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TRACING CONTOURS OF A TRIBAL CHURCH – FROM LIVE-IN EXPERIENCE IN BASTAR

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Abstract

A genuine encounter of the gospel and the culture of the people leads to the realization of the Church or ecclesiology. The present article is an attempt to trace contours of new paradigms of a tribal Church in Bastar, an exclusive tribal region in the state of Chhattisgarh. Visualizing a tribal Church in Bastar becomes a serious imitation of the paradigm of Jesus, a radical conversion to the mind of Jesus and achieving a structural change in the life of the Church returning to her original roots to meet the present world with its challenges and promises. It is following the stand point of Jesus with determination in responding courageously and creatively to the challenges, especially in transcending all that prevent people from becoming better humans in various contexts. The tribal Church in Bastar with incarnational approach must be a 'Church from Below,' which is sensitive to and fully immersed in the tribal context and breaks down the barriers of any kind in building up the Kingdom of God.

Keywords: *Adivasi*, Bastar Church, Church from below, Communion of Churches, Ecclesiology, Individual Church, Jesuan Community, Tribals, Tribal Church

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1. Introduction

As the gospel by its very nature is intended for all peoples, ages, land and context, it is not bound or chained (2 Tim 2:9) exclusively to any particular culture, for it enters into dialogue with and pervades all cultures¹ and illumines them with the divine light. The gospel must be adapted to different cultural contexts and the message of the gospel, which is a message of love and freedom, especially to the captives, the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized, must be articulated in the cultural categories of the people. Hence the missionaries should take into consideration the existing socio-cultural and religious milieu and have a genuine love and respect for all peoples, cultures and religions. The evangelization is the incarnation of Christian faith in other cultures; it attempts to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context, which according to Bevans is a theological imperative.² A genuine encounter with the living Christ and his gospel with the soul of the culture of the people leads to the realization of the Church or ecclesiogenesis, a process in a new context.³ Hence it is reasonable to trace contours of new paradigms of Church. The present article is an attempt to envision a tribal Church in Bastar, an exclusive tribal region in the state of Chhattisgarh, which is a subaltern or rural and tribal context⁴ in central India. The district of Bastar with Jagdalpur as its district headquarters is surrounded on the northwest by Narayanpur district, on the north by Kondagaon district, on the east by Nabarangpur and Koraput districts of Odisha state, on the south and southwest by Dantewada district, and on the west by Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state. It possesses a unique blend of tribal and Odia culture. Tribal contextual experience in Bastar by way of exposure-immersion after the incarnation model facilitates in visualizing a tribal Church.

¹J. Parappally, "Christianity's Encounter with the Hellenistic/Greek World," in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 72.

²S.B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: ORBIS Books, 1992, 1.

³K. Pathil, "Introduction - Church on Pilgrimage: From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth," in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 3-4.

⁴N.J. Kalambukattu, "Theologizing in Tribal Context: A Paradigm for Integration," in N.J. Kalambukattu, ed., *Theologizing in Context: A Hermeneutic of Living Dialogue between the Word and the World*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2019, 13-14; P. Kochappilly, "Celebrating Life in Christ with the Community of Creation: Theological Education in the Tribal Setting of Bastar," in N.J. Kalambukattu, ed., *Theologizing in Context: A Hermeneutic of Living Dialogue between the Word and the World*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2019, 151-175.

