

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 13, No. 3, September 2019
Pages: 471-482

Indian Theological Association (ITA)
STATEMENT OF 42nd ITA MEETING
NBCLC, Bengaluru, 28 April 2019

**WHITHER INDIA? THEOLOGICAL
CONCERNS**

Introduction

We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA), gathered at National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bengaluru for the Forty Second annual meeting cum conference from 25th to 28th April 2019 to deliberate on the theme, "Whither India? Theological Concerns". In continuation with the previous conference of ITA on the theme "Challenges of Religious Nationalism in India Today", the 42nd Annual Meeting went further in its reflections to give appropriate theological responses and deliberations to the contemporary context of the socio-political and cultural situation of India. Sixty-eight theologians from various parts of India reflected, discussed and deliberated on the present situation of India, our mother land, which is going through certain socio-political, religio-cultural and economic mutations that threaten the well-being of all citizens of our country whatever be their religious or ideological affiliations.

The Context

1. The past few decades have witnessed a strong movement of identifying India in an overarching communal vision of the society. It is an aggressive form of religious nationalism intertwined with cultural homogenization. It affects every citizen of this country, especially, the minorities. There is less concern for farmers, thereby increasing their indebtedness. The emerging identity constructions of the new India undermine the pluralistic nature of our country.

2. The Founding Fathers and Mothers of the Indian Constitution, knowing well the Indian socio-cultural and religio-political realities, had set the socialist, secular and democratic principles as the basis of Independent India. But in spite of 72 years of efforts, the Constitutional vision of social, political, economic, religious, and cultural freedom has not yet come home in India. Many segments of the population feel still deprived of their rights as citizens. The lower strata of the population have not turned politically conscious in a substantive and healthy manner. The top-down operation of power, or ad-hoc recourse to grassroots humanity on occasions like election or even populist schemes, have only depoliticized the people, and they still remain incapable of exercising their political agency.

3. At the outset of the Indian Constitution, the composite nature of Indian culture is categorically stressed and declared. The Constitution maintains the liberal and democratic traditions by way of asserting the values like equality, fraternity, and social justice. But in the last few decades, the narrow political and religious considerations have grown in all the spheres of Indian life. In the building of our nation together with its social equality, economic parity, and religio-cultural harmony, the large majority of the people still remain outsiders to the spaces of power. It is a political minority which is exercising power over the majority leaving the later depoliticized and powerless.

The Core Issues in India Today

4. In India more than ever before, religion is misused by the powerful to hold on to their power by evoking religious sentiments among people projecting that those who do not belong to their religion are a threat to them. However, today, the single greatest threat to India's secular democratic traditions is the rise of radical Hindu communalism that has evoked religious hatred in some to lynch or maim those of other religions. Besides this, there is an increase of the abuses of women and children, oppression of Dalits and Tribals and gradual erosion of healthy cultural values.

5. The unprecedented economic development especially after the economic liberalization and globalization since the beginning of 1990s made the rich and the powerful richer and more powerful in the country. Thus, an elite section of Indians benefited much from higher education, economic development, and other modernizing processes, but the grassroots/subaltern people began to experience a sense of alienation. A large majority of the people are becoming poorer and poorer.

6. The corporate groups are given legal support and protection. Government policies made in the name of economic growth have benefited the rich condemning the poor and the marginalized to abject poverty and deprivation. The farmers are committing suicide, many Indian youths are left with no job, there is appropriation of power in a few hands who manipulate rules and regulations to their own advantage. To divert the attention of the poor from their desperate life situation, they are fed with new myths of religious identity through the fueling of religious communalism and fanaticism.

7. The Judiciary and the Election Commission are considered to be the bastions to safeguard and protect the fundamentals of the Constitution. In recent times doubts have risen about their independence and freedom. Some of the decisions and actions of these hallowed institutions reveal that they are under great pressure to fall in line with the communal agenda of Hindutva brigades.

8. In this situation of our country, many groups experience discrimination and exclusion. Caste and religion began to gain prominence as never before in new attempts to gain dominance. Sectarian revolts, insurgencies, communal and ethnic conflicts, and public protests are becoming frequent. We need not view these necessarily as failures or as contradictions. Rather, these indicate that our democracy is still vibrant, and that struggles to redefine identities are going on. It is our task to discern if these struggles are in the right direction aimed at fashioning a healthier nation or not.

