

Indian Theological Association Statement 2017

FORTY YEARS OF INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION: MILESTONES AND SIGNPOSTS

The members of the Indian Theological Association gathered together for the celebration of its Ruby Jubilee from 26-29 April 2017, at Montfort Spirituality Centre Bengaluru. The theme chosen for this memorable event was: *Forty Years of the Indian Theological Association: Milestones and Signposts*. Over the past 40 years, the ITA has striven to live its prophetic call to respond to the signs of the times, indicative of the fresh phases of the Reign of God in new terrains and climes. In retrospect, the ITA has left a mark not only on the theological landscape of the Church in India, but also on the Universal Church, through its commitment and dedication to theologizing in the Indian context and its consistent quest for a more relevant theological method. The Jubilee provided an occasion for introspection on its trajectory thus far and a critical examination of its relevance to the Church in India and society at large.

I JOURNEY OF THE ITA HITHERTO

a. Significant Milestones on this Journey

1. The origins of the ITA go back to the post-Vatican II springtime. It was the fruit of long years of fecundation and experimentation on indigenizing Christian faith and praxis in the Indian subcontinent. The seed was already sown before Vatican II, in the mind of Fr. Joseph Constantine Manalel CMI, the great visionary behind this venture, whose dream saw its realization at the first meeting, held at Hyderabad in 1976. The registered Society of the Indian Theological Association came into existence in 1986 under the Karnataka Societies Registration Act (Act no. 17 of 1960).
2. From its very inception, the ITA attempted to realize its objectives: (a) to be a forum for theologians to meet and discuss current theological issues; (b) to promote the development of an Indian Christian theology; (c) to foster research in matters concerning

religion and society; and, (d) to offer theologians the encouragement and support they need through its powerful and insightful annual seminars and the statements issuing therefrom.

3. The annual seminars of the ITA have dealt with themes like: *Theological Education in India; Indian Theologies of Liberation; Theology of Religions; Christian Commitment to Nation Building; Task of Inculturation; Methodology of Theologizing; Concerns of Women; the Identity and Legitimate Autonomy of the Local Churches; Dalit Concerns, Threats of Hindutva and Religious Fundamentalism; Ecological Integration; Marriage and Family Today* and so on, which manifest the ITA's attempts to address the concerns of the Church in India and society. These theological encounters opened up avenues for developing an indigenous theology which would foster the process of *ecclesio genesis* or the birth of the Local Church in the Indian context.

4. To date, the Indian Theological Association has 200 members including 43 women and a few lay theologians. Based on the deliberations of its Annual Meetings, the ITA has published 28 books, and 2 volumes exclusively of its Annual Statements. Its identity is acknowledged by the Church in India and various bodies abroad, and its statements and books are widely referred to.

5. The ITA is a pointer to a new model of the Church in India in the making. It offers structural support to individual theologians and helps them familiarize themselves with issues of contextual theology and its methods, which have influenced their teaching and writing. Through its contextualized theological methodology it tries to counter various forms of discrimination based on language, gender, rite, region or caste. It fosters the creation of an inclusive space where differences and plurality are not merely tolerated, but respected.

6. The ITA has brought the issues of the periphery to the centre and stirred up a sense of urgency and restlessness in confronting and addressing the realities of the people at the margins. It has encouraged radical thinking by creating an awareness of the emerging challenges in society and in the Church and motivated its members with respect to personal and collective commitment for the transformation of oppressive elements.

7. The ITA has made a specific contribution in articulating Christology from an Indian perspective. It has shown that no dogma, no theological articulation rooted in a particular worldview can make an exclusive claim to have disclosed exhaustively the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It has furthermore pointed out that the plurality of Christologies in the NT itself gives us an indication of the

possibility and necessity of articulating the Christic experience from different worldviews and communicating them in a language meaningful to those to whom they are addressed. The poor and the plurality of religions are the hermeneutical keys to open the revelation of the mystery of God in the Indian setting.

