupation, French citizens had to salute the French flag with a full fascist salute. Most complied with the rule but the people of Le Chambon refused. According to André Trocmé, the pastor of the Protestant temple of Le Chambon, the fascist salute was “obedience contrary to the orders of the Gospel” (Gladwell 264). In *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*, Magda Trocmé was described as the first person to welcome a refugee woman:

A woman appeared at the Trocmés’ door. She was terrified and trembling from the cold. She was Jewish, she said. Her life was in danger. She heard Le Chambon was a welcoming place. “And I said, ‘Come in,’ ” André Trocmé’s wife, Magda, remembered years later. “And so it started.” (Gladwell, 2013, p. 265)

In collaborating with a Quaker named Burns Chalmers, André Trocmé volunteered to receive Jewish children who were rescued out of the internment camps. The arrival of the Jews at Le Chambon began as a trickle and turned into a torrential flood. When Georges Lamirand who was in charge of the youth affairs,

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arrived in the little village for a state visit in 1942, he was given a letter that clarified that the people of Le Chambon wanted no participation in the persecution of Jews. Author of *David & Goliath* Malcolm Gladwell shared an excerpt of the letter:

We feel obliged to tell you that there are among us a certain number of Jews. But, we make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teaching.

If our comrades, whose only fault is to be born in another religion, received the order to let themselves be deported, or even examined, they would disobey the order received, and we would try to hide them as best we could.

We have Jews. You're not getting them. (p. 267)

The villagers of Le Chambon were also known as the Huguenots. The Huguenots were “descendants of France’s original protestant population, and the truth is that people had tried - and failed - to wipe them out before” (268). Prior to receiving Jews, the Huguenots had a history of receiving and protecting varied forms of refugees in the past as well. They were a people acquainted with suffering and persecution. Had they not taken a courageous stand to defy an order that intended to uproot and annihilate their fellow human beings, countless Jewish families across the world would not have existed today.

Like the Trocmés who lived several decades before her, in another land and in a different time and context, a woman made a similar choice. Pastor Matia is from the Mao Naga community. She was travelling from Mao to Imphal during the Kuki-Naga conflict when she encountered an incident similar to Magda Trocmé. She had a choice to make, within a short period of time. What she did then serves as a possible and actual alternative to the darkness that enveloped the late nineties in Manipur.

Narratives surrounding the conflict have been mostly male-centric, not because of the lack of women’s narratives but rather

because of their marginalisation. Within Manipur, Naga, Kuki and Meitei women have worked hard, and worked together over extended periods of time, and have built up an impressive solidarity on a range of issues (Butalia 22). However, times of conflict that highlight differences more than commonalities easily blur the solidarity that women worked hard to build. Yet, through the story of a woman we shall see how these differences can be harnessed to forge peace between conflicting communities.

Between 2018 and 2019, I travelled to five districts in Manipur to meet survivors of the conflict with my parents. The fieldwork required staying in the homes of survivors and interacting with them when their schedules allowed them the time to narrate their experiences. Till today, there is lingering warmth of the hospitality shown by the survivors who also hosted us in their homes. A Pastor from the Thangal Naga Baptist Association played a crucial role as the interlocutor and mediator between survivors from the Naga community and me, as a researcher belonging to the Kuki community. His presence in each meeting helped the communication to flow effortlessly. The narratives of both Kuki and Naga survivors were collected during the aforementioned period. Pastor Matia's story is one of the many narratives from Naga survivors that were collected during a research fieldwork conducted in Senapati and Mao districts in 2018.

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed a bloodbath, the likes of which the post-Independent Indian state of Manipur had never seen before. The conflict between the Kukis and Nagas between 1992 and 1998 took a heavy toll on both communities. Kukis and Nagas are two major ethnic groups in North East India. The two communities come under the Scheduled Tribe category. According to the Census 2011, the Scheduled Tribe "constitutes 35.1 per cent of the total population" (Manipur: Final Population). The conflict, which initially was between the armed insurgents of the respective tribes, snowballed into a collateral damage that devastated countless lives. The violence resulted in loss of multiple lives, decimation of hundreds of villages and the displacement of thousands of people within the state.

Very few papers have been written that deals with the need to rebuild a healthy and mutually beneficial relationship between the Kukis and Nagas. The narrative culture that surrounds the conflict has almost always been directed towards viewing a person from another community as “the other.” Initiatives about the restoration of individual and communal peace are sparse and there is a crying need for many more such initiatives. .Regarding the necessity of reconciliation and peace-building, Bar-Tal and Bennink posits:

We propose that reconciliation is required when the societies involved in conflict evolve widely shared beliefs, attitudes, motivations and emotions that support adherence to the conflictive goals, maintain the conflict, de-legitimize the opponent and thus negate the possibility of peaceful resolution and prevent the development of peaceful relations. (2004, p.13)

Through the narrative of Pastor Matia, the objective of this paper is to show the significance of pursuing peace-building between the two communities. The article “Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case Study of the Kukis and Nagas in Manipur” posited a balanced perspective of the conflict:

When people enjoy the freedom to pursue their own goals, sometimes conflicts of interests become inevitable. Conflicts can develop between different ethnic groups, or within the same group of people and it can involve both violence and non-violence. However, all ethnic conflicts do not necessarily lead to violence. In the case of the Kukis and Nagas, the conflict was non-violent in the beginning, but it escalated into a violent one. Although the physical violence has ended, the tension between the two ethnic groups remains. (Kipgen, 2011, p. 1043)

A brief history of the conflict

Ethnic conflicts between two communities can happen either from ongoing tensions or a sudden clash that happened unexpectedly.

According to Yahya Sadowski, ethnic conflicts are “fought among neighbours, among people who live intermingled with one other, forced to share the same resources and institutions” (22). The immediate cause of the Kuki-Naga conflict started between the Marings and the Thadous and spread its tentacles across areas inhabited by the respective communities across Manipur, Assam and Nagaland between 1992 and 1998 (Kipgen 1051). Currently, the Kukis settle predominantly in Churachandpur and Chandel while the Nagas are a majority in Ukhrul and Tamenglong. They have an equal percentage of residence in Senapati district. According to reports given by Minorities at Risk Project, the conflict spilled over even to Burma where the NSCN-IM burnt a Kuki village known as Wet Yu on 13th April, 1993. 110 villagers were rendered homeless, one villager was killed and 21 houses were burnt. Another recorded incident reported that 30 Kukis were killed in Dimpaur by NSCN-IM on December 10th, 1996.

Prior to the conflict, both the Marings and Thadous settled in Moreh¹. According to Bhagat Oinam, the objective of the tussle between the insurgent groups of the two communities was to control Moreh since the town is a major source of financial income for the two groups. Immediate reasons behind the clash were: “(i) control and occupation of Moreh, (ii) tax on Kuki residents in Naga territory by the Naga militants and refusal by the Kukis, and (iii) refusal by Nagas to renew land agreements with the Kukis” (Oinam 2032). Poignant moments that marked the escalation of the conflict are as follows:

The tension between the two ethnic groups took a violent turn when members of the NSCN-IM attacked and burnt down Molphei, a Kuki village on 12 May 1992... Subsequently, members of the KNA collected taxes from the Maring villages in Chandel district on 3 June 1992, which was retaliated by the KNA by attacking the

¹ Moreh is a crucial trading town in Manipur. Located between Myanmar and India, it connects South Asia, Southeast Asia and the ASEAN communities and plays a crucial role in the Look-East policy of the Indian government.