9. Minority groups in every society are in a disadvantaged position despite all constitutional protection. The problem in India becomes more acute since the religious minority groups like Muslims and Christians carry historical baggage like colonial domination and the trauma of partition. They are often treated as 'alien' and hence lesser citizens who are called upon to prove their national loyalty repeatedly. Yet, these groups have been an inalienable part of the Indian people for centuries and generations.

10. Yet another way of defining majority and minority concept must be reworked based on the economic status of the Indians. Majority Hindus are the poor and oppressed and the minority Hindus are millionaires. It is here we need to reflect how the Hindutva ideology operates with crony capitalism with liberalization, free markets and Globalization, making the poor Hindus poorer, more marginalized and more oppressed.

11. The present threat to the unity and integrity of our nation as well as the well-being and harmonious co-existence of all citizens of our country is by whipping up religious fanaticism and the intolerance of the otherness of the other leading to the elimination of the other. The protection to life and property as well as all human rights guaranteed by the Constitution are negated by the religious fundamentalists of all of religions especially in our times by those who misuse Hindu religion for securing power.

The innate search for identity and dignity primarily as human beings and citizens of a country must find prominence over the find further identity constructions especially through religions. Unfortunately, when the religious identity construct is projected as the primary one and the foundational ones neglected, it destroys not only the individual person but also the nation. The present situation of our country seems to be moving in this direction of self-destruction which must be prevented with all our strength in solidarity with all other citizens of good will.

12. All identities, ranging from personal to national, are to be subject to create the World as a family according to our Indian tradition and we Indian Christians and Christian theology have a key role in realizing this vision in our context. As theologians and responsible citizens we need to critically assess the direction our nation has been taking, and to introspect our own position and role in the making of a new India, a great nation as an example for harmonious living together of various religions, cultures, ethnicities and languages and prophetically challenge the forces of divisions, discriminations and all forms of dehumanization.

Biblical and Theological Reflection on the State of Our Nation

13. What the Indian Constitution affirms about the equality of all human persons before law and the inalienable right of every citizen to profess, practice and to propagate religion, is a re-affirmation of the Christian faith experience in Jesus Christ that God created all humans equal. Any system or structure whether political or social, cultural or religious that does not recognize or prevent the humans from living their life in conformity with their divine vocation to be and to become truly human, is an affront to God who created them in God's own image and likeness.

14. The Jesus movement is dotted with the expressions of resistance to the political and religious systems of power that were oppressive of the subaltern of that society. Liberative theologies across the globe underline the counter cultural character of the Jesus movement and

of the early Church. In the place of oppressive hierarchy, freedom fellowship and justice become the features of the Reign of God as envisioned by Jesus.

15. When as Christians, we oppose those extremist tendencies of the fundamentalist forces who make life difficult for minorities and subalterns and seek ways and means to exclude the latter from their vision of the nation, we must painfully admit that our exclusive claims, superiority and denigration of other religious belief in the past caused deep agony for the people of other faiths. Even today, some of our Christian brothers and sisters are not liberated from such exclusivist and fundamentalist understanding of their faith and unaware of the damage they do to the credibility of the gospel values and faith in Jesus Christ who did not exclude anyone. Unfortunately, the Hindutva forces are using the same exclusivist approach as the most strategic way against the religious minorities and subalterns.

16. Therefore, a Christian in India needs to go through a personal "missionary conversion" (*Joy of the Gospel*, 25) in order to be relevant and to be responsive to the signs of the times. Looking at from a mission perspective, the Christian community in India is more misunderstood than understood, in spite of rendering almost 28 percent of the service in education, medical, and social welfare activities. Despite our services, many a time, without much reason, the Churches, Christian Institutions and persons are attacked, persecuted and harassed. The present challenging situation in India is a wake-up call for Christians to look for new ways of living Christian life, new approaches towards an effective witnessing to Jesus Christ and gospel values. In this context Pope Francis' words are worth-mentioning: "Perhaps the Church appeared too weak, perhaps too distant from their needs, perhaps too poor to respond to their concerns, perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas, perhaps the world seemed to have made the Church a relic of the past, unfit for new questions; perhaps the church could speak to people in their infancy but not to those come of age."