2. Live-in Experience in the Tribal Context of Bastar

Tribals are the original settlers, and they are called *Adivasis*. Tribals/*adivasis*, primitive tribes or aborigines have complexity and commonality in their culture and practices, and on the whole their culture can be branded as tribal.⁵ It includes values of solidarity with nature, egalitarianism, a non-competitive collaboration with one another, and a filial relationship with the land.⁶ Irrespective of different identities, “the world view of ‘God-world-humankind’ interrelationship is intimately found in all tribal communities. Not only that, they always considered this relationship very vital, but also it is their source, their identity and the purpose of their life and community.”⁷ Agapit Tirkey expounds: “In the tribal worldview, *totality of creation* is central. Everything has to be understood in the perspective of creation. *Harmony* with creation is the starting point of their spirituality and search for liberation. An awareness of being one with the whole of creation is, therefore, the spiritual foundation of the tribal people.”⁸ The tribals live in tune with the nature and they depend on the nature for their livelihood. Living in proximity to forests and rivers, the tribals are close to the nature and they have “preserved over the centuries a glorious and unique cultural heritage, which primarily consists in human, ethical and moral values.”⁹ They use things of nature for their need and never for their greed. They never cut a tree from its root but only the branches for their needs. The tribal people lead a simple life and they are paradigms of “anti-greed and anti-pride,”¹⁰ for the tribal values are in sharp contrast to pride and greed that lead to social oppression and economic exploitation.

The tribal life and culture is characterized by a harmonious and symbiotic relationship with *God*, with *one another* and with *nature* and there is a sense of inter-dependence, respect and reverence for one

⁵J. Chittooparampil, “Tribal Culture on Limelight: Subaltern Hermeneutics,” in N.J. Kalambukattu, ed., *Theologizing in Context: A Hermeneutic of Living Dialogue between the Word and the World*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2019, 141.

⁶G. Soares-Prabhu, “Tribal Values in India, Editorial,” *Jeevadhara* 24, 140 (1994) 84.

⁷M. Maisuangdibou, “Marginally Reconstituted: Rethinking National Transnational Identities: Tribal Perspective,” *Mar Thoma Seminary Journal of Theology* 4, 1 (June 2015) 51.

⁸A. Tirkey, “Tribal Spirituality,” *Sevartham* 37 (2012) 11.

⁹J. Crasta, “Indian Moral Theology from the Subaltern Perspective: Current Status and Future Avenues,” in M. Illathuparampil, ed., *Indian Moral Theology: Historical Studies and Future Prospects*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 199.

¹⁰The concept is borrowed from G. Soares-Prabhu, “Anti-greed and Anti-pride,” in I. Padinjarekattu, ed., *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology*, Pune: JDV, 1999.

anther.¹¹ Their life is “a web of relationship between the nature, divine and fellow humans.”¹² The catchphrase *Jal, Jungle* and *Jameen* (= water, forest and land) belong to the very identity of the tribals. They look at nature as their mother, for they live in close relation with nature which plays a significant role in their life as they depend on it for their basic necessities like food, shelter, fodder, fuel, timber, medicines, etc.¹³

The idea of family among the tribals is also noteworthy. They consider the marriage and family natural and essential for the continuation of life, clan and tribe. Marriage is indispensable for them and family is the only way to live in society where the human person can develop himself/herself in a healthy manner. Hence the tribals give much importance to marriage and family.¹⁴ The idea of family includes not only the blood related members but also the entire clan and the community, which epitomizes the communion of living members, the ancestors and God. This understanding enriches Christian idea of sisterhood and brotherhood and the communion of saints.¹⁵

The tribal society is intensely communitarian and the community feeling is manifested in their sharing, friendship and collaboration. Each community is homogenous and community oriented.¹⁶ James Toppo explains, “Tribal people are community-oriented people to the extent that individuality of persons remains overshadowed and submerged in the quagmire of the community.”¹⁷ Tribals also promote egalitarian society.

Tribals have been dealt with unfairly in the sharing and distribution of nation’s resources. They suffer marginalization and powerlessness due to proliferation of unjust power-play by the wealthy and powerful, and they are denied of their right to live a

¹¹A. Tirkey, “Tribal Spirituality,” 12.

¹²R.F. Crasta, “Cosmotheandric Inter-Relatedness in the Life and Culture of Tribals of Chotanagpur and Its Global Significance,” *Sevartham* 38 (2013) 105.

¹³A. Tirkey, “Tribal Spirituality,” 30.