Maring villages in Chandel district. The violent conflict continued between the two groups and spread to other parts of Manipur. (Kipgen, 2011, p. 1051)

In “Ethnic Conflict” Kamaroopi reasoned that the removal of businesses belonging to Naga entrepreneurs from Moreh coupled with the refusal by the Kukis to pay tax to Naga insurgents, blew the conflict out of proportion (2172-2173). Dwelling briefly on the history of the conflict is needed for unlearning, relearning and learning so that the two communities can build a healthy future together.

Pastor Matia’s story

Pastor Matia belongs to the Mao Naga community. She was living in Maharashtra when the conflict began. After she relocated to Manipur, she attended the funeral of two Naga youths who were from Makhon Khuman village, a Mao village. They had been killed on their way back from Imphal.

After attending the funeral, she decided to travel to Imphal for a meeting in Manipur Baptist Convention since she was the Secretary for the women’s society during that time. It was in the month of August on that particular day that she met two women from the Kuki community. She couldn’t recall whether the year was 1992 or 1993 because she didn’t keep a written record of the incident. She recalled that people from her community were furious with her for helping the two women. The woman and her daughter had come from Nagaland and were heading for Churachandpur district in Manipur to meet her ailing mother. They had to pass through Mao since Mao is the commercial town on the border with Nagaland. It was there that they met Matia on the road and asked for direction. She directed them to a bus that was leaving for Imphal.

After some time, she took the next bus along with some other women from her locality. By the time they crossed Tadubi, it was getting late and dark therefore she decided to rest for the night and take another bus early the following morning. However, the

women who travelled with her insisted that she travel with them. They were passing through Hengbung, a Kuki village. They told her "Matia, don't get down even if it is late. We should all travel together. Tangkhul children who had come home for holidays have been killed here in this village. We are afraid to travel if you don't go with us." She told them that they should pray and not be afraid.

When the bus crossed Hengbung and stalled there for a long while, Matia began to suspect that something was amiss. Tying her shawl around her waist, she went out of the bus and was told by someone that two Kuki women have been pulled down by Naga insurgents. She asked people outside regarding their whereabouts. However, people were not willing to give her the details so she continued to walk and ask people who passed by about those women. Finally, she met someone who told her to cross the road and go down the fields. As she went closer to their location, she heard the woman and her daughter sobbing uncontrollably. They were surrounded by five or six men who held guns and swords in their hands. She recognized one of them and pleaded with him. She told him, "What you are about to do is not the will of God. What wrong have they done? Even if I die or live, I won't allow this to happen." Then one of them came and hit her forcefully from behind with a wooden log. He shouted in anger, "Who gave you the permission to come and meddle here in our business?" She replied, "I give myself my own permission to interfere. You are doing what is wrong. This is wrong."

He hit her with the log twice again and told her to leave. Afraid for her life, she left. However, she could not shake off the conviction of how wrong it was to leave the women behind. She recalled telling herself, "I have seen everything with my own eyes. I was the one who dropped them off to the bus. I will not leave them even if I die." So she returned again. When the men saw her they shouted, "She has come again!" Without responding she headed for the women. She tried to pull their hands and take them with her. They must have thought that she was a female insurgent.

Since her altercation with the insurgents was in Mao dialect, the women couldn't understand them and were even more doubtful of her intentions. They resisted her pull. Her second return was unsuccessful. The men drove her away like before.

She went back to the road and returned again. The third time however, she asserted, "In the name of Lord Jesus, I tell you that this is wrong." Suddenly, one man started to speak in Meiteilon. He said, "Aunty, how dare these women give us money to escape? They insulted us!" She turned to the women and said, "Why did you give them money? They don't kill people. They had taken you out to interrogate you because the times are bad. They are considerate men. They are good people." In order to save the women, she had to employ her words tactfully to calm the situation. Their anger subsided a little. Trembling, the mother replied, "We were so scared that we thought we would give all the money that we have so that they would spare our lives. When they came near the bus, we gave them money so that they could have tea. The money fell near the bus window but they did not take it. We are not Kukis. We are Lushais."

By then, her fear of the men had begun to wane. She said to them, "If you plan to take my life, write a letter to my younger brothers and inform them about what has happened to me. Promise me that you will leave the women either at the church pastor's home or at the police station. After that, you can do what you want. Don't make decisions in a rush of fury." The men then started speaking to one another in Nagamese. She heard the words "Ki kori go?" repeatedly which meant "What should we do?"

The woman had a Bible with her. She showed them the Bible as the evidence that she wasn't a Kuki woman. She spoke in Meiteilon, "My brothers, look at this Bible. It is not written in Kuki dialect." At this, one of the men got angry. He snatched the Bible from her hand and flung it to the ground. He then told the woman, "What does it matter to me whether the Bible was written in Kuki or Naga language?" The young man's action infuriated Matia. She sensed courage rising within her. She rebuked him, "Why did you throw the Bible without any reverence?" It was raining. She

picked up the Bible, wiped it with her cloth and returned it to the woman. There were about four or five letters tucked inside the Bible. Those were written by students who were studying in Nagaland. The insurgents took the letters from her Bible. The women had planned to deliver the letters in Churachandpur. When they saw her clean the Bible, their thoughts seemed to change a little. They threatened to impose her with monetary fines. The three women fell down after being shoved by the men.

The woman and her daughter held tightly to her clothes and did not let go till they came out of that area. They boarded the bus and reached Imphal. It was very dark by the time they reached Imphal. She asked them to come and spend the night with her at her aunt's home in New Checkon. They hugged her and wept. However, they refused her offer. They had already planned to stay in a hotel near the Churachandpur bus station. Pastor Matia told them to stop crying and to praise God. She reminded them of Psalm 91 about God's promise to send His angels to protect them. She told them that God sent her to them that day.

The women reiterated that they were Lushais and not Kukis to which she replied, "It does not matter to me whether you are a Lushai, Naga, Kuki or Nepali. I helped you because I know it is wrong to pull innocent people from a bus with the intention of killing them."

Excerpts of peace-building from Pastor Matia's experience

Since the objective of the paper is to explore and understand peace-building within the context of the Kuki-Naga conflict, ideas shared here have been heavily based on the lived experience of Pastor Matia. Her story is a testament that peace-building is an effort that comes with courage and perseverance. It will be met with resistance but the fruit of such an effort is beautiful.

Efforts of peace-building between any conflicting communities require intentionality. Being intentional will direct the course of communication between the parties. The contents of intentional communication could also determine the outcome of efforts at

peace-building. Whether in inter-communal or intra-communal communications concerning the conflict, stories like that of Pastor Matia need telling and retelling. Because human beings are creatures of stories, the human psyche is easily influenced by the stories that one listens to. A narrative of peace and reconciliation matters because the world has become increasingly volatile where communities need reminders of goodness and mercy shown in unexpected moments.

The recurring theme that marked Pastor Matia's story was her refusal to accept the status quo. While the conflict was largely caused by men, the "solidarities and differences among women have been key to some of the attempts at keeping peace in the midst of conflict in this troubled region" (Butalia 23). While many from her community were afraid to get involved in the conflict, she was adamant and courageous where it mattered. She chose to step away from the general view of stereotyping Kukis as the "other" and saw the two women primarily as human beings first.