17. In India the Church may always remain a minority. It is the little flock, who is called to be the leaven of society. However, this minority may come in conflict with the majority. In such circumstances how is she to respond? The Bible shows us certain paradigms by which God's people, a minority, encountered the oppressive majorities in history.

18. The Exodus stands as a fine model of liberation of the minority of God's people from the oppressive majority through the mighty intervention of God in human history. However, it was not for establishing another nation state which may become oppressive eventually, but to create a covenant community centered on God whose way of life is obedience to God. Exodus is a culmination to be achieved only by a people who know their roots and have attained a communal solidarity. But exodus cannot be a model for every kind of liberation as it is an exception in its overall realization. In today's India, our exodus must be from our slavery to exclusivist thinking, superficial and infantile faith, inability to see the presence and action of God's Spirit in all that is good, to recognize the true and noble in other religions, especially in the religious beliefs of our neighbor of other faiths.

19. In the context of living as a minority religious community amidst the majority community of other faiths, the Bible also provides other diasporic models, such as, the Babylonian, Palestinian, and the Asian, among others, for liberation against the onslaught of the majority. The diaspora models present us with another paradigm. It is not about leaving an oppressive situation, but about the how of staying under the oppressor or in an oppressive situation. During the Babylonian exile, some of the exiles did not any more feel the need of leaving Babylon. The crisis of the exilic deportation motivated the exiles to reorganize themselves as a social minority group and to experience the God of liberation and deepened their faith of monotheism. In every situation of life, both oppressive and liberative, what makes us truly human is an unflinching faith in God revealed through Jesus Christ who always sides and struggles with the poor, oppressed and discriminated to regain their humanity and dignity.

20. In the Indian situation, though we, Christians, are a minority in a sea of majority of other faiths, God's people are to be the salt and light in the country. It consists in bringing to effect a qualitative difference in the social life by becoming a 'contrast' community. Christians will become a contrast community when we live values of justice, peace, equality and inclusion in a culture that is marked by violence, corruption, discrimination and exclusion. Indeed, the Beatitudes should inspire us; suffering for righteousness sake brings us blessedness.

A New Way of Being Christian in India Today

21. The new way of being a Christian in India is living and presenting the person of Jesus who was constantly at prayer with the Abba, who

was close to the poor, the lowly, who was eating with the sinners and the outcast, touching the unclean and allowing them to touch him, who was healing the sick, the lame and the blind... (Lk 4: 16-21).

22. A Christian who is called by God and responds through baptism, is sent out to engage actively in God's mission. He/she is called to collaborate with the Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26-27; Acts 15:28), the principal agent of evangelization, by discerning and following the movements of the Spirit who is active in religions, cultures and peoples of India. A Christian who approaches the Indian context from a universal vision of salvation history, which embodies the Reign of God preached by Jesus and extends to everything and to all times by the Spirit, must become an "Indian missionary disciple" (EG 120).

23. As Jesus came into the world by taking flesh by the power of the Spirit, a missionary disciple has to be born in the Indian soil by inculturating Christian life and faith and by practicing and promoting the religious and cultural values of India (EA 6). A Christian must encounter the love of God in Christ Jesus (EG 120) and find out in one's own context the alternative and creative ways of making Jesus Christ known better like Andrew (Jn 1:41) and Samaritan woman (Jn 4:39) in the Gospel, for what attracts the people of India is the person of Jesus. The challenge of the Indian Church is to go through a missionary conversion by fostering in all the faithful a sense of personal responsibility for the Church's mission and to enable them to fulfil that responsibility as missionary disciples and as a leaven of the Gospel in India.

24. It is not enough that we become Christians merely by birth but by choice also because Christian discipleship is ultimately a response to God's call. The call to be a Christian is not an honour or a privilege or a preference over others but to be sent out (Mk 3: 13-15), to engage actively in God's mission of love.

25. As Christians, we have to approach the Indian context in a new way, that is, from a universal vision of salvation history that includes the past, present and future of India. We need to focus on how to indigenize Christianity as much as we try to infuse Christian values in India. It is the duty of Christians to draw from the heritage of Indian categories of thought and vision which are compatible with our faith in order to enrich Christian thought, to make our witnessing effective and to serve our nation better.

