

RETHINKING MISSION IN INDIA: Looking from Tribal People's Experience

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Jubilee is an occasion to thank God for what he has done to us. It is also a *kairos* for the churches and theological communities to look back critically to discern the prophetic task of future for greater unity, witness and service. Jubilee celebration of UTC and Edinburgh – 2010 comes at a moment in history when the whole world is bleeding and life – both human and nature – is under constant threat by global market and the Empire. This has led to a situation of unrest and fear/terror cross the world leading to undermining and denial of the principles of self-assertion, self-reliance and mutual co-operation. Hence, Jubilee is an occasion to revision of our participation in God's mission.

Looking Back the Past

The modern colonizer ... believed in the superiority of his religion, race, economy and culture. This superiority called upon the colonizer to bear the vocation of converting and ordering the world toward his own identity. Such an ideology was grounded in the belief of modernity, Christianity, and industrial advancement. The colonized ..., on the other hand, were imbued with the belief that their own religion, race, economy, and culture were backward.

- Musa Dube

The Edinburgh 1910 was convened to challenge and correct the denominational oriented mission. However, the expansionist missiological motif was reiterated. Mission was perceived as proclamation of “the gospel to all creatures, to gather the ignorant and godless from every corner to the earth, and to lead those in deplorable error to the flock of Christ and to the recognition of the shepherd and Lord of the flock.”¹ The whole mission enterprise was understood in terms of planting and organization of the Christian Church among non-Christians. The conference also lauded the achievements of science and technology as evidence of God's providence for furtherance of mission. Improved means of communication and transport was lauded for reaching the ‘unevangelized world’.² M.P. Joseph recalled that a majority of the missionary enterprise at that time undertaken with the zeal of promotion of western scientific rationality informed by the European Enlightenment.³ Such a campaign of the new rationality against the traditional wisdom of the natives was conceived as a civilizational imperative and thus it was carried out with utmost earnestness.⁴ M.P. Joseph further moves on to argue that “the new

1 Karl Muller, *Mission Theology: An Introduction* (Netherlands: Stely Press, 1987), p. 30.

2 J.P. Joseph, “Revisiting the Edinburgh Conference in the Context of Globalization” in *Witness in Context: Essays in Honor of Eardley Mendis*, ed. by Monica J. Melanchthon and George Zachariah (Tiruvalla: Chrisitave Shitya Samith,

3 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

scientific rationality was presented as the only panacea for growth and prosperity.”⁵ The worst, the conference reiterated that the colonial expansion was the providence of God to take the good news to heathen lands.

The Edinburgh-1910 conference was held under the patronage of colonial powers. Some generals of the colonial administration were present in the conference signifying the mutual importance of mission agenda and colonial project. In Edinburgh conference, among the 1200 participants, only three came from the people in the periphery. The people who sent greetings to Edinburgh conference included the King of England, the President of US and other colonial heads. *Oikoumene* in Edinburgh pretended that Christian unity is possible even without removing and transforming the structures of oppression and exploitation of colonial regime. In fact, the Edinburgh conference co-opted the poor and marginalized like tribal people into the scheme of western empire. As we celebrate 100 years of Mission Conference, we need to challenge and repent out past prejudices and partiality, and dream for wider unity, witness and service.

Christian Mission, Colonialism and Disorientation of Tribal People

The spread of Christianity coincided with colonial expansion. This resulted suspicion, disorientation and identity crisis. We have evidence that the colonial powers like the Portuguese, Dutch and British not only abuse power but the churches among other benefited immensely from such abuse of power. Possession of lands in prime locations in India cities speak of the privilege status of the church with colonial powers.⁶ Speaking about the relationship between colonial power and Christian missionaries, Arthur Jeyakumar, a noted historian, writes,

