

## RELIGION AND SOCIETY

### THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORANIETY

A concept paper on the relevance of theological teachings in India and need for a  
theology to context

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David L. Smith (1996)<sup>1</sup> opines that no institute on earth is more important than the church and he believes that the church is manifestation of plan of God before the foundations laid, but earthly ministry established and animated by the Holy Spirit and thus the church is a vital part of salvation of the human beings. It is strongly believed that if the kingdom of God in this world is to prosper then the Church must prosper. If the church has to prosper, then the Christians must have deeper appreciation. If the deeper appreciation is expected, the pastor should first appreciate, be a model, motivate the congregation and make them to practice their faith.

Unfortunately, contemporary Christians believe that they can have Christ apart from the Church and Christian thinkers are of the view that the church is only a place of worship ignoring the real understanding of martyria “the mission of witness’ which is coined with four greek words of the mission of the church (martyria or witness, diakonia or service, kiononia or fellowship and liturgia or worship). The six books enacts deals with a summary on the spread of gospel where every Christian is expected to be a witness to the Christ in terms of his new commandments of love thy neighbour and be a

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Smith (1996) All Gods People: A Theology of the Church, Victor Books/ SP Publication, USA, p. 3.

witness in practice. Thus the great commission of a church (Mathew, 28: 19-20 cf Acts 1:8) is to be a witness in the whole world to evangelise but to be a testimony of loving the mankind as followers of Jesus which is known as true community of Christ. The today's Christianity is seen on the other side of the prosperity and they care caught up in serious challenges of struggles for the last one and half decade, particularly in India where Christians are minorities and are forced to act only when serious instances are occurring and are living under the terror of fascism.

The history of Indian church indicates ample evidences of nation building in the past with greater contribution of imparting education not only to Christians but to whole country and also providing better health and living conditions to mankind which prompted the national leaders to include the secular and democratic principles in the constitution of India. The Indian history has ample evidence of greater role played by the church in the ancient days particularly on social problems like Sati system, female infanticide led by William Cary and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a reformer influenced by Christian missionaries, child labour, child marriages, untouchability, and building quality of life. Of late, the Christianity have become an isolated minority in the country with increased persecutions particularly in Orissa where thousands of villages, churches, houses, Christian institutions were gutted to ashes and the reverence of nun sisters getting raped in the hands of Hindu fundamentalists. These poses a greater question as to why the Christianity that was welcomed in India has now become an enemy of society, is it because of many churches and are centre of worships including the challenges within the society or they are only running on cold feet for survival. It will not be out of place to quote the illiteracy in India is dominating and even after independence of 60 years, the literacy rate remain stagnant at 60%, out of which also 27% is the school dropout rate within the primary education despite a millennium development goal of universal declaration to give 100 percent education free of cost and the levels of graduation is also very pathetic and more than 67 percent are following the toe of dropout. The child marriages, the temple prostitution, untouchability, unemployment, poverty, human trafficking, exploitation of women and children under the guise of marriage, both in-house and abroad are ruling the roost of Indian society for which the Indian church have to rethink on the scope of its mission. It is opined by many

sociologists and reformers that every church should become a source of strength to the underprivileged for emancipation and every Presbyterian in-charge to be a social reformer and a dedicated missionary.

The present paper is an effort to examine the curriculum being applied and imparted to the pastors of mainline churches and to investigate whether their capacities are being built to face such challenges and to bring in a change within the society as part of their role in the church. The present scenario of Indian society reminds an ageold short story of dilemma of four persons; everybody, somebody, anybody and nobody. The government, the nongovernmental organisations, the church and the society seems to have been continuing in the dilemma affecting the common mans interest.

### **India – An overview**

India is a republic comprising of 28 states and 7 union territories with a billion populations of varied features of language, culture, religion and tradition. In the twenty first century, the world witnessed a rapid growth in urban population and India became the fastest growing region in Asia. The recent National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) survey indicates that 80 million urban people are Below Poverty Line (BPL) and 61.8 million are living in slums which lack basic services. Unfortunately, majority of them eke their living from informal sector of urban economy and as a result face various problems related to housing and shelter, water, sanitation, health, education, constant threat of eviction and removal, confiscation of goods on one side and almost non-existent social security cover on the other. Such conditions render lives vulnerable, and hostile.