¹⁴S.K. Ekka, “*Adivasi* Understanding of Marriage and Family in the Context of Chotanagpur: A Christian Reflection,” *Sevartham* 41 (2016) 9.

¹⁵S.K. Ekka, “*Adivasi* Understanding of Marriage and Family in the Context of Chotanagpur,” 30.

¹⁶ M. Maisuangdibou, “Marginally Reconstituted: Rethinking National Transnational Identities,” 51.

¹⁷J. Toppo, “Church’s Mission to Tribal Peoples and Theological Education,” in D. Varayilan, ed., *Theology on Wheels: A Movement for Contextualised Theological Education*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2011, 147.

dignified human life.¹⁸ The sources of livelihood of the tribals are land, cattle, crops and forests. They rely on primitive and traditional methods of cultivation and are ignorant of modern agricultural instruments and systems, and are deprived of the facilities to obtain them from the government. Cold-hearted deforestation brings down the tribal economy, and these poor peasants become easy victims of landlords and moneylenders.¹⁹

The Church in Bastar, to become a tribal Church, needs to integrate herself to the tribal context and address the agonies and struggles of the tribals. In the pursuit of tracing contours of a tribal Church, Jesus sets the perfect paradigm, and therefore his disciples shall “have the same mind of Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

3. Jesuan Mind as a Paradigm and Pattern of Tribal Church

Jesus reached out to those people on the fringe of society to make them partners of the Kingdom of God.²⁰ His way reflects new forms and new approaches in carrying out his saving mission²¹ and espoused the style of sincere and serious expressions of immersion into and assimilation of the culture.²² The incarnation is immersion into the history and by incarnation Jesus became the perfect exigent of God.²³ “He is the visible image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). The solidarity of Jesus with the poor and the outcastes is evident in the incarnation (Jn 1:14). Pope Francis states, “Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe (cf. Phil 2:6-8; Jn 1:14). So if we dare to go to the fringes, we will find him there; indeed, he is already there. Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in their profound desolation.”²⁴ Due to his immersion in the context of common people, Jesus was a victim of insults, mockery and contempt (Mt 11:19; Mk 3:22-30; Mk 6:3; Jn 8:48-52).

¹⁸Crasta, “Indian Moral Theology from the Subaltern Perspective,” 198.

¹⁹S.K. Kujur, “Are Tribals Hindus?,” *Sevartham* 29 (2004) 105.

²⁰T. Karimundackal, “Lukan Perspectives for a New Ecclesiological Paradigm in India,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 83, 6 (June 2019) 444.

²¹A. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, London: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1991, 62.

²²S. Athappilly, “Inculturation in the Model of Incarnation,” in S. Chackalackal, ed., *New Horizons of Indian Christian Living: A Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Dr Vadakethala Francis Vineeth CMI*, Bengaluru/Coimbatore: Vidyavanam Publications/Preshita Communications, 2009, 440.

²³S. Athappilly, “Inculturation in the Model of Incarnation,” 435.

²⁴Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2018, 135.

The identification of Jesus with the poor and the needy is clearly visible in his Nazareth manifesto (Lk 4:18). At the commencement of his ministry, Jesus previewed his mission to the less fortunate. He announces that at the center of his ministry is preaching “good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Radical inclusiveness was characteristic trait of Jesuan ministry as opposed to the Pharisaic extreme exclusivism.²⁵ Jesus breaks down human barriers to take his message of the Kingdom of God to all and the new community that Jesus envisioned has no boundaries. The values held by the clever and the wise of the world is challenged by the wisdom of the marginalized and the downtrodden in the society. He is the liberator of those who longed for a saviour, who are vulnerable and kicked to the outskirts of the society due to poverty, illness, handicaps and other deprivations. Jesus was always sensitive to the context where he lived and was eager to reach out to the people, especially to those at the periphery (Lk 8:1-3). Being totally available at the service of the marginalized, he gave them freedom, hope, wholeness and new orientation to their lives and transformed them. “Jesus alleviated human suffering and taught his followers that coming to the help of those in need was the hall-mark of discipleship and the criterion of entry into his everlasting kingdom.”²⁶

Jesus who entered into and got united to the reality of human beings in their poverty-stricken and unjust context, preached liberation and communicated the Word in the language and idiom of the people in context. Therefore the Church in Bastar must start from the scratch, from below, from the concrete life of the people, and then should strive at a new interpretation of the message of Jesus.