Emotions are freely expressed on a person's face. Unspoken longings, terrors or joy are easily visible through facial expressions. In encountering the desperate, crying faces of the woman and her daughter, Matia did not and could not turn her back. Each face that another face encounters calls for responsibility. In recognizing that the mother's face represents an eternal soul, Matia valued the person above ethnicity. In valuing the souls of the women, she took responsibility upon herself to ensure their safety. According to French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the pleading face of the mother ignited in herself the will "to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it" (218-219). The face of a person reflects the truth of *imago dei* that sets mankind apart from all other forms of creation. The divine fingerprints on a human being call for honour and responsibility, which darkness through war and violence constantly tries to undermine. Had she chosen to not respond to her inner conviction and take responsibility, there

would be no story to narrate today. The first key to maintaining peace between communities is to recognize that one is responsible for one's neighbour.

Secondly, Pastor Matia mentioned that she visited churches in Kuki villages along with pastors from the Manipur Baptist Convention. Those visits were crucial because they enabled people from both communities to interact and more importantly, pray together. As they prayed together, the tension and fear that were prevalent during those times took a backseat. Those who prayed together waged a different kind of war in the realm of the spirit, which the apostle Paul talked about in the sixth chapter of Ephesians. Through prayer, they were binding strongholds of hatred, violence and murder. By meeting in churches, Kukis and Nagas also transcended the limitations of ethnicity and interceded for a common goal.

A church building as a sanctified location therefore became a force of resistance against the widespread violence. By meeting together and worshipping God in the midst of a conflict, they showed an alternate spectacle that was very different from the spectacles of loss, violence and fear that pervaded Manipur. The church therefore served as a pan-tribal unifying force during the conflict. To this day, the church holds a major key in maintaining harmony and keeping the lines of communication open between different communities in Manipur.

Thirdly, the narrative account mentioned that people feasted together when they met in church buildings. They ate vegetables and meat together. This seemed bizarre in the midst of the enmity that was prevalent then. However, feasting together created a space for Kukis and Nagas to meet and talk. Most people will acknowledge that food curated with preparedness and intentionality brings people together. The significance of inter-communal commensality is that "sharing food is essential to our survival. Eating bridges and builds communities...Food is a tool for reconciliation in families, in nations and around the world" (Mechefske).

In 1999, Tokyo Multicultural Church and Daebang Church of South Korea organised a seminar titled “21 Seiki no Koinonia” which means “21st Century Fellowship”. The fellowship aimed at three integral components: to reflect on their shared colonial past, to celebrate their shared Christian faith and to promote casual social interactions through sight-seeing, joint meals and home stays. In a study conducted on the Japanese- Korean post-conflict relationship, commensality has been viewed likewise:

In these contexts and others, food is as much an instrument for inclusion as it is an instrument for exclusion and particular attention has to be paid to why, when and how commensality can be, and has been, utilised as a reconciliatory rather than a boundary-affirming event...the importance of positive social interaction and especially of sharing food with each other, of learning about each other's foodstuffs and cuisines, and of seemingly mundane conversations during and about these very meals. (Ketterer, 2014, pp. 3-5)

Perhaps the reason why commensality proved beneficial for Kukis and Nagas during the conflict was that they shared many similar food habits and customs. Similarity in food choices encouraged them to focus on their similarities rather than their differences. Food promoted inclusivity and stood as a beacon of hope that not every Kuki and Naga supported the conflict. There too, women played a crucial role behind the scenes. Even though they did not take centre stage in the interlocution of peace talks, they were responsible for cooking the varied meals.

Much like praying together, feasting together became a symbol of resistance that the Kukis and Nagas will not allow unreasonable acts of violence to shroud their perception of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Food forges bonds between people. Therefore, choosing to eat together signifies that people have either forgiven each other or are willing to build a positive bond. Since the purpose of commensality during the conflict was not in the food itself, food became a means to achieve reconciliation.

The act of feasting together reminds one of the twenty-first chapter of John where Jesus prepares breakfast for Simon Peter and the disciples at the sea of Tiberias. Jesus cooks fish and bread for them. The locus of the scenario is the moment Jesus asks Peter how much he loves Him, a question Jesus asks three times. The food was laid out but it was not the end in itself. By cooking for Peter who denied Him and the disciples who deserted Him, Jesus Himself initiated reconciliation through the fish and the bread. Food as a means of mediation could serve to “create spatio-temporal conditions necessary to successfully mitigate situations that may otherwise be characterized by misunderstandings, animosity, and an unwillingness to move beyond dividing lines” (Ketterer 2).

Koinonia participants understood that commensality reminds them of what “brings them together rather than what keeps them apart” (8) and doing so has encouraged them to view themselves as a member of a larger fellowship, which is the church. Likewise, reconciliation and peace-building can be expected to reach its fruition when Kukis and Nagas agree to reach a point of understanding where they prioritise the identity of belonging to the eternal body of Christ.

The conflicting communities no longer suffer from direct consequences of the conflict today and they live largely independent of each other in their individual lives. Also, the conflict is unlikely to be a guiding force in personal decision-making processes. Based on these two reasons, focusing on building peace and reconciliation through seemingly mundane and daily interactions like sharing food, inter-ethnic prayer meetings and conversations could be feasible and beneficial. Just as Pastor Matia stood her ground as a leader and engaged in improving the Kuki-Naga relationship, even as the women in the Kuki village cooked meals in obscurity for the peace talk, peace-building is an effort that requires active participation from leaders and civilians alike. The price of violence is an expensive cost though it is a broad path. On the other hand, peace-building is a narrow path but the fruit that it yields feeds many.

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A TELESCOPIC VIEW OF SUFFERING: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

J Judith Gracia & Jessica Selwyn***

Abstract

Religion is a man-made entity, experienced more by faith than by sight. While the belief in religion in society has started to fade away in the western parts of the world on one side, there is a revival on the other side. Each individual at some time or other experiences suffering, either physically or mentally. This article draws examples from the Christian faith. Examples ranging from King David's life to the 20th century can equip people to grow more in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Instances of suffering are stepping stones to one's leap of faith in Christ. One helpful aid to this is qualitative analysis of christian devotional lyrics, which can help create solutions to problems and challenges people face.

Keywords: Psalms, Lyrics, Leap of Faith, Space, Christianity

Life is an amalgam of joy and sorrow, a see-saw of ups and downs, a blend of sweetness and bitterness. It is this state of binaries that makes life valuable, meaningful and fruitful, with a simultaneous state of balanced, acceptance of life speculation and hope and expectation about one's future. Scientific developments and improved technology do not guarantee a world free of suffering. Suffering is part and parcel of everyone's life. People who have faith and trust in God are not exempt from the challenges of life. Suffering may vary from person to person. It may be physical,

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psychological, mental, social and even spiritual. It is the way a person looks at it, encounters it and overcomes it that makes all the difference. No achiever in life succeeds without passing through a phase of struggle in life.

A struggle may be short-lived or may be extended days together. Sufferings do not always mean bloodshed, violence or physical suffering, but they can take the forms of agony, angst, psychological trauma, depression and *strum und drang*. Jeyakani observes suffering of the African Americans in the same vein.

Suffering is an inescapable predicament in human life. In the case of the Blacks, affliction for centuries has resulted in *angst*, anguish and despair at all levels - physical, mental and social. Chronic suffering results in a wearisome humdrum of affairs. In Brooks' "kitchenette building" the speaker tells drily, "WE ARE things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, / Grayed in, and gray." (Jeyakani 1996: 177).