The biblical approach to these challenges makes the church and Christianity a sole source of strength and support in a country like India. The poor aspire for a support to re-address poverty and receive better health, education, and enhanced quality of life. This fond desire of the poor is against the backdrop of prevailing social evils that are rooted in the social, cultural and economic wave of Indian society. Therefore there is a need for a modified approach for a church to emancipate the poor.

The present paper is an effort to evaluate the challenges of contemporaneity in India and identify solutions particularly through qualitative education to theologians who are the prospective social reformers of Indian society. The core objective of this paper is to investigate the relevance of the present curriculum of theological colleges of India and suggest modifications to suit the context and the social challenges. The role of the church in India and relevance of Nazareth manifesto are relied as basis of this study.

### **Social Challenges in India**

Social change is a reality and no society is without challenges. Developing countries like India grapple with such burning issues. Despite making giant strides in its way to becoming a superpower, India still faces a greater challenge of poverty while the gap between the have's and have not's and gene-ratio is widening day by day causing a major concern.

In the face of efforts falling short of expectations of the oppressed, Christianity has had a long cherished acceptance of building qualitative lives to Christians and non Christians alike undergirded by strong belief in equality, emancipation, peace and prosperity. Among the non-Christians, upper castes were the ones to benefit in terms of better education, qualitative medical services and other hygiene environment of living and other living conditions.

This section deals with some of the major social challenges that prevail in India since time immemorial which continue to dominate the society. This situation reiterates to the church and Christianity, the need to look back for a viable solution like a mother towards its vulnerable and weak children as they have no other alternative. The Church has a significant responsibility in the context of social change in addressing social issues and challenges. In order to be relevant and meaningful, the church particularly, the pastors (shepherds) and the laity need to be equipped with an understanding of their role in a sustainable system of administration which involves low cost and no cost solutions resulting in providing solace to the lost and confused congregation in particular and society in general.

A modified and relevant curriculum is necessary at this juncture for theological teaching which covers the changing dynamics of social trends and economic measures that can give relief to the society. At the same time effective mechanisms to deal with “social evils like Caste System, Untouchability, Illiteracy, Women discrimination, Child Labour, Religious persecutions, Oppression and Suppressions of certain community, unequal distribution of natural wealth”, that “are making people’s life miserable”<sup>2</sup> need to be explored. Against the background of all off the above, some of the challenges prevalent in India are briefly referred as to show the need for such an approach and also give an understanding of the pathetic conditions of Indian society. For the purpose of this paper, few issues broadly classifiable into demographic, socio-cultural concerns are focused.

### **Demographic Indicators**

According to an article, though there is a fall in the poverty rates of India from 51% to 37% between 1990 and 2008, it will still not reach the poverty head count ratio of 23.9% by 2015 to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG). 4 out of every 5 persons living in extreme poverty are from Sub Saharan Africa and Southern Asia of which India is the major country. India will also fail to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger as committed as a MDG. “India has the largest hungry population and it’s a cause of serious alarm. We have the largest population of children born underweight ---- and are actually doing worse than before in reducing hunger and providing food security” (Jayathi Ghosh, Jawaharlal Nehru University).<sup>3</sup>

*Refer Annex 1 for other important demographic indicators*

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<sup>2</sup> M.N. Sreenivas, *Caste in Modern India*, Bombay 1977 p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *The Economic Times*, Kounteia Sinha, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012.

## Socio-cultural Indicators

### Education System

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan seeks to provide elementary education to all children in the 6-14 years age group by 2010. Enrolment, however, is only the first step. Children must also complete eight years of schooling and this continues to present a major challenge. High drop-out rates are the result of a combination of factors – like long distance to school not functioning regularly, absence of teacher, is intimidating or uses uninteresting methods are a few of them. Well run residential schools in regions of extreme poverty keep the children from living on streets or railway platforms or joining the work force prematurely.