In obedience to the command of the Pope, the Portuguese colonizers got engaged in missionizing their territories in India by a diverse way....The Portuguese administration in Goa offered jobs to Christians only. It was decreed that public offices could be held by Christian alone. So, some of the Indians in those territories embraced Christianity for the sake of government jobs. Christian faith was spread by direct evangelism too. At the same time there was forced conversion too. The Portuguese government prohibited in its territories the public worship of Hindu and Muslims. Moreover only Christians were given the power to own lands and possessions. Others were asked to leave the area or to embrace Christianity. Those who had their ancestral property, preferred to join the Church rather than leave the place⁷

This speaks clearly the use and misuse of power. Some Christians enjoyed advantages and benefits of colonial power.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶ Rienzie Perera, “Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious Context” in *CTC Bulletin*, Vo. XXIV, Nos. 1-2, April-August 2008, p. 51.

⁷ D. Arthur Jeyakumar, *History of Christianity in India: Selected Themes* (Revised and Enlarged) (Madurai: Author, 2007), p. 20.

Though in some contexts, missionaries opposed some of the colonial government's policies, we have clear evidence that missionaries also functioned as colonial agents. In some places, missionaries were paid by the colonial government.⁸ The military was obliged to protect the missionaries from any hostile people's resistance to evangelization, and the missions were to produce part of the sustenance for the regional military government. As a result, some scholars went up to the extend of criticizing that "missionaries were there not for advocating a faith but for keeping imperialism alive."⁹ This is the reason why the church is identified till today as an arm of western imperialism.

The colonial power and Christian missions (no matter from which denominations or missionary societies they came from) considered themselves "superior" in terms of religion, race, economy and culture and they consistently maintained an exclusive and negative attitude towards the traditional religions and cultures. They considered the 'others' as primitive, uncultured, uncivilized and savages. "Their description of the people ranges from people with no culture to inferior culture, life styles and ways of life. Their religion was derided as demonic, superstitious and evil."¹⁰ The people's characters and virtues also came under serious negative attitude and they were held at the lowest esteem.¹¹ This superiority value system justified slavery system, exploitation, war, domination and replacement of native culture by the white culture and saw cultural conversion prerequisite to conversion to Christianity. Such an ideology was grounded in the beliefs of modernity, Christianity and rapid industrial advancement. The colonized people, like the tribals and dalits, who have been suffering under the caste system further led to internalization of native inferiority and the idealization of the white culture and religion. Even today many people (including tribal people) think that their own religion, economy and culture are inferior and backward. Hence, "Conversion" was justified. The process of conversion, George Tinker¹² noted four cultural disorientations:

First, the converts were separated from their native village and relatives in new communal enclosures; that is, the native persons were removed from their former mode of existence.

8 For example, William Pettigrew's was a government appointed school inspector while at the same time working as a missionary in Manipur state. Recognizing Pettigrew's reputation among the hill people, the colonial government sought for his help in the recruitment process and he did oblige with the request. Pettigrew was instrumental in recruiting many hill people to serve in the Labor Crops for the Allied forces during the First World war. See to further details, Yangkahao Vashum, "Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal' in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol. XII, No. 2, July-December 2007, pp. 1-22.

9 Quoted in K. Suresh Singh, ed. *The Tribal Situation in India* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), p. 620.

10 Yangkahao Vashum, "Revisiting Tribal/Indigenous Theology and Its Theological Methodology", a paper presented at consultation on "Revisiting Tribal and Dalit Theologies and Their Theological Methodologies" Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, New Delhi, from 14-16 March, 2008, p. 8.

11 *Ibid.*

12 George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 48-49.

Second, once converted and relocated in the mission compound or in a new village, the converts were permanently proscribed from rethinking their conversion and returning to their own homes. In some contexts, the missionaries had military assistance at hand to hunt down fugitives and return them to their missions for discipline.

Third, converts were committed to a rigorous regimen of work to support the mission, the missionaries and their obligation to the military government.

Fourth, converts gave up all aspects of self-governance to live under the strict and authoritarian governance of the missionary priests.