The content and methodology of evangelization must be based on the life of Jesus and his teaching... Once he started his mission as an itinerant preacher, his life’s insecurity reaches extraordinary heights of total dependence on his Father’s providence; he did not even have a place to lay his head on. This was the way he taught his disciples to rely totally on God and not on money.²⁷

The credibility of Jesus lies in his solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, and hence, for the one who proclaims Jesus who was poor and stood for the cause of the poor, has no better option than to

²⁵Karimundackal, “Lukan Perspectives for a New Ecclesiological Paradigm in India,” 453.

²⁶C.L. Thomas, “Mission and the Use of Money,” *Mission Today* 19, 2 (April-June 2017) 102.

²⁷Thomas, “Mission and the Use of Money,” 102.

be in solidarity with them which in turn adds to his or her credibility and integrity.²⁸ Jesus visualized true liberation of humanity, a setting where everyone lives in solidarity, freedom and justice, for his “mission was to lead humans to realize true freedom by their becoming authentic humans.”²⁹

4. Tracing Contours of a Tribal Church in Bastar

Jesuan movement which was dynamic, creative and ever growing spread ‘from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth’ encountering different peoples, cultures and nations, and responding to their problems, struggles and aspirations. To the centrifugal force of the gospel and the movement, the people in various contexts responded to the apostolic Christ-experience shared through the proclamation of the gospel and the Church incarnated in each place with its unique identity.³⁰ Churches were formed when the message of the gospel was presented to new people and cultures. In this process of ecclesio-genesis, which is a divine initiative, a constant and living dialogue between the gospel and the people in the context, i.e., proclamation of the Christ-experience and fitting response from the people with the power of the Holy Spirit are significant.³¹ Errol A. D’Lima delineates,

The encounter of the Christian proclamation with the culture and civilization of a particular period gave rise to ecclesial communities which followed a Christian praxis without losing their cultural and political moorings. Such encounters gave rise to the Individual Churches that belong to the Communion of Churches.³²

As the gospel gets rooted in any culture and context, it is pertinent to visualize a tribal Church in the rural and tribal context of Bastar, for the emergence of a tribal Church in a cultural environment congenial

²⁸G. Kudilil, “Mission Approaches in Evangelizing Process with Special Emphasis on Human Promotion in the Missionary Context of India,” *Ephrem’s Theological Journal* 21, 2 (October 2017) 18.

²⁹J. Parappally, “Christian Leadership and the Praxis of Jesus,” in A. Kalliath, ed., *Christian Leadership: The Shifting Focus in Theological Education*, Bangalore: Dharmaram publications, 2001, 79.

³⁰K. Pathil, “Introduction: Church on Pilgrimage: From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth,” 2-3.

³¹N.J. Kalamkattu, *Roots to the Wings: The Apostolic Christ-Experience and Its Organic Growth in the Syro-Malabar Eucharistic Liturgy*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 77-80.

³²E.A. D’Lima, “Church in the Roman Cultural and Political World,” in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 74.

to it is a proof that unity is not uniformity.³³ The unity of faith and plurality of its expressions contribute to the vitality of the Church³⁴ (Acts 2:8-11).

As Jesus crossed the socio-cultural barriers of his society to spread the message of the Kingdom, the tribal Church in Bastar shall adopt a method of dialogue for spreading the message of the Kingdom in the tribal context. As Jesus brought liberation by breaking down the social and religious barriers, the tribal Church is called to negate the unjust and exploitative socio-religious structures of tribal world and the society at large. After the model of Jesus, the Church in general and the Church in Bastar in particular has to break down the blocks that promote divisions, and build up unity and harmony.