8. Resonating with the multifarious challenges posed by the Indian context with its amazing plurality of cultures, religions and spiritualities, Indian Christians have experienced Jesus Christ in a variety of ways. Indian theologians have attempted to articulate these experiences using models drawn from Indian philosophies such as *Advaita*, *Vishistadvaita*, *Saiva Siddhanta* and the less articulated visions of reality embedded in the lives, struggles, folklore of the marginalized and victimized sections of society. Among such significant Christological models there figure: *Jesus the Jeevanmukta*, *Avatar*, *Sadguru*, *Iraivakkuchittat* and *Karma Yogi* (liberator). Such models are not only complementary in expressing the inexhaustible riches of the mystery of Christ, but also enable us to transcend the God-human, heaven-earth, religion-society, mystic-prophetic dualisms often present in traditional Western Christologies. These presentations of Jesus Christ offer us an integrated vision of life in which God is envisaged as the companion in our life's journey, co-sufferer in our trials and participant in our struggles. These Christologies help us to perceive God's grace as a gift and a call to a life of inter-relatedness and communion with the others, despite differences and an invitation to be in harmony with the whole of creation, under God, the Father-Mother of all.

9. In the light of recent scholarship, and taking into consideration the plurality that makes up the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society, ITA theologians propose *Interculturation* as an appropriate category to articulate the Gospel-culture encounter in the Indian context. They are strongly in favour of developing a theological approach that looks at multiplicity, duly nuanced, not as a threat but as a blessing, with respect to the growth of gospel values. In the opinion of some of these scholars, such a theology that fosters the mutual enrichment of Christian faith and other cultures ought to become a counter-cultural project by offsetting the negative values embedded in Indian culture like casteism, manifold expressions of Indian patriarchy, bonded labour and other forms of injustice inflicted on the poor and other vulnerable sections of Indian society. It is only when one engages in this process of Interculturation that takes seriously the commitment to integral liberation, does the celebration of the Liturgy unfold fully all its prophetic depth.

10. While the ITA takes pride in these contributions, it is, however, deeply aware of its limitations. Despite having held seminars dedicated to the concerns of women, the feminist issues have not been adequately addressed. Inclusive language and inclusive images of God have not yet become sufficiently mainstreamed in the ITA discourse. Furthermore, a re-reading of marginalization in Indian society has not been done using a gender lens, nor in the light of the religio-cultural sources of the subalterns. Even though approximately 8 per cent of Indians are *Adivasis* belonging to various tribes, tribal concerns have not figured significantly as a major theme in the ITA's seminars. The inadequacy to deal with tribal issues, the question of gender justice, and other concerns of the marginalized are indicative of the fact that, despite being progressive in its theological involvement, the ITA has not fully succeeded in taking a bold prophetic stand on issues of major concern in the Church.

(b) Describing the Context Today

11. Since the Ruby Jubilee of the ITA is a historical milestone of contextual and liberative theologizing in India, it is imperative to take stock of the factors that make up the social fabric of this country today, particularly in view of charting its path ahead. We take a look at the Indian context from the economic, political, religious and social angles in order to spell out the challenges this situation poses for theologizing in India today.

12. India, having a population of 1.27 billion persons, has in the recent past grown into the 10th most industrialized country in the world. Even so, it is home to 1/3rd of the world's poor, since around 27.1 per cent of Indians live below the poverty line. The dominant economy of India today is capitalism, which is a profit maximizing global system of industrial production and exchange based on a system of unequal relations of human transactions. We also observe the open withdrawal of the State from most sectors of people's welfare and a steady intensification of the privatization of public assets. This public sector disinvestment is forging ahead under the pretext of a reform; transferring national resources into the hands of a few like the corporates, multinational companies and the business class without sufficient care for social equity and ecological sustainability.

13. The affluent classes - corporates, landlords, businessmen, bureaucrats and industrialists - manipulate elections, create powerful lobbies in the assemblies and control the local government bodies. With the economic policies that are geared to the advantage of the

business class, stock market deals and the underground mafias, farmers are at a losing end, being denied the rightful support for their labour or a just price for their products. Thousands of farmers committing suicide every year in the country illustrates this point.

