

HUMAN DIGNITY IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY: ALREADY OR NOT YET?

Anish Mathew Palathinadiyil, CMI[♦]

Samanvaya Theology College, Bhopal

Abstract

The article aims at perceiving the concept of human dignity in the Indian democracy based on the present socio-political situation. The pertaining question the article treats is whether human dignity is already realized or it is an ideal yet to be realized in the present situation of the nation. The first part of the article makes an investigation into the notion of human dignity as presented in the Indian constitution. The preamble, fundamental rights and some significant judgments by the judiciary emphasize human dignity. However, the present socio-political situation gives a different picture. In India democracy is flawed, politics is criminalized, dissents and media are silenced, administrative structures are being nullified, widespread corruption, violence, lynching, casteism, pro-rich economic policies, post-truth culture and attacks on women constantly challenge human dignity. The second part of the article tries to understand the theological and biblical foundations of human dignity. Based on this, the political ramifications of human dignity are analysed. Steps to regard Indian constitution as a sacred book, to take national pledge seriously and to actively participate in the democratic processes are proposed.

Keywords: Human Dignity; Indian Constitution; Indian Democracy

India is a democratic nation. In order to nurture and sustain the democracy unharmed, a constitution was framed and it safeguards

[♦]**Anish Mathew Palathinadiyil** is a Religious Priest belonging to Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). After his priestly ordination in 2010 he worked in the fields of education, pastoral ministry and formation in Maharashtra, India. He completed his Bachelors in Education (BEd) in 2012 and Masters in Arts (English) in 2015. He successfully completed Licentiate in Moral Theology (LTh) in 2020 from Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram. At present he is in Samanvaya Theology College, Bhopal as a staff member. Email: anishpalam@gmail.com

the dignity and rights of every citizen. 'Dignity' in the general sense means 'true worth' of something and it is being applied to human beings. Indian constitution gives great importance to human dignity and its nuance shall be viewed from various angles.

Human Dignity in the Constitution of India

The framers of the Indian constitution were aware of the importance of human dignity and incorporated the word human dignity in the preamble of the constitution of India.

We, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN, SECULAR, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, Social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the *dignity* of the individual and unity and integrity of the nation.¹

Preamble of the Indian constitution attaches dignity to the very personhood of the individual. "In simpler terms, it can be said that dignity can be ensured when every member of the society has a feeling that he or she is a respectable member and no one can humiliate, harass, exploit and insult him or her on the basis of caste, creed, sex and status, etc."² In the framework of the Indian constitution the notion of dignity protects civil, political, religious and social rights of the individual.

Fundamental Rights

The term fundamental rights would mean "human rights flowing from the very nature of man [...]. And certain rights are legally recognized because they preexist on account of the moral values inherent in the human person."³ Indian constitution includes a chapter on fundamental rights in part III of the constitution. "The provision of fundamental rights preserves and protects the human dignity."⁴ It would be significant to point out that there is no mention of the word "dignity" specifically in this chapter on fundamental rights. However, there are provisions to protect the inherent dignity of every citizen of our nation.

¹"Preamble of Indian Constitution," <http://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-750-preamble-to-the-indian-constitution.html>. Italics by the author.

²Shachi Chakrabarti and Nirmal Chakrabarti, ed. *Gender Justice*. vol. 2. Kolkata: R Cambay and Co. 2008, 339.

³George V. Lobo, *Christian Living according to Vatican II*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1980, 269.

⁴A.K. Sikri, "Human Dignity as a Constitutional Value." <http://blog.hawaii.edu/elp/files/2016/06/HUMAN-DIGNITY-HAWAI.pdf> [Accessed on 2 October 2020].

Judgments by the Supreme Court

The various judgments by the supreme court of India incorporated the concept of human dignity into articles 14 and 21 of the constitution by reading the same notion of dignity into these articles of the constitution. In shaping and giving true meaning to the fundamental rights enshrined in part III of the constitution of India it is the concept of human dignity which has been in the mind of the Supreme Court. Some of the significant verdicts of the recent past make this clear. The courts have scrapped many practices and have even decriminalized many actions and practices taking recourse to the notion of human dignity. Allowing women entering *Sabarimala* Temple, Naz Foundation case,⁵ Scrapping of article 377 and decriminalizing homosexuality, declaring article 497 of Indian Penal Code and decriminalizing adultery, etc. are some judgments in India which were based on human dignity according to Indian Constitution.