Furthermore, the perception of cultural and intellectual superiority motivated missionaries to promote western scientific rationality informed by the European enlightenment. This campaign for a new rationality against the traditional wisdom of the natives was conceived as a civilizational imperative and carried out with utmost earnestness. The new scientific rationality was presented as the only norm for growth and prosperity.¹³

The educational ministry of the missionaries had the most significant impact on the life of the people. Arthur Jeyakumer writes,

It not only enabled them to read and write, it also sowed the seed of nationalism. It started a renaissance. It paved the way for reforms in the society. Missionaries by opening their educational institutions for everybody irrespective of caste, creed, colour, or status began to revolutionize in more than one sense.¹⁴

Mission schools were used as instrument for civilizing local people, a process which systematically integrated the tribal people into imperial/colonial structures.¹⁵ Gangmumei Kamei observed that modern education was “designed to inculcate European liberal ideas, literature, and science in the Indian mind, and to produce educated persons who could be conveniently employed to run the colonial administration.”¹⁶ Even if the missionaries did not consider themselves agents of colonial powers, they participated, wittingly or not, in advancing the colonial project.

The education process, medical practice, reduction of languages into written form and the production of first literary texts, introduction of new housing, hygiene, clothing, time, history led to complete disorientation of traditional cultural structures of existence that give a people a sense of holistic and communal integrity. No longer did the life of the people revolve around the soil-centred culture, but revolve around church services, prayer

13 M.P. Joseph, “Be Witness to Life: Towards a People’s Concept of Mission” in *Re-routing Mission: Towards a People’s Concept of Mission and Diakonia* (Tiruvalla: CCA-URM, 2004), p. 11.

14 *History of Christianity in India*, pp. 30-31.

15 Ward Churchill observed that “since schooling was brought to non-Europeans as part of empire ... it was integrated into the effort to bring indigenous peoples into imperial/colonial structures.” See his book *Since Predator Came* (Colorado: Aegis Publications, 1995), p. 245.

16 *Ethnicity and Social Change: An Anthology of Essays* (Lilong: Smt. Ponglau Gangmei, 2002), p. 138

meetings, revival camps, Christian Endeavor, etc. This process had contributed to the loss of identity and spirituality rooted in the soil. To conclude, I quote the statement of Indigenous People Conference met in Baguio,

In our history, we recognize that some of Christian missionaries have done immense work for the liberation of indigenous people. They were the first to open mission school, printing press, hospital, translation work and many others. Recognizing their genuine interest in the well-being of the oppressed people and commitment to bring the people to the gospel message of salvation, many oppressed people converted to Christian faith searching for a more dignified life. While acknowledging many dedicated and selfless works rendered by the missionaries, we are recognized that the church has been an ally of empires in the marginalization, oppression, exploitation and even obliteration of indigenous peoples' communities. In the name of God, Christian missionaries have demonized indigenous cultures and traditions forcing it to hide and, consequently, robbing the younger generations of its own heritage. Christian faith and churches became the Trojan horse of empires, and to this day continues to be an instrument of subjugation of indigenous people's communities. The church has consistently played her role as the cultural partisan in our colonization, consistently breaking our will to resist subjugation and domination, and tragically standing in silence in the face of the destruction of our habitat, our livelihood and culture.¹⁷

Approaches to Mission

Huang Poho, a Taiwanese theologian, writes;

The traditional views of mission history that centred on ecclesiology saw mission as a strategy to expand a church's territory and made people into objects of missionary activity. Human beings were "commodified" for the sake of mission programs. Christian mission derived from this historical view expresses the mentality of conquest. More precisely, it is in view shaped by a religious colonization history.¹⁸

The perception of cultural and intellectual superiority of the white led to engage in three types of mission practice. Such approaches make it impossible to engage in meaningful dialogue with other faiths.

a) *Civilizing mission*: The issues have been already noted above. During the colonial era, Christian mission was primarily understood as "civilizing people". The language was absolute and exclusivist. The task of the Christian mission was seen in terms of demolishing native culture and establishing Christianity. Often military and warfare language such as "army", "advance", "attack". "battle", "campaign", "crusade", etc were used as motivational means for missions. Even other words like "pagan", "darkness" and