'God takes the side of the oppressed' (Ex 3:7-9), and 'God liberates the oppressed' (Lk 4:18-19); these two messages have to be the spirit behind all ecclesial expressions in the tribal settings of Bastar. Therefore, Church in Bastar necessitates addressing itself to the liberative praxis of the oppressed, exploited and marginalized people, taking a serious note of stark realities within social, cultural, political, economic and religious pluralism to help the people in their struggle to alter their situation of injustice and oppression.³⁵ Identifying with Jesus Christ who preached about a loving God who became one with the marginalized people in the periphery, the primary concern of the Church in Bastar is directly addressed to the poor, outcastes, sinners, marginalized and oppressed tribal people who look forward liberation from all kinds of bondages. The tribals like any other socially disadvantaged group remain at the periphery and are often victims of meandering development. The Church needs to ensure that they may no more be sacrificed on the 'altar of development,' and all her ministries emphasize their aspirations and human right concerns.³⁶ In other words the tribal aspirations and concerns are to be a priority of the Church. "The forceful evacuation of tribals from their natural environment in the name of development by government and other global companies,

³³J. Pathrapankal, "The Church at Its Origins in the Jewish Milieu," in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 47.

³⁴D. Alphonse, "Being the Church of Christ in the Pluralistic and Democratic Society of India Today," in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 352.

³⁵K.C. Abraham, "Contextual Theologies," in J. Massey, ed., *Contextual Theological Education*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1993, 18.

³⁶J.V. Edwin, "Practising Christian-Muslim Dialogue in India towards a Method," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 83, 2 (February 2019) 142.

destruction of flora and fauna for the selfish reasons by people, etc., destroy the rich cultural heritage of tribals.”³⁷ Church has to see to that through the open schools, health care centres and mission stations she offers the tribals legal assistance to regain their land and heritage.

The Church needs to make people aware of their rights through mass education. It necessitates contributing its mite collaborating with the government. Jesus who identified himself with the poor is the role model of social action and intervention. Church has to understand the tribal vision of life and value system, and try to enhance their quality of life and work for social transformation.³⁸ Therefore the formation of the priests and religious must include exposure-immersion to tribal life. The Church has to be knowledgeable to empower the underprivileged with power of knowledge. She shall revamp or refashion her formation and education centres. The final Statement of the annual Conference 2018 of Catholic Biblical Association of India affirms, “There is a noticeable lacuna in our formation system where the only insistence is passing on information to the heads but not tested whether passed on to the hearts. Some way our institutions have miserably failed to impart passion and fire in our students.”³⁹ The formation houses and seminaries need to include a serious study and reflection on the tribal life, values and issues they face. Contextual exposure-immersion programmes, participation in peoples’ struggles and serious and systematic reflection on them should be made mandatory. “A contextualized grasp of the faith requires genuine immersion in the life of the people, especially the subalterns. This immersion ought to emerge from the deep love for the people.”⁴⁰

In order to carry on the liberative mission of Jesus the Church needs to learn from the tribal pains, agonies and struggles. Church with her network of institutions and personnel, shall offer valuable service in ameliorating the agonies of the tribals. The Church shall very well get rooted locally through her commitment through

³⁷Crasta, “Cosmotheandric Inter-Relatedness in the Life and Culture of Tribals,” 105.

³⁸A. Ekka, “Community Transformation and Biblical Faith in the Context of Tribal Cultural Issues,” *Sevartham* 29 (2004) 81.

³⁹“Catholic Biblical Association of India (CBAI) annual Conference 2018 Final Statement,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 83, 2 (February 2019) 153.