The current set up for skill formation and upgradation is woefully inadequate. The number of institutions and skills for which training is provided also needs to be expanded to include new skills.

### Caste System

Caste is playing a major role in determination of social relationships and human behavior wherein both the government and multinational companies are having an apartheid attitude towards a lower caste person. It is an unfortunate scenario that the Hindu thinkers still look back to the Brahman and associates with the creation of the universe and categorize others as *Shudras* “untouchables”.<sup>4</sup>

M.N Srinivas’s process of Sanskritisation observed in many parts of Karnataka state of India and proliferated into other states has given scope for people of lower castes to rise in the caste ladder through certain acts of omission (adaptation of vegetarianism) and commission (wearing of secret thread and chanting of the Brahminic recitation) have only marginally changed their status in the concerned individuals who still are subject to discrimination and prohibition from entering the places of worship.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Chandhoke, N and Priyadarshini, P., *Contemporary India: Economy, Society and Politics*, India: Pearson, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Augmentative India: writings on Indian History Culture and Identity*, Picador, 1972. p 601.

The Dalits, which are outside the caste system, are the lowest in the social system and suffer from social segregation and restrictions in addition to extreme poverty. It is a bitter reality that even amongst the Christians and Muslims, caste has become a major source of discrimination and stigmatization, being identified as Dalit Christians and Muslims.

### *Prostitution*

In India, sex work has its origins in the ancient Hindu customs of Devadasi, Matangi in different parts of the country to service the priests and the upper economic crust, also belonging to the upper castes. Sex work, on the other hand, is related to high dependency ratio in the family and, the phenomena of migration for livelihoods. An important dimension of this problem is the exploitation of poor vulnerable women through deception and their trafficking.

The half-hearted implementation of the Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act (SITA) and Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA), which leave a lot of gaps have relegated the sex workers vulnerable to violation many times in the hands of the policy makers and law keepers themselves.

The above three problems are indicative and are used only for illustrative purposes as these are only the tip of the huge iceberg of discrimination, exploitation and suppression.

### **Bible - Mandate of Church – Nazareth manifesto**

Entry of Christian service and spread of the gospel started with the advent of Missionaries to India with a three point objective of education, health and spread of gospel. In the face of the first two objectives which have targeted the lower strata of society Mission work and service enjoyed a lot of response from the oppressed and at the same time received tolerance from the governments and other sections. However with the increase of the number of institutions giving these essential services and the government also universalizing education and health, the Church has started focusing lesser on these aspects and more on the spread of gospel.

Statistics pertaining to the oppressed over the decades indicate that 96 percent of the poor still grapple with the basic needs relating to education, health, employment, etc. church teaching which has gathered lot of experiential aspects of salvation have somehow relegated the dimension of 'faith in works' amongst its members. As a result of this there is more focus on members' responsibility towards the pastor and the church as an institution rather than a joint focus of the clergy and the laity on the needy members of its congregation.

In the New Testament, the Ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, reiterates the Nazareth Manifesto of lifting the needy and showing them the gift of salvation. Jesus exemplified this manifesto by his very birth in a manger, spreading of the Gospel among the poor, healing the sick, discipling common fishermen and preaching the gospel of servant-hood as the manifestation of God's love. In his own words:

- The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring Good News to the Poor.
- He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recover of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lords' favors (Lk 4:18-21).

After reading the above, Jesus concluded by saying "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21).

In Jesus preaching, hearing, teaching all through his life on this earth the Nazareth Manifesto occurs. While healing, teaching and discipling was Jesus's mandate, liberating the poor and the oppressed and questioning the authority of the self proclaimed righteous, was an integral part of his ministry making him the liberator of mankind. Just preceding his ascension, he gave the mandate to all to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth and make people his disciples.