17 Statement of "Ecclesial And Social Vision Of Indigenous Peoples", 21-26 October, 2008, Baguio, Philippines

18 Huang Poho, *From Galilee to Tainan*, p. 29.

“heathen” have been used to refer to our friends, relatives, neighbours and other faiths. In the process of aggressive evangelization “local people abandoned their own cultures and betrayed their countries in order to follow a foreign mission. Following Christ in practice meant “accepting the existence of colonialism and the abolition of local cultures and languages.”¹⁹ The civilizing mission approach led many tribal people lost their land, their mother tongue, cultural and social structure. Today Euchee language is spoken only by 3 persons under the sky. More than 500 languages in Australia disappeared due to colonial policies. This attitude contributed to do mission in an exclusive way, refusing to dialogue with people of other faiths, and of obsessing with the expansion of the community in a kind of militant evangelistic approach.²⁰ The aggressive attitude had kept and continues to keep the Indian churches away from the mainstream of Indian culture and political life as a community. The church is seen as a stranger to many people.

b) *Charity mission*: The charity mission is an empire model of doing mission. It is seen in the form of gifts of food and clothes for the poor, consolation to the sick and other human services. Charity oriented mission is the product and extension of industrialization in Europe and North America during the 19th century. Charitable mission creates subject-object relationship between the giver and the recipients and helps to maintain the status quo based on unjust power relations. It is seen as “reproducing dependency relationships and failing to account for the subjectivity of the poor and need.”²¹ It also fails to restore and recreates the identity of the people with justice and dignity.²² The people of other faiths see it as a ploy to attract the poor and needy into the church and eventually to baptize them. Poho is critical of charity approach mission.

c) *Development mission*: Mission was/is understood as developing the underdeveloped people, a dominant model till today. It identified that the problem of poverty and malnutrition, and even the disease like HIV and AIDS are the result of ‘underdevelopment’, lack of skills and resources and therefore it is a mission imperative for the churches to help the poor communities around the world to ‘develop’. Development hence assumed the nature of a missiological witness of the charity and compassion of Christ expressed through the Body of the Church. Even the communities and nations who were critical of development paradigm were brought under the grand design of the capitalist development ideology through the committed and uncritical work of the church bodies.²³ Theological assumptions regarding unity, freedom, humanization informed by the values of self-hood, democracy and more directly development were symbolic of the trapping in the project of modernity.²⁴ The understanding of mission as “developing” slowly reduced the churches to act as faithful NGOs who function as an implementing agency of the projects designed by those hold the capital. Many churches

19 Josef P. Widyatmadja, *Rerouting Mission: Towards a People’s Concept of Mission and Diakonia* (Tiruvalla: CCA, 2004), p.23.

20 Huang Po-ho, *A Theology of Self-Determination* (Tainan: Tainan Theological Seminary, 1996), p. 28.

21 Josef P. Widyatmadja, *op.cit.* p.99.

22 *Ibid.* p. 99

23 M.P. Joseph, “They Left by Another Road: Rerouting Mission and Ecumenism”, (Chiangmai: CCA, 2007) p. 215.

24 *Ibid.* p. 214.

have reduced themselves as local agents or sub-contractors for development assistance from western economies, banks and governments, to the communities of the poor.

Are they not mere replica of the mission agencies of the colonial period? The churches have not moved away from such mission priorities. We need a paradigm shift in our mission.