Expressions of suffering may vary according to the age, maturity, gender, intensity and depth of the problem. Suffering may be expressed and made known to fellow human beings in different ways. A person with poetic aesthetics and aptitude is naturally prone to express his views through a piece of art or poem or picture or song. The lyric is the most common channel for poets to articulate their emotions.

Most often, emotions are either shared with kith and kin or kept within one's own self. Brooding upon troubles will not benefit in the long run. It is always good to give expression, through any form of art, to one's inner self to overcome and survive amidst odds.

Turning back the pages of history, one finds that many great people who suffered in their real lives found new ways of managing situations of life through writing poems. Emily Dickinson, an American poetess, for example, used to vent her

feelings by scribbling in bits of paper and give them away. (It is well-known that all her poems were posthumously recognised.) The literary giant who has stood the test of time, the master of 'grand style', John Milton, is a spectacular testimony to the fact that nothing can impede one's progress. His total blindness at the age of forty-five did not deter him from completing his magnum opus, *Paradise Lost* – which, as he wished, was a great work which posterity has not "willingly let die".

The music maestros J.S. Bach and Beethoven are no exceptions to this. In the face of sickness and blindness, Bach produced masterpieces like the Cantata BWV 147, Mass in B Minor, St. Matthew's Passion, Toccata and Fugue in D minor, and Beethoven's being deaf did not hinder his Sonatas, Quartets, and Symphony no. 9 becoming world-class.

Amy Carmichael, a 20th-century minor poet, is yet another example who, in her later years of bed-ridden passivity, was able to wax eloquent the eulogies of her creator God.

The classic hymn 'What a friend we have in Jesus' was sung by a poet Joseph Scriven who serially lost his brides on their respective wedding days. He was able to scribble the surge of emotion in a piece of paper kept by his bedside like a robin bleeding with a thorn in its breast and singing simultaneously:

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge –
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there. (Osbeck 1982:101)

Horatio Spafford, a hymnist whose sufferings ought to be graphically expressed: a wealthy man, whose fortunes were burned to ashes unfortunately, simultaneously losing his son to a fatal fever had another major trial in life. He had sent on a vacation his family, whom he planned to join later. Sadly their ship met with a major accident and sank. He lost his five daughters. Only

his wife survived. Later, when Spafford crossed the same spot (pointed by the Captain) where his family drowned, his heart was overwhelmed with sadness but God's voice overrode his emotions, and he poured forth the lyric, which is unrivalled in its power to comfort people in similar distress:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea-billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to know;
It is well, it is well with my soul.

.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.
And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend
A song in the night, oh my soul! (*The Seventh-Day
Adventist Hymnal* 198: 530)

These lines help one reflect the different facets of the suffering undergone by Spafford. He fixes his eyes on Christ and His coming back in His glory along with his loved ones. His sufferings had mellowed him into a person with faith that looks beyond the clouds.

The best example from the Bible of a metaphor of suffering is the patriarch Job who looks in the same vein like Spafford, his eyes looking beyond his suffering to glimpse his Redeemer:

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes – I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25 – 27)

Suffering is common to all, whether one is a theist or an atheist. Many people have a notion that God's people do not have suffering since God loves them. In fact, God is impartial.

Suffering maybe due to one's own sin, failures and shortcomings and not always unmerited as in the case of patriarch Job.

Faith transforms one's suffering into spiritual maturity. Suffering is an instrument used by God to shape, polish and hone people. This article focuses on Christian faith in relation to sufferings with specific reference to King David, the great Psalmist of the Bible.

In this context it is highly relevant to bring in the concept of faith as put forth by the great Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Jeyakani, throws light upon Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith in her treatise:

It is Kierkegaard who gives a distinct, clearcut and solid answer to the incertitudes and queries in man's life...For Kierkegaard, faith means the total surrender to the Superior Being who is strong and definitive in character. Again, "to make the movements of faith, [I must] shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd. (Jeyakani 1996: 190)

King David exercises this leap of faith as he himself avers in one of his Psalms, "For by thee I have run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall (29). Such a leap of plunging into the unknown obstacle may seem impossible and hyperbolic, but for a person who goes through such a situation there is no other alternative, than a "go forward"

When as a boy, King David encounters the giant Goliath who is on the other side of the valley, he takes a Leap of Faith with a sling and a stone in his hand, rather than with the might and power of the sword of Saul, and gains victory for the Israelites. There are many other occasions in his life wherein he exercises this faith.

It is assumed that David sang this Psalm after this great triumph.

My enemies turn back;
they stumble and perish before you.
For you have upheld my right and my cause,
sitting enthroned as the righteous judge.

You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked;
 you have blotted out their name for ever and ever.
 Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies,
 you have uprooted their cities;
 even the memory of them has perished.

.

Lord, see how my enemies persecute me!
 Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death,
 that I may declare your praises
 in the gates of Daughter Zion,
 and there rejoice in your salvation. (9:3 – 6, 13, 14)

David's Psalms are an outcome of an emotional experience. G.W.F. Hegel points out that "lyric is concentrated into the depths of feeling or assembled and evaporated in the universals of reflection" ("Hegel's Aesthetics. Part 3, Section 3: αα"). For the lyric, this is one of the important features. It is not just one Psalm that has such a dramatic background, but there are many such that follow. After the war, there is a spark of a grudge between King Saul and David. Faced with this, David does not abandon his religion or God, but keeps calling on Him and finds confidence in God, as revealed in the opening lines of another of his Psalms:

Listen to my words, Lord,
 consider my lament.
 Hear my cry for help,
 my King and my God,
 for to you I pray.
 In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
 in the morning I lay my requests before you
 and wait expectantly. (5:1-3)

David has a habit of clinging on to God for help, pouring out his lament as prayers, and waiting patiently. Suffering is not a long-lasting thing.

Again David calls on God to deliver him from the attackers when King Saul sends men to kill him. As he begins Psalm 59, metaphorically, he tells God to be his fortress.

Deliver me from my enemies, O God;
 be my fortress against those who are attacking me.
 Deliver me from evildoers
 and save me from those who are after my blood.
 See how they lie in wait for me!
 Fierce men conspire against me
 for no offense or sin of mine, Lord.
 I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me.
 Arise to help me; look on my plight! (1 - 4)

The special character of David is that in the midst of aggressive conspiracies against him, he has the energy to say that "I will sing", because "I can rely" on God.

But I will sing of your strength,
 in the morning I will sing of your love;
 for you are my fortress,
 my refuge in times of trouble.
 You are my strength, I sing praise to you;
 you, God, are my fortress,
 my God on whom I can rely. (16 - 17)

David sings many Psalms at the time when he has to flee from King Saul and his team. Psalm 34, 56, 64, 35, 52 speaks of his fear of death, and of his distress. The background of these Psalms is found in the book of I Samuel 21, 22, 23. Though there were instances when David had the chance to kill, he did not do it because King Saul was a God-ordained person. King Saul's centre may have become decentered but David's centre is the same. However much the suffering, anguish, mental torture surrounds him all his life, crowding one upon the other, his center point, God, does not suffer change. As the mellowing of a fruit gives a sweet taste, likewise David's life is mellowed with repeated sufferings, harassment, pestering, and mental agony and he is matured and takes the Leap of Faith.

A significant incident makes David get closer to God when he sins. He lowers himself to the ground and asks God for forgiveness:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions
Wash away all my iniquity and
cleanse me from my sin.