⁴⁰F. Minj, “Mission of the *Adivasi* Church in the Era of Globalization,” *Sevartham* 39 (2014) 39.

radical option for the tribals and other subaltern people after the model of Jesus, the radical prophet of all times. The Church getting immersed more and more in the tribal context needs to have a living dialogue with the tribals and join hands with people and groups involved in the humanizing process of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized in the country.⁴¹ To phrase it differently, the Church needs to go out of herself in order to be present to the tribals. This 'going out' helps her to be with the tribals and to experience solidarity and togetherness with them.⁴² The tribal community is to be helped to achieve liberation from all subjugation and alienation; and is to be raised to the mainstream of the society, and thus the Church has to envisage and ensure lofty goals of justice, equality and freedom. In their powerlessness Church has to support them and empathize with their cause. The Church needs to show the core values of tribals, such as "equality, solidarity, liberty, fraternity and justice, which are slipping away from the modern man and woman who entertain reckless individualism, cut-throat competition, unbridled greed and mindless materialism."⁴³ Today tribal life and culture is susceptible to the evils of modernization, urbanization, communalism, religious fundamentalism, corruption, naxalite movement, anti-people policies of the government and the non-tribal hegemony in economy and polity.⁴⁴ Church has to be aware of and intervene in the unjust and oppressive scenario, and assert peoples' rights through the media, rallies, dharnas, dialogues and negotiations. It is also a kind of identification with the affected people. After having identified the issues and having become aware of their detrimental and damaging impact on the tribals, the Church has to act as a catalyst in the entire process.

The tribal life of interconnectedness should inspire the Church to respect and promote the order and harmony in nature, which will result in peace, prosperity and happiness. Tribals maintain symbiotic relationship with nature.⁴⁵ As forests and land are the sources of tribal culture, economy, social and political structures

⁴¹A. Ekka, "Community Transformation and Biblical Faith in the Context of Tribal Cultural Issues," 74.

⁴²Edwin, "Practising Christian-Muslim Dialogue in India towards a Method," 138.

⁴³A. Ekka, "Community Transformation and Biblical Faith in the Context of Tribal Cultural Issues," 75.

⁴⁴A. Ekka, "Community Transformation and Biblical Faith in the Context of Tribal Cultural Issues," 70.

⁴⁵A. Ekka, "Community Transformation and Biblical Faith in the Context of Tribal Cultural Issues," 74-75.

and of their identity, and the alienation from them causes a total crisis in their life,⁴⁶ the Church needs to reaffirm the importance of nature and recognize a call to receive the gift gratefully, to draw earth's sustenance carefully and to share it equitably. Church may promote a spirituality of living in harmony with God, neighbour and nature that would be more attractive and relevant. The tribals must experience freedom from blind beliefs and the fear of evil spirits. They should experience inner freedom. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the best ways to bring peace, in the context of struggle to achieve freedom.

After the model of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and to become the light of the nations and cultures, the tribal Church has to embrace the attitude of a servant. Church has to imbibe the style of 'need based' and not 'greed based' economic life.⁴⁷ The Church has to imbibe the spirit of the tribals who regard greed and pride as grave sins, and whatever can be spared is shared in a need-based economy.⁴⁸ Church has to discern that possessiveness of any sort, be it ego, wealth, power, position, influence, name and fame dilute the simplicity of the Jesuan community and become major blocks to possess God.⁴⁹ The gospel values of equality, respect for one another, tolerance, hospitality, solidarity and sharing, virtues of anti-greed and anti-pride are also the traditional tribal values. When the Church upholds these values in every aspect of its life, it gives the tribals confidence and self-respect, and the tribals get attracted to the Church.

Ekka argues that there is much similarity and convergence between the tribal and Christian understanding of marriage and family.⁵⁰ "The properties of Christian marriage, such as unity, indissolubility, faithfulness, etc., and the purpose of it, such as procreation, education of children, mutual assistance and community of life, etc., are part and parcel of the *adivasi* matrimonial and family

⁴⁶W. Fernandes, "Indian *verify please*. Tribals: A Vision for the Third Millennium," in G. Karotemprel, ed., *Dalits and Tribals: The Plight and Path Ahead*, Rajkot: Deepti publications, 2009, 119.