26. To be a new way of being Church in today's context implies to nurture relationships and cultivate common grounds with people of good will. We need to be concerned with the humanitarian mission

involving people of all faiths and communities, to be on a joint platform. We have to join hands to protect the environment and enable sustainable development for all. We are called to cross boundaries to embrace common humanity.

27. At an everyday social level, the importance of getting out of Christian ghetto mindset cannot be underestimated. Religious prejudices can only be broken through interactions and dialogue with others. Too often our social circles are drawn from our parishes or catholic schools. Friends of different faiths challenge us to rethink about our religious conditioning and expand our horizons.

28. Another new way of being Church is to listen to the cries of the subalterns. The market economy as hegemonic force has become a source of modern forms of social, cultural and political exclusions and discriminations. It marginalizes vulnerable groups such as Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis, migrants, refugees, stateless people, bonded labourers, the minorities, the differently abled, transgender, and homosexuals. The subalterns need to battle against such an insidious ideology, 'an economy' that 'kills'. A characteristic feature of the Indian social fabric is the hierarchical ordering of people based on their positioning in the class, caste, gender and ethnic ladder. In this context, a new way of being Christian would imply that the Church leaves aside its bureaucratic identity and becomes a prophetic presence as exemplified by Jesus. This entails a radical shift from being ritualistic Christians to Gospel Christians who live the Gospel vision with greater intensity and integrity.

Recommendations

29. Since many of the Gospel values and the Reign of God are enshrined in the Constitution of India, promoting the values of the Constitution along with all other religious groups like Hindus, Muslims, and others will pave the way for bringing God's Reign in the midst of the poor and oppressed Indians who are the majority.

30. We need to make use of all the possible ways and channels to make the Constitutional Values get rooted in the public space. The educational institutions come first in that order. We, as Christians who run more than 65,000 educational institutions have to bring into the syllabus the Indian Constitution. The Preamble could be recited at the school assembly on important days so that the students start to love it and keep it close to their heart from the very childhood. The youth organizations like NSS and AICUF could be of special help in this regard. It is high time the Church in India starts law colleges and

law universities to educate the future leaders of our country based on Indian Constitution to bring about social and economic justice, with social and religious harmony.

31. The Church having the vocation to be the Sacrament of Christ in the world, she has to play a vital role in strengthening the democratization process of the nation. She can fulfil the same by directing the faithful to perform diligently their civic duties as responsible citizens and by making them vigilant in defending the citizens' rights. This has to begin by helping the faithful to get elected to the panchayats, the local decision-making bodies in the country. Similarly, the Church can network with secular NGOs in fighting against the oppressive structures and in safeguarding freedom, justice and equality. Since social media is found as today's most effective medium of communication, the Church organizations can be guided to undo the efforts of the communalist agencies who propagate hatred among the different castes, ethnic groups and believers. The gifted writers are to be enthused to publish articles in the secular press, both regional and national.

32. One of the New Ways of Being Christian in India would be witnessing to our common identity as human beings. To evolve our common human identity, we have to think beyond the barriers that divide us namely casteism, gender discrimination and various forms of communalism. This can be achieved through conscientization programmes at different levels: networking with the public movements, installation of "Community Radio", art, street plays, folklore, and so on and so forth. In this venture, the myths, stories, symbols and proverbs in the Indian religio-cultural heritage can be made use of.

33. Promoting theology in the Public Forum is an urgent need of the hour. The issues that address the common people like unemployment, problem of the farmers, oppression of women, environmental problems, etc., are to be taken as the substratum for theologizing. Catechesis and sermons must gear to forming people mature in faith rather than keeping them in infantile faith. Church documents related to social teachings must be made known to the faithful in vernacular languages. Constituting think-tank groups in every parish and diocese is a need of the hour.