.

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
(Psalm 51:1,2,14).

Later, Absalom, his own flesh and blood, plans to kill
David and take his throne. This makes David feel that his
own sword has pierced his soul, and so he runs away to
save his life:

Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.”
But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain. (3:1- 4)

David aspires to be with God, not only at the time of suffering,
but he seeks God even after being delivered from his enemies.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I have been saved from my enemies.
The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me. (18:2-5)

David is hounded and harassed all through his life, at first by the King who is the most powerful of all men in his country and later, even by his own progeny. So David has to hide under a cave, mountains, and outskirts of the desert, and flee from city to city. Though he moves from place to place, his only shelter is God. In Psalm 55, he compares himself to a dove that flies away and finds solace, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest" (6). The suffering he undergoes at various times - from Goliath, Doeg, King Saul and his family - is like a whirlwind but those are the very situations that birth his lyrics. Even God certifies him as "a man after his own heart" (I Samuel 13:14).

In the Old Testament, God made provision for cities of refuge so that a murder-accused would have a second chance of hearing. He could run and hide himself there, and no one could lay his hand on him. Similarly, David finds shelter on so many occasions after sinning or when he flees from his enemies: he finds shelter in the wings of God, cries to God with a broken and contrite heart, seeks solace, gets convicted of his sins, receives pardon from God and regains his lost peace and joy. Thus David sings Psalms that connect and find a better rapport with God.

Suffering is common to all. In the New Testament, Jesus says every human has trouble, suffering and pain in this world but that he has overcome all these, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This verse gives hope that anyone can be freed from the troubles of the world that we live in since God the Son has succeeded. There are many ways to reach peace, harmony and relief, and one of the most effective of these is through the use of lyrics. Even today, one can find comfort or peace in lyrics, either in the Psalms or in the lyrics of a song. The emotional experience of the poet makes possible a shared subjectivity, offering comfort to any afflicted reader who turns to them for solace. Thus writing lyrics or singing songs helps one to grow into mature faith and, anchored in Christ, face one's suffering with boldness and the the confidence to overcome.

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GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: REFLECTIONS BASED ON JOHN 5:1-18¹

*Johnson Thomaskutty**

Abstract

This reflection is an attempt to foreground the message of John 5:1-18 in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic context. A contextual interpretation of the passage provides us several new insights and a new perspective that takes into account the struggles of the people and other existential realities. The invalid who was lying by the pool of Bethesda undergoes a breathless situation as he was undergoing continuous frustration over a period of 38 long years. Though he was ill, enduring a prolonged quarantine, living in social isolation, widely treated as unclean, and resilient to the situation of a 'life camp,' Jesus liberated his life from those clutches and transformed him toward a hopeful future age. In today's context, the healed man's story can be considered as a paradigm for the church to follow the words and deeds of Jesus and to engage in the ministry of liberation and transformation. Moreover, the story provides hope for all who are undergoing debilitating situations in life in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The man stands tall as a representative of the afflicted, persecuted, and the dehumanized sections of our society. The transformation that happened in his life can be considered a paradigm of restoration for contemporary human situations.

Key Words

Gospel of John; quarantine; social isolation; healing; cleansing; life camp; COVID-19

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¹ This is an edited version of a sermon preached during the Sunday Community Worship Service of The United Theological College, Bengaluru, on 18th July 2021.

Introduction

Nelson Mandela is remembered always for the difference that he had made in the history of South Africa. He inspired movements worldwide for making differences in communities. Mandela had said: "It is easy to break down and destroy. The heroes are those who make peace and build." This is an apt introduction for us to dive deep into John 5:1-18. As Mandela was emphasizing the aspects of changing the community for better, serving humanity and the world at large, making peace and building the community, we need to see how Jesus was involved in change-making, serving humanity and peace-building in the first century Jewish context. By keeping the paradigms of Jesus and Nelson Mandela before us, we become empowered to carry out our responsibility to build people in the present COVID-19 situation.

The pandemic persuades a reader of the Fourth Gospel to interpret the Scripture in new light. In the contemporary context, the Gospel of John has the potential to attune the attention of the reader toward the existential struggles of the people with myriad interpretative possibilities. The Jews often twinned *sinfulness* with *sickness* and in that light they considered Jesus as a *social sinner* and his followers as a *diseased community*. The Johannine narrator realigns the struggles of the *early church situation* dynamically within the *situation of Jesus* to present the narrator's defensive rhetoric. The Johannine community was comprised of those who suffered quarantine, social isolation, sicknesses, resource deficiencies, and continual cleansing processes in the socio-religious and politico-cultural setting of their lives. Jesus as the creator of the universe and the giver of life provided them hope in the midst of breathlessness and suffering and liberated them from the clutches of dehumanization and marginalization. As the community was suffering from breathless situations in life, Jesus came to breathe the breath and life in abundance in their lives. With this framework in mind, let us view the story of the man in John 5:1-18. I would like to delineate 5 significant narrative aspects of the story:

A Quarantine Narrative

The Covid-19 situation forces many people to undergo a period of quarantine. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines quarantine as “a period of time during which an animal or person that might have a disease is kept away from other people or animals so that the disease cannot spread.”² The Jews often considered illness as a consequence of people’s sinfulness. As the Covid-19 patients suffer from shortness of breath and other related problems, a reader of the Fourth Gospel can understand the life-and-death situations of people both in the Johannine community and in the contemporary global context. As sinfulness was metaphorically considered a pandemic, illness was also considered a universal phenomenon.³ Those who entered into a closer relationship with the diseased were also considered sinful (9:16, 24). Jesus breaks the traditional Sabbath regulations and takes steps to visit a quarantine centre. This story foregrounds the Johannine community ethos and its ministerial focus even toward the quarantine centers (5:1-17).

During Biblical times, quarantine was strictly observed. Mosaic Law gives instructions concerning people with infectious diseases. Lev 13:46 states that as long as a person has infectious disease s/he remains unclean, must live alone, and must live outside the camp. 2 Kings 7:3 requires that people with leprosy be put outside of the city gate. A similar situation is narrated in the Fourth Gospel. In Biblical times, a disabled person was not treated as ‘unclean’ as in the case of a leper or a person with infectious disease. But John’s story gives us an indication that even the disabled people were put together in seclusion. The location here is: “in Jerusalem,” “near the Sheep Gate” and “by the pool of Bethesda” (5:2).⁴ The narrator states that “a great

² Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines quarantine in the following way: “separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.” See <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html>, accessed on 1 October 2020.

³ Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 150-152.

⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 71-72.

number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed” (5:3). Though the water is adjacent, Jesus’ interlocutor is unable to take advantage of the miraculous medication. His situation is a prolonged quarantine of 38 years.⁵ He was considered ‘unworthy’ as he was dumped into this situation; he spent 38 years among ‘other disabled’ (hence, his thought-world was shaped accordingly); and he was put ‘outside’ the mainstream society (so, he was a marginalized person).⁶ Jesus transforms his life from *a situation of a deadly and breathless nature* to *a situation of life*.⁷ The church in today’s context should emphasize human transformation and help the diseased to overcome difficult situations. The church should function as the body of Christ that breathes life in a situation of breathlessness.