⁴⁷S.K. Ekka, "Encounter between Adivasi Culture and Christian Faith in Chotanagpur: Challenges and Opportunities," *Sevartham* 40 (2016), 65-66.

⁴⁸Crasta, "Indian Moral Theology from the Subaltern Perspective," 212.

⁴⁹T.K. John, "Gospel to the Poor and the Struggle of the Church to be Poor," in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 462.

⁵⁰See S.K. Ekka, "Adivasi Understanding of Marriage and Family in the Context of Chotanagpur," 9-31.

system.”⁵¹ Hence the Church in Bastar shall promote the tribals to observe their own matrimonial customs and laws. The fear and apprehensions connected to social taboos with regard to marriage, and the ghetto mentality need to be revisited. The prohibition of sex abuses has to be strictly observed to maintain the sanctity and purpose of marriage and family and to safeguard the tribal morality.⁵² The Church has to promote the permanent union and oneness, which is admirable and commendable among the tribals. The constant reliance upon God and invoking His blessings at every state of marriage and promotion of its communitarian understanding is a welcome contribution to tribal Church at Bastar. Church has to work out strategies to safeguard the marriage and family from the evil of divorce, outdated customs and customary laws based on omen, or reformulate them according to the post-modern civilization.⁵³

Though the concept of an egalitarian society is very dear to Christianity (Eph 4:5; Gal 3:28), often the Church fails in practice. As the Church is no more pyramidal or hierarchical, but collegial or synodal, the tribal idea of an egalitarian society enriches the Church.⁵⁴ As harmony and communion are the characteristic traits of tribal life, the communitarian face of the Church shall well be fostered, for the Church exists as a community of persons formed in Jesus Christ or it is a community of graced communion.⁵⁵

The Church has to see that the repugnant religio-cultural practices such as “witchcraft, reliance on the hocus-pocus of the medicine men in times of ill health and misfortune, belief in superstition and occult and other malpractices of the caste societies like dowry and child marriage”⁵⁶ do not prevail among the tribals of Bastar. “The challenge is to remove all types of superstitions

⁵¹S.K. Ekka, “Adivasi Understanding of Marriage and Family in the Context of Chotanagpur,” 9.

⁵²S.K. Ekka, “Adivasi Understanding of Marriage and Family in the Context of Chotanagpur,” 28-29.

⁵³S.K. Ekka, “Adivasi Understanding of Marriage and Family in the Context of Chotanagpur,” 31.

⁵⁴S.K. Ekka, “Encounter between Adivasi Culture and Christian Faith in Chotanagpur,” 72.

⁵⁵D. Varayilan, “Asian Churches at the Crossroads: FABC Perspectives,” in K. Pathil, ed., *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 281.

⁵⁶A. Ekka, “Community Transformation and Biblical Faith in the Context of Tribal Cultural Issues,” 70.

and through the Gospel encounter to evangelize and purify the culture."⁵⁷

As the tribals have a rich cultural heritage and as their talking is a song and their walking is a dance,⁵⁸ their songs and dances are to be made part of the liturgical celebrations. The tribals have songs and dances according to the seasons and the incorporation of these make the liturgy ever meaningful and appealing to them. Efforts to celebrate the Eucharist in the language and idiom of the people shall be a concern of the Church. Church needs to teach tribals catechism in stories, open schools in the interior tribal villages, write encyclopedias and books on tribal culture and folklore, dictionaries of tribal language, write books and articles, compose tribal music in their traditional style, create museums where the articles of traditional use and the stories are preserved. This in turn free the tribals from the fetters of ignorance, widen their outlook and change their behaviour patterns, acquire a strong sense of their identity, become aware of their rights and duties and defend their rights.⁵⁹