## Call - Imperative for Curriculum Change

The existing curriculum according to the Senate of Serampore University in India is classified into 5 Clusters listed below.<sup>6</sup>

1. Biblical Cluster
2. Theology, Ethics & Sociology Cluster
3. Religion Culture and Society Cluster
4. History and Mission Cluster
5. Christian Ministry Cluster

*Annex 2 contains the detailed information on the curriculum as followed by the Senate of Serampore, India.*

These clusters have further specific courses totaling to 48 topics. It is proposed that the clusters be shortened so as to retain the most relevant subject components. Further contemporary topics that reflect the realities of contemporary world may be included so as to offer the student an integrated understanding of the Gospel against this socio-cultural background and enables them to make their teaching and Ministry more relevant. Some of the subjects for inclusion in the above clusters are listed below:

1) *Crime and Society:*

Crime; Corruption; Substance Abuse; Terrorism; Suicide

2) *Women and children:*

Early marriage; Female feticide; Gender inequality; Atrocities against women; Education of women; Women and divorce; Prostitution; Empowerment; Child labour; Child abuse; Juvenile crime; Trafficking

3) *Contemporary problems*

Unemployment; Poverty; Population explosion; Social justice; Homosexuality

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<sup>6</sup> *Senate of Serampore College Faculty of Theology, Regulations and Syllabus, Senate of Serampore, Calcutta, 2010. p. 25-31.*

#### 4) *Rights and Privileges*

Human rights; Rights to universal basics (Education, Housing, Water, Sanitation, Health, etc.); Ageing; Disabled welfare; Social security; Food Security; Wellness; Terminal Illnesses

While the above topics for inclusion are only indicative, the exhaustive list of contemporary issues properly classified and taught to the students would enable them to have a comprehensive understanding of the gospel and the mode of outreach and preaching while allowing them have a glimpse of the gospel perspective related to some major issues like homosexuality, etc.

Apart from the above, there is a need for translation of the major theological works that serve as reference material for the students at the graduate and post graduate levels. This is an important area of need that should be addressed. An example may be taken of Andhra Christian Theological College, the only ecumenical college representing Church of South India, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist and independent denominations located in Hyderabad, the capital city of Andhra Pradesh. It may be noted that while there are more than 50000 books for reference, only 2000 books are in vernacular language (Telugu) while all the rest are in English. Considering that students come from various rural and urban backgrounds in the state, lack of books in Telugu limit their opportunity to benefit from the rich content offered by the other books. There is therefore a need for an urgent translation of all these books into the vernacular language to enhance their accessibility by the students.

Theology to the context is the most needed dimension of theology that addresses spirituality of individuals caught up in the contemporary society with its own share of existing and emerging challenges. Provision of contextual perspectives and wherever needed, pooling of resources for standing by the member in need of immediate succor, and taking up a definitive stance with respect to certain issues are all the ways in which the church as a body can rise up to the issues of contemporaneity. Viewed in this perspective, the church plays a pivotal role in the emancipation of the member and strives towards their development in the different areas of living. This is where theological teaching needs to become contextual and relevant to the present.

The important initiatives which the church can take up to become relevant to the challenges of contemporaneity are given in the 10-point formula listed below:

1. Every pastor to be a social reformer
2. Vision and mission of social development with low cost and no cost measures
3. Mobilizing the congregation to put their faith of love in practice by contributing to the poor
4. Encouraging schooling and livelihoods
5. Organizing medical camps
6. Taking up care of the widow, destitute and orphaned children
7. Setting up counseling centers, career guidance for youth, entrepreneurship development network with government programmes
8. Centers of night studies
9. Setting up expert groups on legal issues and challenges to support the needy
10. Coordination with other NGOs, government agencies for support

God wants every individual to live a life of righteousness, harmlessness and thereby honor God and humanity where we are living. The responsibility squarely falls on the shoulders of the clergy which builds nurtures and empowers individuals to lead the true Christian life in church as well as in secular life. Needless to say, this can only happen with the guidance of the Holy Spirit that indwells the Born-again Christian, with the pastor shepherding the congregation in that direction.