A Social Isolation Narrative

During the Covid-19 period, people are forced to live in isolation. Shortness of breath and other related symptoms affect the respiratory systems and those lead some of them to severe health problems and death. The Government and the community regulations instruct everybody to keep away from physical interactions and social gatherings. In the Jewish context, both the so-called ‘sinful’ and the ‘diseased’ were isolated from the mainstream society. The invalid and the other diseased were dumped into that situation as the man explains: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up” (5:1-2, 7).⁸ The invalid (5:1-17) exemplifies the struggles of the early Christian community members. As he was considered ‘sinful,’ he was also counted as ‘diseased.’

⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 73-75.

⁶ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 73-75.

⁷ Kanagaraj states that, “Here the word ‘sin’ is not referring to unbelief or rejection of God’s self-revelation in Jesus, as it does in other parts of the Gospel. Rather, Jesus is here speaking of evil acts and moral failure, which are themselves rooted in unbelief.” See Jey J. Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2005), 172.

⁸ Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 108-110.

Counted as a *social sinner* and hence as one who was *diseased*, Jesus also had to undergo social isolation on multifarious occasions. The coming of Nicodemus to Jesus *by night* (3:2) can be an indication that there was a ban on Jesus and hence people were not allowed to associate with Jesus.⁹ Some of the gatherings of Jesus were organized in remote places (6:1-15).¹⁰ The narrator of the story states that Jesus went to the festival of the Tabernacles “not publicly but as it were in secret” (7:10).¹¹ Jesus’ social isolation is further exemplified in the incident where Jesus takes the disciples along and goes across the Kidron Valley (18:1).¹² As a friend of the sinners (5:1-17; 9:28-34), and as one who was labelled a blasphemer (8:58-59), and a Sabbath breaker (5:1-17; 9:1-41), Jesus was considered a *sinner* and a socio-religiously *diseased* personality. Thus, Jesus was marginalized into a situation of breathlessness and isolation. Such an *isolated* Jesus comes to rescue this invalid from his *social isolation*. Only someone who has really undergone social isolation can understand the similar situation of another person. Jesus was qualified to rescue this man since he himself had gone through similar social experiences.

A Healing Narrative

In the Covid-19 situation, people are affected by various socio-political and religio-cultural issues. At present, the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and financial aspects of people face deterioration. It is in this context that the universalistic message of the Fourth Gospel functions as a narrative rhetoric with profound persuasive power. The Johannine community was comprised of people who were deprived of their rights and privileges due to their association with the so-called socio-religious *sinner* Jesus.¹³ As Jesus emphasized a ministry of healing, the Johannine community was expected to get involved in holistic healing.

⁹ Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*, 108.

¹⁰ Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 191-197.

¹¹ Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 132.

¹² Beasley-Murray, *John*, 321-322.

¹³ Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*.

In the story, the man is addressed as an *invalid* (5:3). As a man who was *lying there* for a long span of time and was *unwell*, the narrator invites the attention of the reader toward his emotional pain and social stigma (5:6).¹⁴ When he says that *I have no one*, his isolated position all through the thirty-eight years is brought to the foregrounded (5:7a). When he says *someone else steps down ahead of me*, he delineates his continual frustration (5:7b).¹⁵ His prolonged quarantine experience is transformed into joy when Jesus intervenes in his life. The miraculous power of Jesus over the creation is exemplified through this narrative.

The Johannine community was exemplifying its identity as a wounded but at the same time a healing group. The healer Jesus, as one who breathes life, was placed at the centre stage in their interpretative endeavors. As a community of healing, they exemplified themselves as a sign or a *sēmeion* to the world outside. During this Covid-19 period, the church should stand on the principles of Jesus and also on the Johannine community ethos to show its identity as a sign to the world and as a community of holistic care and healing.

A Cleansing Narrative

As the pandemic progressed, the use of masks, sanitizers, soaps, disinfectants, towels, gloves, and Dettol became routine in a way that was without precedent. Nowadays we pay greater attention to hand washing, regular body washing and cleaning of our surroundings. People pay more attention on cleaning and disinfection of laundry, bathrooms, kitchen and communal canteens, and waste provinces. More water is required in this cleansing process. Johannine theology and community practices take our attention toward several cleansing processes. Water is at the heart of the Fourth Gospel. As John presents water as an element of cleansing and transformation, the readers can understand its symbolical value within the narrative framework.

The narrator of the story points out that just as material water is needed for outward cleansing, one needs living water for internal

¹⁴ Brant, *John*, 103.

¹⁵ Brant, *John*, 103-104.

transformation. The man who was lying by the pool was unable to access the power of healing. When he met Jesus, he started to receive the words of eternal life and the water of life for his internal transformation and also for his external purification. Through Jesus' presence and involvement near the pool of Bethesda, the man is externally purified and internally sanctified. In today's context, we need to be internally sanctified as men and women of God just as we are externally purified by keeping the COVID-19 protocol. We need to make the world aware so that all might be purified externally and sanctified internally.

A 'Life Camp' Narrative

During the Covid-19 period, a large number of life/refugee camps are facilitated in different parts of the world in order to cherish life. At a time when the life of people is at risk, these camps function as centers of hope and rejuvenation. The Johannine community was at risk of life as the mainstream society attempted to eliminate the group; but the narrator of the story comforts the community with the message of abundant life. Jesus appears in the Gospel as the source of life.¹⁶ In John, life/eternal life is not limited to a future age, but is accessible 'here and now' for those who believe in Jesus (3:15-18, 36; 5:24).¹⁷ The metaphor of water is used in relation to the experience of eternal life (4:14).¹⁸ The Jews understand that through diligent study of the scripture one can receive eternal life (5:39; 6:63).¹⁹

Jesus says to the person: "Stand up, take your mat and walk." A transition from his position of *lying on a mat* to a position of *standing up, taking up the mat*, and *walking* amply demonstrates that he was invited from a *dying* and *'breathless'* situation to a *living and eternal life experience*. In 5:11, the person testifies to the Jews that Jesus *made him well*. This further informs us that he was moved from an *unwell* situation to a *well-to-do* position.

¹⁶ John 1:4; 5:21, 26, 40; 6:33.

¹⁷ See D. H. Johnson, "Life," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 469.

¹⁸ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 136-137.

¹⁹ See Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 180-181.

Later on, Jesus tells him “you have been made well” (v. 14). As the man was brought from a *lying* position to a *standing up* position and from an *unwell* to a *made well* situation, the man started experiencing life in abundance in the presence of God. He became a follower of Jesus and a member of the Johannine community. As a follower of Jesus, he started to experience life in abundance; and as a member of the Johannine community, he felt that he was now in a *life camp* where life is cherished. As the Christian community, we have a greater social responsibility to cherish life in all its worth during this COVID-19 situation.

Implication and Conclusion

The Jesus movement and the Johannine community teach us the following lessons in managing the current crisis situation: first, belief in the Creator God and in the Pre-existent *Logos* should be facilitated irrespective of all sorts of challenging situations during the COVID-19 pandemic; second, the church should get involved as a community to comfort and heal people who are in quarantine; third, the people of God should get involved in the transforming mission to rescue the secluded and to feed the hungry; fourth, the church should remain as a community of healing both in the physical and in the emotional and psychological areas of humanity and other members of the created order; fifth, the community of God should teach the afflicted to trust in God even in the midst of deficiencies and promote charity and protection of life; sixth, the believing community should remain as an agent of sanctification both in the physical and in the spiritual levels of human life; and seventh, the members of the body of Christ should reiterate the voice of God in the world to protect human life and to spread the good news of abundant life in Christ. The message of John helps the readers to understand the role and status of Jesus and the Johannine community in breathing the breath of God. As Jesus had been a change-maker, a social reformer, and a peace-builder in the first century Jewish context, as Nelson Mandela implemented Jesus’ model in the South African context, as Gandhiji adopted the non-violent, Satyagraha, and servant-leader model in the Indian context, and as Martin Luther King Junior foregrounded the ethos and pathos of the Jesus community in the North American context, let us

go and do likewise. Let us function as agents of transformation during this quarantine, in the midst of social isolation, and in the diseased, unclean, and 'breathless' situations in life as Jesus, Nelson Mandela, Gandhiji, Mother Teresa, Pandita Ramabhai, and Martin Luther King did in the world.