Presenting Christianity to the Wider Society of India

34. Overall in India a rising trend is perceptible among people to know Jesus more closely as the example of Christubhaktas, among many others. What they look for is an experiential knowledge of

Jesus as well as radical models of Christian life from the followers of Christ. At the same time, considering the pluralistic context of India, due care needs to be taken not to antagonize our Hindu brethren by claiming Jesus to be the only Saviour. The uniqueness of Jesus shall be proclaimed without hurting their religious feelings, and in this regard, the principle of co-mediation which is presented in the *Dominus Iesus* (CDF document in 2000, no 14) could be normative.

35. Parallel to our present Basic Christian Communities, Basic Human Communities may be formed joining with people of other religions recognizing the seeds of the Word in all religions to express and celebrate the common Fatherhood and Motherhood of God and brotherhood and sisterhood of all people. We may also collaborate with the civic society organizations in their struggles against injustice and oppression.

Strengthening the Subaltern Groups

36. The new tendencies of cultural and religious nationalism cause indescribable havoc to the unfortunate children of our Mother county especially the Subaltern. It is high time that the church gets awakened to the plight of Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis and women who are her own children. Instead of criticizing the Governmental sources, let the church practice in her home measures that would give equal justice to Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis and women. The Church has to recognize their dignity by according them proper roles in her decision-making bodies. Grievance redressal cells may be established wherever applicable in order to empower the victims of injustice or maltreatment.

37. In order to inculcate in the minds of the future leaders of the church a healthy attitude to these otherwise marginalized sections, the curricula in seminaries and formation houses of the religious are to be urgently updated by including the themes from the life of the subalterns, such as their traditional values, the anthropological and sociological factors of Tribal life and their history of oppression and marginalization. The Church can be a constant companion of the marginalized brothers and sisters by helping them regain the rights denied to them for centuries. The Church should act as their agencies in voicing their concerns through her print and electronic media.

Hindu Perception of Christianity in India

38. There are different perceptions of Christ among Hindus in India. Some love Jesus and Christianity. But some others like Jesus but are apprehensive of the imposing ecclesiastical structures. Another group

of Hindus is indifferent. Still a few others hate both Christ and Church. In this context, we need to take an additional care not to hurt the feelings of the fearful Hindu brothers and sisters. We have to proclaim Christ without criticizing other religions and involving ourselves in inter-religious dialogue.

39. In order to remove our own prejudices against other religious cultures, the future priests and religious who are in formation must be given adequate knowledge about other religions which will help them to live in solidarity with other believers in spite of holding on to their differences in the belief systems. Since the Catholic Church has several educational, health and social service centers, they can become a platform to promote inter-religious harmony.

Response to Minority-Majority Divide in India

40. Christianity in India is a tiny minority. It may remain as a small flock for many more years to come. To be a minority does not imply powerlessness. It can be a contrasting movement or a witnessing community living the Gospel values of love, truth and justice. As children of God we can work in collaboration with others in the fight against all kinds of discrimination based on economic, social, cultural and political realms. Christians in India need to shake off fear, apathy and sloth and actively get involved in the civil society to transform India. We need to create opportunities to come together and synergize our common relationships by participating in common festivals and joining hands to resolve common issues.

Conclusion

41. We, as Christians, ought to effectively commit ourselves to respond appropriately to the forces of extremist ideologies through all our ministries. Our response is founded on our mission to promote justice and reconciliation in our broken world. In this mission, the dialogue with the poor and with the people of other cultures and religions is an essential part. Our mission is to build counter-cultural human communities of solidarity which will function as instruments of peace and reconciliation in our nation. If we remain silent when the Constitutional values of equality, fraternity, secularism and pluralism are attacked, then it will betray our mission. We have to discover various expressions of our commitment to spread the values enshrined in the Preamble of our Constitution. For instance, make a procession carrying the Constitution and take the pledge of our commitment to live the values of the Constitution.

42. Our response to the forces of religious fanaticism, bigotry and discrimination has to be in collaboration with men and women of good will and through networking with civil organizations that share our values. We should work for harmony and mutual understanding. We must foresee communal tensions and anticipate the efforts to bring in peace and reconciliation. We need to encourage and promote inter-religious dialogue. We ought to have professional think tanks to continuously recommend ways to counter extremisms. We shall join all people of goodwill to defeat the forces of hate and violence by promoting a politics of pluralism and inclusion that ensures justice, equality, liberty and fraternity for all! Instead of Hindutva which divides we need Bandhutva that unites.

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