14. The majority of the people affected by the present politics of exclusive development belongs to the Dalit and *Adivasi*/Tribal communities. At least 80 per cent of the Dalits who form 16 per cent of our population, are landless and illiterate. The dehumanizing caste system with its overt and covert ways of operation in our Indian society, ensures that Dalit people have very little opportunity for upward mobility. The internalized casteist mentality prevalent among many Indians constitutes a real hindrance for the Dalits to come out of their present socio-economic and other forms of backwardness.

15. The situation of the *Adivasis*/Tribals in our country is not very different. In the name of development and mega projects, *Adivasi* lands have been taken over by the government and given to multinational companies for mining or other industries. Many *Adivasis*, displaced by mega projects like the Narmada dam have not been rehabilitated so far. The *Adivasis* are becoming increasingly landless in the process and their culture, which is intimately linked to *jal*, *jungle* and *jamin* (water, forest, land), is gradually disappearing.

16. Indian women too experience diverse forms of oppression and subjugation. Sexual violence continues unbridled. India has become one of the most unsafe places for women in this world. Besides the unimaginable forms of discrimination and violence women are subjected to, many religions sanction the devalued status of women through their scriptures, cult and rituals. In the churches, women are denied opportunities to mediate the Divine and are excluded from the important decision-making processes.

17. A ghastly situation that threatens India today is the appalling rise of religious communalism. Promoters of the *Hindutva* ideology, which is a section of extremists within the broader framework of Hinduism, interpret Indian identity as Hindu identity; consequently, the place of the minorities in the new scenario is questioned. The life of the minority communities and marginalized groups like Dalits and *Adivasis*/Tribals and other subalterns are under real threat, as the proponents of *Hindutva*, under the pretence of defending their ideology and related symbols, take the law into their own hands and do so with impunity.

18. With the *Hindutva* ideology penetrating every aspect of public life, there is an increasing saffronisation of socio-economic, political and cultural life in India today. The saffronisation of education and other national institutions, the distortion of history, and attempts to alter even the Indian Constitution are among some of the alarming threats which would result in the erosion of the secular and democratic fabric of our country. Any resistance to this agenda is labelled as anti-national. The divisive *Hindutva* ideology is having disastrous effects even on young minds in colleges, universities and nationwide. On the one hand, any voicing of differing opinions and forms of democratic protest on campuses are snuffed out with gross violence, and, on the other, students are forced to either remain silent or support the saffron ideology; or else be the target of insults, intimidation, beatings and even imprisonment. Frontline Universities have been labelled anti-national, unpatriotic and 'Marxist' and have become battlegrounds with the State allowing its student-affiliates to attack staff and students at will.

19. In the face of *Hindutva* rejecting Semitic religions and opting exclusively for the Indic traditions, Christians and other minority religious groups live in a culture of fear as they are vulnerable to extreme forms of violence and destruction for following a religion different from what is being proclaimed as the *Hindu Rashtra* agenda. In this conflicting political scenario, even though Christians continue to render their services in the educational, social and health sectors, the Right-based approach is seldom used to effect a change in the existing unjust systems.

20. Examining Church life, we see it also divided on the basis of caste, gender, rite, language and the like. Dalit Christians are the majority in the Catholic Church, numbering around 12 million out of the 19 million members of the Church in India. But their participation at the level of leadership in the diocesan administration, as well as in religious orders is minimal and at the higher levels of decision-making, it is almost non-existent. There is the risk of growing institutionalization which is choking the Church. At times, overly obsessed with establishing themselves through the construction of palatial structures and excessive ritualism, the members of the Church are not always at the service of the Reign of God. Under the guise of religious renewal, fundamentalism gets a foothold in the Church. This adversely affects the relationship of Christians with the surrounding cultures and religions.

II CONCERNS CHALLENGING ITA

(a) The *Hindutva* Agenda

21. The ITA is called to respond effectively to the present-day political climate of our country, poisoned as it is by the *Hindutva* agenda and strategy. It should address religious extremism of various kinds and of different groups. It needs to engage the Church constructively in dealing with religious nepotism within and without. It has the obligation to wipe out the fear from the hearts of our brothers and sisters of other religions through the promotion of a 'relational identity'. Joining hands with persons of goodwill in civil society and within the broader framework of Hindus; it needs to address the *Hindutva* ideology, not in a confrontational mode, but in a spirit of dialogue.