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BIBLE STUDY

STAR OF THE EAST

*D. R. Sadananda**

Mathew 2: 1-12

“We saw the star in the east, and we came to worship him”
(Mt.2:2)”

Introduction

The Universal Church has been celebrating the “Week of prayer for Christian Unity” since 1908. Christians belonging to all denominations gather in an act of ecumenical solidarity to proclaim the unity of the Church symbolically and demonstratively and based firmly on Christ’s prayer “that all may be one”. The focus of the Unity Octave is therefore, on affirming the gift of unity in prayer and worship. The themes proposed for each year’s celebration call all Christians to steadfastly pilgrim towards that unity in living out and fulfilling our Christian calling, in discernment and radical engagement, in faithful and committed discipleship, and in participating in *Missio Dei* unitedly or together, which is the true worship.

The theme proposed for the week of prayer for Christian Unity 2022, that is “We saw the star in the east, and we came to worship him” (Mt.2:2), is also the theme for NCCI Sunday 2022, which challenges us to understand worship as an act of living out the Incarnation. The Matthean narrative is simple, yet profound. The narrative leads us to an ecumenical gathering, not just of people and the earth community, but also of the celestial order representing the whole created universe in worship around the Christ Child at Bethlehem. In fact, the star of the east leads the wise to the Christ Child, but the journey towards the Christ Child and its aftermath captures the depth of meaning, or the hermeneutic of worship.

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The Narrative

Being a disciple of Christ is an invitation to embark on a lifelong, exploratory pilgrimage. Matthew the evangelist informs us that for Joseph and Mary, the major characters of the birth narrative in chapters 1 and 2, it was a pilgrimage of understanding the meaning and significance of life together and comprehending what abiding love, constant faith and lifelong commitment. In a world encircled by poverty and violence, marginalization and exclusion, victims of abusive powers, injustice and empire wait patiently for a sign. The wise persons coming from the east, of diverse identities, come to Jerusalem, the Jewish capital now under Roman rule, under an Idumean tetrarch, Herod, the great, proclaim that they have seen a sign of the birth of a messiah, "We saw the star in the east, and we came to worship him" (v.2).

Worship is an exploration of truth, justice and shalom, the peace found in the source of everything, the Creator God. The wise were searching to find Christ the Messiah, born to bring truth, justice and peace. "*Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?*" (Mt.2:2) The Gospel of Matthew is all about answering the exploratory question and gives a simple, yet profound answer to begin with, that 'He is not in Jerusalem'. Jerusalem means the city of peace, but it was neither a peace-loving nor a peace-making city. Rather, it was a town of power and authority, a 'masked' city, known for its show and sham, where everything was superficial, pretence and farcical. In such a city, one will not find the child who has been born King of the Jews. Jerusalem had habitually killed the prophets, had taken pride in burying the truth, true religion, and justice. Jerusalem became symbolic of that space where religion had become a business, where people were not allowed to worship without indulging in business, where money, power and authority were worshipped and glorified, where traditions and rituals took the centre stage and hijacked true religion, where traditions were honoured more than simple transforming faith, where insincerity, pretence, hypocrisy became the order of the day, in such a city, one will not find the child who has been destined to be the Messiah.

At the same time, the Evangelist, through the chief priests and scribes of the people, reminds his readers of the prophecy

of Micah, and informs them: *“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel”* (Mt.2:6). Bethlehem, despite being the birthplace of David, the shepherd king, was a little-known, remote village, endowed however with tight-knit family ties and bonds, where human relationships were sacred and celebrated! The people in Bethlehem were understanding, shared deep relationships, and provided strong, rock-like support to each other. In fact, when Joseph wanted to divorce Mary quietly, he was reminded of his Bethlehem roots and called to show commitment and faithfulness even under dire circumstances. In a community where there is mutual respect, care and love, where faithfulness and commitment are celebrated, where persons are accepted as they are, respected for what they are, where people find a safe space, security and strong refuge, one will find the child who has been born King of the Jews; the Messiah.

Though Bethlehem was an underdeveloped village in the margins, it was known to be the house of bread, as the people were an agrarian community that produced food, yet remained poor, as they were oppressed, exploited by those in the power and authority and their middlemen, and did not receive their due for their hard work and labour. Yet in their poverty, they provided for the nation, making others rich through their committed and faithful work in tilling, toiling and nurturing mother earth. In every such place, where commitment and faithfulness to family, village, community and work are celebrated, one will find the child who has been born King of the Jews; the Messiah.

Naturally, Jerusalem and all its citizens were terrified, perplexed and began scheming when the good news of the birth of a Messiah was announced to them (Mt. 2:3). When the wise of this world, instead of faithfully following and interpreting the signs of the times, give credence to rational instinct of looking for the Messiah among those who represent the subjugating empire, and when those who are entrusted with the sacred duty of interpreting the scriptures, the chief priests, and the scribes, fail to discern where, when and to whom the truth needs to be interpreted and revealed, they make the innocent and defenceless vulnerable.

The result, therefore, of the wise men visiting the temple of the subjugating empire, the Chief priests and scribes informing the empire about the location of the birth of a messiah, was straight forward. Terrified, Jerusalem pounced on Bethlehem to hide its vulnerability! The innocent, poor parents of Bethlehem lost even the flickering hope, as their children were massacred! Hopes of many died an instant death.

When the wise set out towards Bethlehem, the star that they had seen at its rising went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt and worshipped the child. The worshipping community at Bethlehem was a sign that encompassed people of different faiths and ideologies, people of different nations, races and identities, along with the whole of creation including celestial representation. The diversity that is present in the worship of the Christ child included demographic identities (identities of origin) experiential identities (identities of growth) and cognitive identities (identities of aspiration) in a dynamic tension. It was a sign of ecumenical inclusion, in recognizing, respecting and valuing the diversity, as well as connecting committed and collaborating identities. It is a foreshadow of ecumenical worship, even amidst fear, threat, tension, impending exile, and life-threatening violence. It was a powerful sign in all its vulnerability, giving a vision and foretaste of a universal ecumenical community, constantly receiving truth, justice and peace in gratefulness, and looking ahead, in all its struggles, pain and suffering, towards a time of consummation, when God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15.28).

