

# **No one can serve Christ and Caste:**

## **A challenge to the Christian Community**

### **An Individual and Collective Programme of Action**

Delegates from the member churches and organisations of National Council Churches in India (NCCI), Catholic Bishops Conference of India, National Campaign on Dalits Human Rights, global ecumenical movements, met at the International conference on Caste and Indian Church: Retrospection, Challenges and the Way forward at CNI Bhavan, New Delhi from 2-4 November 2014 in the run up to the concluding session of the NCCI centenary celebrations, in the context of the sharp rightward shift of Indian polity, and some sections of the church, accommodating such right wing forces compromising basic Christian values.

The member Churches of NCCI have repeatedly affirmed that no one can serve Christ and caste (International Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits, New Delhi, 22-24 October 2010, NCCI, WCC.), that caste based discrimination is a 'sin and crime' that is a 'serious challenge to the credibility of their witness to their faith in God' (Central Committee Meeting, Geneva, 26 August-2 September 2009, WCC) and called for the member churches 'to commit to end this practice which is against the very teaching of Christ' (Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits, Bangkok, 21-24 March 2009, WCC, LWF, CCA) and remove this 'institutional casteism' [Caste, religion and Culture, 14 May 2011, Cochin, NCCI, CWME (WCC)] that is practiced within the church.

Despite such unambiguous recognition, emphatic exhortation, eloquent statements and declarations, casteism and caste based discrimination remain entrenched and widely practiced in several forms, invading more areas of the church and the Christian community.

It is time to put these lofty words into concrete action with collective responsibility and individual accountability to ensure coherence between word and deed. These actions need to be measurable, time bound and incremental, with regular review of progress. It requires intense personal transformation and institutional democratisation addressing core assumptions and attitudes regarding caste and gender based discrimination including institutional systems and structures to support such fundamental change. Both individual and collective actions are equally important, each reinforcing the other.

The following programme of individual, collective and institutional action is the minimum required in fostering justice and equity in the practice of the ideals set out before us by Christ Jesus, and form the basic, non-negotiable tenets of our faith.

1. Theology and theological education provide the foundation of our understanding of our faith. Therefore the curriculum for the bible studies and sermons should consciously incorporate elements condemning and denouncing casteism and gender discrimination in the worship orders as part of the faith proclamation. The material already developed could be shared between churches.

2. Advocate for the elimination of caste and caste based discrimination within the church and church based institutions, especially those within who wilfully deny or actually practice casteism.

- The identification and elimination of caste and caste based discrimination needs to be based on hard data on (a) the composition of congregations and (b) forms of discrimination. Based on this, a policy of affirmative action within the church and church institutions needs to be developed and owned by the entire church and Christian community.
- The findings of the study will help develop a policy of affirmative action to make sure that Dalit Christians manage (govern and administer), are employed by and are enrolled in all church based health and educational institutions in proportion to their population in the congregations. Within this reservation fifty percent should be kept apart for the Dalit women.
- All solidarity and support resources earmarked for the Dalits, whether national or international, should be managed by bodies made up exclusively of Dalits in which more than half should be women at all levels. Special management and leadership programmes and mentoring need to be provided to the Dalits for the effective discharge of these functions.

3. The task is huge and the resources small. NCCI, its member churches and the Christian community should work in synergy both intra-department and inter-church together with the larger community of civil society organisations and Dalit feminist movements drawing on their expertise and complementarities to eradicate casteism in all its forms within the church and the Christian community (eg. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), Centre for Dalit /Minorities Studies Trust, National Confederation of Dalit Christians (NCDC), Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), National Safai Karamchari Andolan (NSKA), Indian Social Institute (ISI), National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW)).

4. Institutional policies, systems and structures need to be fostered to monitor the affirmative action process within the church. There should be regular meetings of the Church leaders and Dalit desk leaders of the church to collectively share experiences, identify discriminatory practices, draw out programmes to eradicate the practice of caste and caste- based discrimination within the church and monitor the implementation. It would be the responsibility of the entire church to implement the agenda so identified.

### **Implementation and monitoring**

NCCI will design and implement programmes both independently and in collaboration with its member churches, church institutions, ecumenical bodies, global ecumenical Dalit movements, Dalit organisations in India and secular organisations to build the awareness of caste practices and caste based discrimination, develop tools to identify, monitor and eliminate such practices, and build capacity to address and eliminate such practices.

A road map will be developed, and annual operational plans will be drawn out for implementation. The tasks will be specific and focussed so that implementation is unambiguous and progress can be easily monitored. The Commission on Dalits, NCCI, will monitor and report progress annually in similar conferences with the potential including other experts and consultants.

### **The Call**

The delegates/participants of the International Consultation reaffirm the churches' commitment to the Gospel principles of justice, equality and dignity. The Commission commits and hopes that with God's help, with global and national solidarity and support, it will be able to put these plans into actions. The areas of Theological Education, Advocacy, Networking and church based programmes will become the key milestones for action. It was deeply felt the Commission should be focused and clear in its planning, monitoring and evaluation in lines with the Strategic Plan of the NCCI. This document calls for a recommitment to the justice to Dalits in collaboration with other oppressed, discriminated and exploited communities. We reiterate that the Church and the practice of caste cannot coexist in any form.

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