A Church to be viable needs a sound contextual theology. An indigenous tribal theology⁶⁰ well rooted in their life and world of experience contributes to make the tribals feel at home in Christian faith and the tribal theologizing unfolds rich resources for life. According to Wilfred, "the strong sense of community and practice of solidarity at a time of aggressive individualism, the sense of wholeness and harmony with nature at a time of serious ecological crisis are some of the important elements which the tribal peoples can contribute to theologizing."⁶¹ The Bastar Church needs to interpret the gospel to make it a living word among them. The gospel would require a tribal interpretation to make it the living word of God. The Church needs to be open to the tribal culture that contribute to gospel values and authentic spirituality, and the gospel shall be preached to the tribals using living symbols, images, realities and stories that are

⁵⁷ S.K. Ekka, "Encounter between Adivasi Culture and Christian Faith in Chotanagpur," 76.

⁵⁸ S.K. Ekka, "Encounter between Adivasi Culture and Christian Faith in Chotanagpur," 64.

⁵⁹ S.K. Ekka, "Encounter between Adivasi Culture and Christian Faith in Chotanagpur," 71.

⁶⁰For the details see J. Chittooparampil, "Tribal Culture on Limelight: Subaltern Hermeneutics," 148.

⁶¹F. Wilfred, "Indian Theologies in the Post-Vatican II Period," *Sevartham* 39 (2014) 20-21.

part of their daily life and experience. "The Church can become the voice of the voiceless for the conversion of the powers that dehumanize the vulnerable."⁶²

The Church has to follow Jesus who always confronted the evil and never negotiated with it. The Church has to become the leaven, salt, light and voice for the people. It has to interpret the Bible from a tribal perspective; the biblical parables are to be reinterpreted.⁶³ The tribal Church would grow only with the commitment to continuous empowerment of the people, which begins with a deep love for the people and friendship with them.⁶⁴

5. Conclusion

Church can very well ground itself in the congenial and delightful setting of Bastar because of the favourable elements in tribal culture. The tribals might find many elements in Christianity akin to their own culture. If the Church addresses the issues of tribals effectively, the interaction would continue which would successfully lead to the birth and growth of tribal Church; and it would further foster a new paradigm of being the Church in Bastar. The Church in Bastar is not safe without a proper and strong foundation in the culture of the land. Just as the house built on the sand collapses due to its shaky foundation and the house built on the rock remains strong due to its strong foundation (Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:48-49), the Church in Bastar becomes strong only when it is rooted in the soil and culture of this tribal land.

The Church must be assimilated into the life of tribal people that receives her, and she must be incarnated in such a way that she is regarded as a tribal Church in Bastar. Therefore as Pope Francis instructs, it is essential to "...Strip away the fear of opening the doors and going out to encounter all especially the poorest of the poor, the needy, the remote, without waiting..."⁶⁵ Thus visualizing and implanting the Church in Bastar becomes a serious imitation of the paradigm of Jesus, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). There is need of a radical conversion to the mind of Jesus (Phil 2:5). It is taking a step forward in realizing the vision of a 'Tribal Church,' articulating a liberative spirituality (Lk 4:18-19) drawn from Jesus, and achieving a structural change in the life of the Church

⁶²Minj, "Mission of the *Adivasi* Church in the Era of Globalization," 41.

⁶³Minj, "Mission of the *Adivasi* Church in the Era of Globalization," 37.

⁶⁴Minj, "Mission of the *Adivasi* Church in the Era of Globalization," 38.

⁶⁵Francis, *Meeting with the Poor Assisted by Caritas*, Assisi (Perugia), 4 October 2013.

returning to her original roots to meet the present world in mission with its challenges and promises. It is following the standpoint of Jesus with determination in responding courageously and creatively to the challenges, especially in transcending all that prevent people from becoming better humans in various contexts. This maturing process of the Church necessitates the “convergence of divine assistance and able human leadership.”⁶⁶ In a nutshell, the tribal Church in Bastar with incarnational approach must be a ‘Church from Below,’ which is sensitive to and fully immersed in the tribal context and breaks down the barriers of any kind in building up the Kingdom of God.

⁶⁶Pathrapankal, “The Church at Its Origins in the Jewish Milieu,” 51.