The blend of theology and readings in contemporary society including problems and social evils in an intertwined model should be introduced both in teaching and life pattern so that they both strengthen the Christian laity in society to stand-up against any evil practices that can disturb any one. This nature of teaching will result in enabling the pastors and clergy with a comprehensive philosophy and Christian world view so that with the divine knowledge of God they will be effectively able to shepherd congregations

and lead many into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This gives due credence to the very words of Jesus during His earthly ministry: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Lk 10:1-3).

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## Annex 1

### Demographic Details

#### Demography

Population (thousands), 2010, under 18	447309
Population (thousands), 2010, under 5	127979
Crude death rate, 2010	8
Crude birth rate, 2010	22
Life expectancy at birth, 2010	65
Total fertility rate, 2010	2.6
Average annual growth rate of urban population (%), 2010-2030	2.5

#### Mortality and Morbidity

Under-5 mortality rate, 2010	63
Infant mortality rate (under 1), 2010	48
Neonatal mortality rate, 2010	32
Total population (thousands), 2010	1224614
Annual no. of under-5 deaths (thousands), 2010	1696
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2010	65
% of infants with low birthweight, (2006-2010*)	28
% of under-fives (2006-2010*) suffering from: underweight (WHO), moderate & severe	43

Literacy

Total adult literacy rate (%), 2005-2010*	63
Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate (%), 2005-2010*, male	88
Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate (%), 2005-2010*, female	74
Life expectancy: females as a % of males, 2010	105
Adult literacy rate: females as a % of males, 2005-2010*	68

(Source: DFID Report)

## Annex 2

### FIVE CLUSTER CURRICULUM

#### 1. **Biblical Cluster**

- Introduction to post Biblical Judaism
- Descending the Science of Signs of times
- Life and faith of people of God in the Hebrew Bible
- Bible Hermeneutics.
- Bible & Ethical Perspectives: Reading apocalyptic Books; Daniel and Revelations.

- Life and Ministry of early Christians according to Acts of Apostles
- General Introduction to the Bible and its contents,
- Jesus movements in the Gospels
- Prophetic Responses – to the struggles People of God
- Jesus Tradition in Paul and Pauline.

#### 2 **Theology, Ethics & Sociology Cluster**

- Introduction to Christian Social Ethics
- Reading the Bible from Feminist, Dalith, Tribal and Adivasees Perspectives.

- Green Theology, Feminist Theology
- Sociology
- Understanding the Indian Society
- Theological Methodologies from the Margins
- Introduction to Christian Doctrines
- Introduction to Christian Theologies in India,
- Person and Work of Jesus Christ
- Hope in suffering and Joy in Liberation- Dalith Theology and Tribal

Theology

#### 3 **Religion Culture and Society Cluster**

- Modern Religion – Socio , Political Movements in India
- Science and Religion
- Histories and Cultures of India/South Asian Regions
- Contextual and Methodological Issues
- Introduction to Indian Religious Traditions
- Detailed Study of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam
- Modern Religious Socio, - Political Movements in India
- Philosophical Foundation
- Christian Response to other faith.

4. **History and Mission Cluster**

- Introduction to Mission Studies
- History of Christianity 1st to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century
- History of Christianity in India
- Women in History of Christianity
- Development of Contemporary Global and Musicological perspectives.
- Contemporary Issues in Xin. Mission and Evangelism
- History of Ecumenical Movements
- Ecclesia: Radical Democratic Assembly of Equals.

5. **Christian Ministry Cluster**

- Personal and Vocational Formation of Christian Minister
- Information and Communication Technologies
- Implications for Christian Ministry
- Marriage and Family Counseling, Justice, Peace, and Overcoming

Violence.

- Christian Education for Social Change,
- Church Organization and Pastoral Administration
- Crises Counseling towards inclusive communities – Peo[le living with HIV

and AIDS children at risk

- Psychology
- Introduction to Worship and Preaching
- Introduction to Communication Studies for Christian Ministries
- Introduction to Pastoral Care and Counseling