Mission in Context

The CCA Jubilee declaration underlines the reality of Asia, thus;

The defining reality of the socio-political milieu is globalisation, a political construct of the predominance of the market and speculative portfolio-capital. This reality coupled with the *war on/of terror* leads to the escalation of violence resulting in militarisation, plundering of earth's resources, and oppression of marginalized sections within communities such as the women, children, indigenous peoples and the poor in each nation. This hegemony of the Empire that creates a collusion of the Market, State and Religion breaks down relationship between individuals, groups, communities, countries, and amongst all of God's creation - humanity and nature alike.²⁵

Further, it elaborates on the current situation of ecumenical movement, thus:

Churches and ecumenical bodies have often departed from being a movement of ordinary people and from siding with the poor. Such a position has rendered churches and ecumenical bodies to being mere associations creating self-justifying structures that ease the process of being co-opted as the agencies of the Empire. Self-dependence, Resource sharing, and Resource Management, as much as the spirit of peoples' sovereignty and moral sensitivity have become euphemistic clichés, or at best the dream and not reality that it defines.²⁶

How can people celebrate life in a situation of economic depravity, corruption and the misuse and abuse of political power? How can God's mission be done in a situation where the rich and powerful decides who is to live and who is to die?

Today we realize that peace and justice have remained distant hopes and dreams. The situation of the poor has turned from bad to worst. The violence of cultural nationalism against the tribal people is on increased. The attack of Christian in Orissa during Christmas celebration in 2007 and continuing attacks of tribal Christians in Kandhamal and other part of India are concrete examples. The anti-conversion ordinance in some of the states in India are examples of institutional forms of violence, inflected by evangelists of the gospel of cultural nationalism, genocide and ethnic cleansing of certain

25 Jubilee Declaration On "Rerouting Mission And Ecumenism In Asia", The Christian Conference of Asia, March 4-8, 2007, Parapat, Indonesia, p. 1.

26 *Ibid.* p. 2

communities of India today are expressions of direct forms of violence of cultural nationalism.²⁷

The global market turns human beings and their cultural activities and earth's resources into commodities for profit. The weak, namely the migrant workers, farmers, consumers, small entrepreneurs and the whole eco-system are the victims of globalization. The poor and their resources have become mere source of raw materials, cheap labor, and food needs. The unjust financial system, ever increasing ideology of consumerism, materialism, individualism, competition and greed erode life-affirming values, fragments communities and increase poverty; the value system which are driven by the powerful financial co-operations. The poor are deprived of their rights to celebrate life in the midst of all those problems.

We need to discern God's mission amidst all those problems and challenges. To be relevant to the context, mission priorities in India have to be life-centred, seeking ways to establish peace and justice, overcome violence while affirming the rich contributions of pluralistic communities and traditions. Therefore, the future of church in India lies in its ability to create counter movements against all these oppressive powers and structures. This counter movement is possible through strengthening and building grassroots or local social movements.

Discerning from the Past

John England uncovers that the Christian presence in Asia goes back to 2nd century and mission was understood as common sharing and respect of one another²⁸. He further argues that during the first 15 centuries of Christianity in Asia, there are clear signposts of Christian's engagement in various secular vocations. Although they were not critical of caste oppression and patriarchy, there were courageous missionary endeavours, monastic movements, long traditions of state service, education and medical care, a mutual beneficial co-existence with neighbours of other faiths, survival despite repression and persecution, creative biblical interpretation, theology and spirituality.²⁹ The record of pre-1500 shows a clear signpost of wholistic mission. Christian communities in many countries at that time were not only co-existed peacefully with those of other faiths, but also happily exchanged understandings of religious faith and life. For example, Buddhist terms and imageries were used freely to present New Testament teaching. There is also clear evidence of Christian influence in Mahayana teachings. From the earliest period in Persia (pre-400 C.E.), until the later history of Mongol ascendancy (pre-1400 C.E), Christians played key roles in various professions, and their commitment to all that promoted people's welfare, is widely recorded. In all these periods, there was a "non-institutional" Christian presence which was authentically rooted in secular worlds and a

27 George Mathew Nalunnakkal, "Mission as if People Mattered: An Indian Perspective" in *Re-routing Mission: Towards a People's Concept of Mission* (Tiruvalla: CCA, 2004), p. 98.