(b) A Contextual Mode of Theologizing:

22. While the ITA speaks on behalf of God's poor, it needs to be evangelised further by listening more intensely to the cries of subaltern, exploited and marginalised groups, and learning from their religio-cultural resources, in order to strengthen its transformative impact at the grassroots. Indian sources and Indian ways of theologizing, need to be used, and a plurality of theologies that reflect the varied contexts of those who are oppressed and long for liberation, must be encouraged. Local narratives and symbols of these groups should be used to inculturate theology. The ITA's theologizing must be more praxis oriented, and liberative theologies like Dalit Theology, Tribal Theology, Feminist Theology and Eco-Theology must be promoted. Spaces must be created within ITA for more voices of Dalit and *Adivasi*/Tribal theologians to be heard.

(c) Playing a Prophetic Role in the Church and Society

23. The ITA's statements are at times not sufficiently prophetic in nature. They are called upon to courageously denounce and challenge anti-human values, and announce an alternative vision that promotes human dignity, respect, equality and communion. Furthermore, the percolation of the ITA's Statements needs to be enhanced if it is to challenge the discriminatory stances present at times in certain sections of the Church with regard to the empowerment of women, the caste system and an enhanced participation of the faithful in the life of the Church.

24. The ITA needs to do something to clear the theological confusion that, at times, exists in theological centres with regard to the teaching of contextual theology and classical theology. The daily life struggles of the people and the Scriptures are non-negotiable in the process of

theologizing. The ITA's Statements must be made accessible to all, in terms of language and reach, to assist in their formation as Church, committed to building the Reign of God in this world.

(d) Assisting the Magisterium

25. The ITA has a special vocation to hear, to distinguish and to interpret the voices of contemporary world, to discover the presence of the Divine in the concrete life-situations of the peoples and to examine them in the light of the Good News announced by Jesus. In this ministry of acting like a meaning-making agent for the community of believers and the society, the ITA wishes to be a link between the people and the hierarchy. The influence of fundamentalism and market forces is on the increase in the Church. Fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible are resulting in a decrease in social concern. The erection of monumental Churches and the central place given to money by some churches are detracting from the Gospel vision. The ITA needs to collaborate with the Magisterium, while raising a prophetic voice against these evils.

(e) The Complexity of "Interculturation"

26. In the world of today marked by pluralism and the phenomenon of globalization, interculturation presents itself as a better paradigm for undertaking a credible and dynamic dialogue between the Gospel and the diverse cultures and religions as there is an epistemology of participation and mediation inherent in the process of interculturation. The ITA has not utilized our Indian resources as theologically relevant primarily for two reasons: on the one hand, the Church does not seem to leave space for plurality as it takes an attitude of resistance to *Hindutva* and its symbols; and on the other hand, the *Hindutva* groups also tend to oppose the use of Indian symbols by Christians as improper and deceptive. Here fundamentalists in both religions – Hindu and Christian – concur as they mix up cultural symbols and religious symbols. In such a context, it is important that the ITA affirms the cultural heritage of India, and work towards realizing the task of interculturation.

27. The ITA's commitment to interculturation also demands that steps be taken towards creating a Counter Culture with a view to transforming the present dominant, oppressive, patriarchal, brahminic, casteist, capitalistic and consumerist society. It has to empower the marginalised to challenge unjust structures. It must find ways to express its concern for migrants. It needs to encourage and support people's movements and civil society groups.

(f) Ecological Concerns

28. Since advancement by the capitalistic economy in the name of development goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of nature, the ITA needs to take a stand in the defence of nature. As a step to prevent further degradation and destruction of mother earth, it can promote eco-spirituality and eco-theology for better environmental sustainability.

