National Council of Churches in India
Commission on Tribal/ Adivasi Concerns

Tribal and Adivasi Sunday, 4th August 2024

Theme: "Protecting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact"

Notes for Sunday Reflection

Scripture Reading: Luke 13: 6-9

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

Reflection:

In a world of rapid technological development and urbanization, ***indigenous people living in voluntary isolation and initial contact*** are the most excluded and exploited populations. They are facing serious challenges. It is estimated that there are 200 groups of peoples in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Peru, and Venezuela, maintaining unique cultures and languages with undisturbed habitats to assure their survival. Their deliberate isolation is thus a way of self-determination and autonomy that ensures the protection of their fundamental human rights.

The surge for economic growth, driven by globalization and further enhanced with technologies like electric cars, continues to fuel demand and results in increased mining on indigenous lands. This intrusion, coupled with agricultural expansion, mining ventures, tourism development, and resource extraction, has resulted in widespread deforestation and environmental degradation in indigenous territories. These are threats to their way of life and to the very delicate ecological balance they maintain. These communities who are the custodians of ancient wisdom and stewards of our planet, are facing threats from deforestation, exploitation, and cultural erosion, they have been robbed of the conditions for their survival.

The Tribal and Adivasi people are one of the most marginalized groups in the country. Land dispossession, denial of rights, and systemic injustice mostly result in them being pushed off their ancestral lands. As reflected in Luke 13:6-9, the parable of the fig tree calls for a consideration of the existentialist realities of Indigenous Peoples, especially those living in voluntary isolation and initial contact, the Tribal and Adivasi communities in India.

Milieu

The parable given in Luke's Gospel shows the liberative nature of Jesus' life and ministry, going along the liberative nature that critiques oppressive structures victimizing the weak and bruised in society and opening hope for survival and sustenance promised through the Christian mission. In this parable, Jesus speaks of the fig tree that is not able to bear fruit for three years,

with the owner of the vineyard already ready to cut it down and the caretaker insisting on forbearance, promising to tend it one more year. In a way, it is a story of grace, patience, and hope for renewal and growth. As we further reflect on the Parable of the Fig Tree, it has a close-knit connection to isolated communities, which also brings criticism to the church over its stand regarding the problems faced by these communities - particularly the critique of the concept of 'productivity', and how it is viewed in commercial and market terms and not on capacities to sustain and promote life.

Mission of Christ- Communities

Now, an introspective analysis is required at this juncture to find whether the Church adorns the sovereign position of the owner of the Vineyard or the liberative role of the gardener who lives along with the fig tree and participates in its growth. Rather, just like the plea by the caretaker in that parable who requests more time to tend to the fig tree, we should be advocates for the rights and dignity of Indigenous Peoples in general, and those who have chosen voluntary isolation in particular. We must guarantee conditions that give them an opportunity to thrive: recognizing their sovereignty, protecting their lands, and ensuring the right to self-determination. It is upon our commitment to justice of the sovereignty of these peoples and communities that the flourishing of Indigenous communities will depend. Not just surviving but living, in their own terms, that is what matters for this community.

Our call is to stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples who have chosen voluntary isolation, to amplify their voices, and to fight systems of oppression that seek to silence their voices and abrogate their spaces. This is the real work of liberation- a world where every person and every community may live in dignity and peace. We are here as such followers of Christ who are stewards of truth, bearers of justice, and of liberation.

Messianic hope

The task seems uphill and against many odds. The corporates on the one hand and the consumerist lifestyle on the other does not yield to a thinking of fullness of life for all, with equal dignity and rights for everyone. The messianic vision, both in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 11) as well as in the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament (Revelation 21) offer hope of the possibility of living on the terms of the weak and the vulnerable, and not by the diktats of the powerful, and the dominant. The creation stories also (Genesis 1 and 2) depict how in the beginning it was all but simple and harmonious, but with the vulnerabilities of being corrupted and thus distorted.

Therefore, let us heed the call of the caretaker: to nurture the fig tree through the fertilizer of our love, our advocacy, and the relentless pursuit of justice. Thereby, we glorify the Creator and build a world where all God's children can flourish. May we be God's instruments of grace, planting seeds of hope and freedom in the midst of every community, that justice and peace in abundance may flourish.

Today we commit to support indigenous communities who have chosen to be in voluntary isolation and to protect their habitats, while at the same time advocating for their right of access to health and life as well as that of self-determination. Amen.

(With inputs from Ms. Myingthunglo K. Odyuo (UTC), Mr. Lasha (UTC), Ms. Phoebe Huang (NCCI))