28 John C. England, "Historical Notes on Mission and Ecumenism in Asia" in *The Left by Another Road*, p. 39-42.

29 *Ibid*, pp.40-49.

new pattern of Christian community life, study, and prayer.³⁰ It is imperative that we revisit these early traditions in our attempt to re-root mission in our context.

Looking Ahead the Future

a) *Affirming Life*: Christian witness and mission are about bringing healing, wholeness, and new life into the lives of individuals, communities and nations. Any mission that builds barriers, divides the world into the 'saved' and 'unsaved', that makes people narrower, that alienates neighbours, that promotes enmity and rivalry, that is not built on self-giving is not mission. It is a counter witness to God. It betrays God, and in the Christian context, is alien to the spirit and message of Christ.³¹ Breaking down barriers, seeking justice and dignity for all, building community, enabling reconciliation and peace among all peoples are at the heart of mission.

b) *Transforming life*: The churches in India need a transformative mission. Mission in Christ's way is God's mission amidst people in pain is the one which is transformative. It is giving protection and justice for the weak in the house, in the community, in the nation and also in all creation. This is not a mission by conquest but mission according to the way of the cross. Mission amidst people in pain meant fellowship and peace among communities and nations. This cannot be attained without justice. It involves struggle for transformation of a social system that ensures social, economic, political and cultural justice. This Peace and fellowship cannot be realized when people still have to struggle to meet their basic needs. Jesus could able to bring justice through organizing people's movement. "Only when people are able to organize themselves for social justice can the oppressed regain their dignity and help secure justice and dignity for all."³² The churches have to take the position of, and for the poor and become the voice of the poor and exploited.

(c) *Building solidarity*: The World Mission Conference held in Melbourne affirmed that

There is no evangelism without solidarity; there is no Christian solidarity that does not involve sharing the knowledge of the Kingdom which is God's promise to the poor of the earth. There is here double credibility test: Kingdom to the poor of the earth is a caricature of the Gospel; but Christian participating in the struggles for justice which does no point towards the provision of the Kingdom also makes a caricature of a Christian understanding of justice.³³

Solidarity is not token partnership with its economic and political agenda; it is not a life of passive indifference but an active and critical engagement in people's concrete needs.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ S.Wesley Arirajah, "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other Religious Traditions", in *Visioning New Life Together Among Asian Religions*, eds. Daniel S. Thiagarajah and Wati Longchar (Hong Kong: CCA, 2002), p. 21.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³³ *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), 0. 58.

Genuine solidarity encompasses interreligious solidarity. To be in solidarity means to be one with another, to identify with the other, to feel strongly for the pain and hurts of the others, to share the burden of the other as if it were one's own. Solidarity implies the self-emptying mindset and attitude of Christ in an effort to life up those who are downtrodden, oppressed and dehumanized.³⁴

d) *Affirming Integrity of Creation*: The land, the mountain, the desert, the river and forest have been the home and life sustaining source of tribal people for centuries. But today they are being misused and raped to meet the growing demand of consumerism. Forest and fishing resources are depleted for quick profits. Mining companies rape resources with little regard to the environmental and social costs. The sustaining power of the earth for nurturing life is being destroyed. The whole planet is at threat and climactic change is the biggest side effect of our world today; a world which we see in a serious, deepest and complex crisis. Today one cannot deny the fact that land and resources have become the greatest single cause of strife and warfare between nations and people of different communities within a nation. Resources are hoarded by a few and denied to others. Possession of resources, instead of being used as an opportunity for mutual sharing, as of an unmerited gift of God, has become a matter of conquest and seizure, a tool of oppression, greed and power. We need to affirm

- Community over individual interests,
- A logic of relationality or interconnection between every living being, even the inanimate living as rocks, sites, etc,
- Simplicity of function over luxury,
- Respectful and reciprocal logic and use of natural resources,
- Sharing over accumulation of wealth,
- Alternative definitions of privilege, power and prestige.

34 Hope S. Antone, "New Paradigm Concepts of Mission" in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, December 2008, p. 58.