III SIGN POSTS FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD

(a) Engaging in Dialogue as a means of Addressing Religious Politics:

29. In the present political scenario, which is marked by the politicization of religious identities, the ITA needs to evolve various strategies to counter the *Hindutva* agenda and other forms of identity politics. These could include: the mapping of events of conflict and the dissemination of facts; dialoguing with the proponents of *Hindutva*; studying *Hindutva* literature and understanding its agenda; creating an ITA blog to disseminate information and to articulate the ITA's stand on the issues; exploring the possibility of bringing together other Church associations periodically for a wider discussion on these issues; dialoguing with Hindus about the negative impact of the *Hindutva* ideology on Hinduism and the development of the nation.

(b) Envisaging Christian Identity and Praxis Anew

30. The current situation in India being one where State policies deny religious and cultural plurality and curb diversity of thought and expression, the ITA is called to re-examine its self-understanding of Church and help articulate an identity deriving from a Christianity incarnated in India. With faith, courage and prophetic insight, it will have to discern new ways of witnessing to the Christ event in this environment of exclusion and subjection, especially of the poor and marginalized.

31. Given the diversity of living faiths we encounter in India, there is need for interfaith theologising based on a dialogue that proclaims the Gospel and is informed by other religions. Static meanings and suppositions with regard to the realities of God, faith and the world of the spiritual must be examined in the light of other religions, and new models developed for God's revelation and activity in the world. Modalities for nurturing such an inter-religious and inter-cultural Christianity must be worked out. A comprehensive study of marriages between persons of different

faiths, which provides a locus for such interfaith theologizing must be undertaken.

32. Structures of accountability are needed, which must embrace the non-ordained, including laymen and laywomen in the decision-making structures of the Church, instead of restricting them to the ordained. The ITA must envisage and promote such alternate structures.

(c) Supporting Pope Francis' Initiative and Leadership

33. Pope Francis has offered authentic leadership to the Church, initiating changes in structures and pastoral practices. However, some conservatives, traditionalists and Vatican officials have questioned his orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The ITA needs to support the Pope's intuitions with rigorous theological reflection to illustrate their orthodoxy; hence the need to study his documents in depth.

(d) Expanding the Presence of the ITA in India

34. The ITA needs to increase its membership in order to stimulate theological consciousness adequately. Zonal theological activities in collaboration with the ITA could help expand the ITA's outreach and feed members to the parent body. A multi-layer approach could be considered, involving the participation of seminarians, diocesan priests and people in the pews. The admission of associate members to the ITA could be considered. The ITA needs to publish its Statements in regional languages and disseminate them in national and diocesan training centres.

(e) Facilitating a Wider Fellowship

35. Even as the ITA engages in examining and developing theologies that will enable movement towards Christian unity, it needs to facilitate a wider collaboration beyond Christian boundaries. God's promise to Abraham found expression in a people who formed community in different contexts. In the First Testament, Israel was that community in which different tribes formed a unity and carried out God's purpose for the world. In the Second Testament, the Christian Church sees itself as a community that Vatican II situates in the People of God. Vatican II understands People of God as including not only the Christian Church but the entire human family with its different religions and faith persuasions. Everyone is called to build community so that concern and respect for the other are fostered, peace and security prevail, and persons relate to each other in love and forgiveness. The Christian Church, with all others, is called to transcend sectarian divides and serve selflessly in the formation of

this world community. The ITA sees itself as a facilitator in bringing about this world community.

IV CONCLUSION

As the ITA continues its journey, its members look for the mystery of God's saving action unfolding amidst different groups of persons who are side-lined, marginalized, discounted and oppressed. They form the poor, whose faith and hope endure in the face of problems that seem to have no answer. The ITA's contextual theologizing is founded on that same faith and hope which are gifted to all. Faith reminds us of our limitations and the need to trust in God in our efforts to bring justice, dignity and equity to all people, but especially the poor. This task may not be completed in the foreseeable future. But we acknowledge God's Spirit acting powerfully in creation and reassuring us that change and transformation are taking place even in life's darkest moments. Hope continually strengthens our conviction that God's plan will succeed in the events of human history and that, in God's own time, the forces of evil, destruction and death will be defeated. With this conviction and seeking to realize its aims and objectives, the ITA walks in to the future.

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