The offerings of the wise to the Christ child, that is gold, frankincense, and myrrh reminds us of three offices of the Messiah now unified in the Christ child, namely king, priest and suffering servant of the Lord. The gifts also symbolically foreshadow the self-giving death of Christ (myrrh), in an act of complete obedient worship (frankincense), which is indestructible and rises again to life (gold). Therefore, ultimately, Matthew the evangelist exhorts the readers to gaze at the charge

on the cross: *"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews"* (Mt.27:37). The Messiah is neither in the pomp and sham of city culture, nor in superficial, pretentious relationships. The evangelist, in a very intelligent, yet theological and cultural critique, also informs the readers, when Jerusalem was busy celebrating the Passover, the feast of liberation, the King of Jews was hanging on the cross, outside the city, in a place called Golgotha (Mt.27:33). The Messiah is the one who is thrashed, bleeding and rejected. In his experience of the abandonment, in his cry, *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me"*? he gives expressions to the sorrow, pain and pathos of people who are marginalized, excluded and eliminated. Therefore, the one who is on the cross is Jesus, the one who delivers his people, the Messiah, King of the Jews! The cross expresses the vastness, incalculability, and limitlessness of God's love, its height, length and depth. The cross is also the revelation of the truth and justice of God! It is in the self-offering and self-emptying love, and in the true love that reveals itself in broken and shared lives, that we encounter the Messiah, the Christ. In Jesus' own words, in the least ones, in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and the innocent condemned to prison, in those who form the crucified community, we meet Jesus the Liberator (cf. Mt.25:40f).

Later, Matthew the evangelist informs us that when the disciples saw the risen Lord, they worshipped him. (Mt.28:17), When the risen Lord encounters a community perplexed and frightened by the turn of events and brings the good news of peace, the risen Lord encompasses them with the power of resurrection and the community resurrects itself to face the challenges that lie ahead. The risen one assures them that he was not just the Immanuel, God's abiding presence (cf. Mt.2:18), as he walked and journeyed with them in Galilee, but he would be with them always as a reassuring, resurrecting and empowering presence, to the end of the age (Mt.28:20).

Reflections

NCCI Sunday 2022 is being celebrated in the backdrop of rising third wave of Covid-19 pandemic, as the Church in India faces challenges of the empire trying to take hold of the called-out

ecclesia. With increasing communal polarisation, fear of Hindutva squeezing the space of freedom of religion, introduction of anti-conversion acts in some states, becoming a sign of an ecumenical worshipping community is a challenge.

How can the Churches, as life-affirming communities, not only resist, but also lay siege on the empire and live as an alternative that grows within the empire, even amidst fear, threat, violence, exclusion, and displacement?

How can every local congregation become the universal ecumenical sign in its location to radiate the joy of our relentless quest for truth, justice, and peace through the telling of our own stories of ecumenical pilgrimage with people of all faiths and identities?

How can our stories of migration, suffering, losing existence, of being excluded and trampled down, yet finding the courage and strength to become an alternative community inspire communities around us to gather to worship the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine?

How can the churches witness to the fact that each worshipping community is but joining in the liturgy of the whole created universe, the earth community, the created order and the celestial world as it deeply reflects on the ecological crisis and engages in eco-justice ministries?

How can the churches locally, become signs of celebrating diversity, by recognizing, respecting and valuing differences yet coming together to connect, commit and collaborate with diverse identities with all the vulnerability, disability and frailty in order to thereby become an ecumenical foretaste, foreshadowing the ecumenical worshipping universe, the reign of God that is to come?

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NCCI NEWS

A Tribute to the man of God who walked the talk: Rev. Dr. P B M Basaiawmoit

We are saddened to know of the sudden demise of the Rev. Dr. P. B. M. Basaiawmoit, a senior leader of the Presbyterian Church in India, a fiery social activist and a committed ecumenist, who was called to glory in the early hours of Wednesday the 9th February 2022.

Rev. Dr. Basaiawmoit led from the front in the Churches' involvement in the issues that affect the common people. He was the leader of the Church who gave leadership in many community groups and social action networks. He was a leader who spoke his heart and did not fear anyone in the hierarchy. Rev. Dr. Basaiawmoit was an eloquent speaker, a good preacher and a practical theologian. His sermons address practical Christian witness.

He served as the Chairperson of the NCCI Commission on Life during the quadrennial (2004 – 2008) and as the Vice President of the National Council of Churches in India from 2008 to 2012; during the latter period he was also the Chairperson of the Personnel committee of the NCCI. During these times he played a major role in making the ministries of the NCCI relevant to the issues in North East India and to the contemporary socio-political challenges facing the country. He was a pillar of strength to the Secretariat and the leadership when the NCCI faced an organisational crises in the years 2009 and 2010.

We acknowledge the contribution of this man of God in the different local, national and global movements relating to environment, human rights, mining, migration, plight of the refugees, anti-conversion laws and such other issues.

We join the family and the church, especially all those who were mentored by him, in thanking God for the gift of Rev. Dr. PBM Basaiawmoit to the world and the ecumenical movement particularly in India. We offer our prayers and deep condolences to each member of the family. May God's peace that surpasses all understanding remain with them today and always.

Rev. Asir Ebenezer
General Secretary NCCI
10th February 2022

Let's discern and be dictated by the agenda of the masses ...

Today, the 73rd Republic Day of our country, is one more occasion to celebrate our prowess and proficiency in different sectors of our journey together. Traditionally, it has also been an occasion to take stock of the strides that we have taken in-country and in the world.

In the last year, we have supposedly done well in many areas of our history as a nation. In some other areas we have not done as well as we would have wanted to.

Unequal distribution of wealth, differentiated access to rights and privileges, challenges to dignity of life, culture, and heritage of the religious minorities, socially disadvantaged ethnic communities and the economically disprivileged persons however continue to haunt the journey of our destiny. Today is yet another opportunity to pull ourselves together to address what lies ahead of us and achieve it together.

The Christian Gospel teaches us to fashion ourselves and the environment around us on the terms of the conditionalities of 'the least, the last and the lost'. This approach among other things is certain to further build common resources and thus safeguard against transfer of public assets for personal gain/ private profit.

The Gospel also requires that we network with all those who are similarly oriented irrespective of faith and belief. There are several activists, academics, economists, civil servants, politicians and concerned citizens belonging to all faiths and beliefs who are working on these lines orienting our thinktanks, our planners, also the executive and the enforcement on the terms and conditionalities of the persons pushed to the bottom of the ladder.

There is an urgent need to cultivate this basic ethos amongst all peoples, and ward against alternates that promote prosperity for all but cultivate it otherwise – where there is further impoverishment because of organised loot and thus disproportionate growth.

The need is also to hold each other and all the arms of our governance accountable. It is time now to orient ourselves on our civil and political rights in order that the debates on rights and privileges of unique and diverse individuals, groups and communities will not be derailed toward affirming 'majoritarian' privileges of the small numbers of the unduly privileged.

Let us as members of nationally networked historic and traditional churches in this country along with all related agencies, regional ecumenical councils and christian organisations, individually and together as the National Council of Churches in India, renew afresh our commitment 'to discern, be informed and be dictated' by the agenda of the masses, their dreams and aspirations. And let our good work, along with those of all other like-minded individuals, groups and communities, continue to be a light to the nation.

Let us rise to bless India. God bless India . . .

Rev. Asir Ebenezer

General Secretary

National Council of Churches in India

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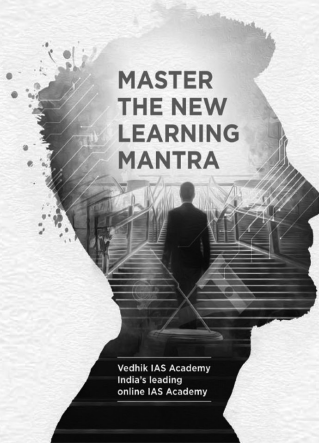
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