Human Dignity in Indian Democracy: Is All Well?

The World Happiness Report 2019, places India on 140th position. This may be an indication that there is a sense of hopelessness, despair and anxiety in India. There are many structures, practices and expressions in Indian society which undermine human dignity. A bird's eye-view of the current socio-political milieu shows some significant trends.

Erosion of Democratic Values

According to the report of the Global Democracy Index (GDI) India ranks 41st. The report indicates that the type of regime in India is not full Democracy, but *flawed democracy*.⁶ There is a proposal for “a constitution based on the exclusive, discriminatory, hierarchical and patriarchal *manusmirti*”⁷ instead of the present constitution. For example, the way parliament sessions are conducted has become a matter of concern. On many issues no discussion or consensus were

⁵In 2009 a two-judge bench of the Delhi High Court had decided that treating consensual homosexual sex between adults as a crime is a violation of fundamental rights protected by India's constitution. (Ref. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090826035913/http://lobis.nic.in/dhc/APS/judgement/02-07-2009/APS02072009CW74552001.pdf>)

⁶Flawed democracy exists in those countries where although elections are held fair and free, there are issues such as media freedom infringement. Those countries have flaws in some democratic aspects such as underdeveloped political culture, low levels of participation in politics and issues in the functioning of the government.

⁷Jacob Peenikaparambil, “Mobocracy to Derail Democracy,” *Indian Currents* 30, 45 (2018) 17-19, at 19.

obtained in the parliament, making a mockery of democracy. Techniques such as politics of intimidation and attempts for artificial uniformity are being used to destabilize the state governments and to disintegrate democracy in the country.

Criminalization of Politics

“Crime and politics in India are so intertwined that a “clean politician” sounds like an oxymoron, a breed that no longer exists.”⁸ In the present India 33% of Members of Parliament (MPs) and Member of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs), have criminal cases such as murder, attempt to murder, rape, extortion, kidnapping and creating communal disharmony pending against them. There is a nexus between criminals and politicians.

Silencing of Dissent and Criticism

It is sad that in Indian democracy intolerance is so bad that no contrary opinion or a different voice is tolerated. Serial killings of rational thinkers and activists are happening in India. The recent past has witnessed the arrest and intimidation of independently thinking doctors, engineers, teachers, writers, poets, priests and thinkers and human right defenders. “Anyone (individual or group) who dares take on the government or their foot soldiers are dealt with iron hand”⁹ and is termed as anti-national.

Human rights are chartered out for the protection of life and liberty, preserving people’s dignity, promoting brotherhood and maintaining equality. But unfortunately, their violations seem to be the order of the day. In India, now it is not rare that the

human rights activists who take up the course of the poor and the marginalized are branded as Maoists and put behind bars; non-government organizations which do not toe the line of the government and the ruling party are made to suffer by cancelling their licenses; farmers who seek better price for their produce have to face the ire of the police; the unemployed who want jobs face water cannons; students are charged with sedition for expressing their views.¹⁰

The prevalence of violence is widespread in Indian society. Different forms of violence exist—political, religious, domestic, sexual violence, and violence against children. In the present socio-political situation violence has an aura of sanctity and legitimacy and

⁸ “India’s Criminal Politicians,” <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/12/indias-criminal-politicians/> [Accessed on 17 September 2020].

⁹Cedric Prakash, “Rights Endangered,” *Indian Currents* 30, 49 (2018) 11-14, at 11.

¹⁰Suresh Mathew, “Rights on Paper, Wrongs on Ground,” *Indian Currents* 30, 49 (2018) 5.

violence is "... often exercised in rituals—that is to say, they are staged like a play in front of an audience."¹¹

Lynching is "a premeditated extrajudicial killing by a group. It is most often used to characterize informal public executions by a mob in order to punish an alleged transgressor, or to intimidate a group."¹² In the recent past the rising graph of incidents of lynching in our country is frightening. "The mob quickly appears, do their 'business' and then simply disappears."¹³ Shoma Chaudhary, a well known journalist sarcastically wrote in her face book post, "Don't love. Don't hold hands. Don't get on a train. Don't ride a horse. Don't buy cattle. Don't give chocolates to children. Don't keep meat in fridge. Don't breathe: You can be lynched to death for it. This is India."¹⁴

Media is the fourth pillar of democracy. "Any effort to muzzle the freedom of the media is detrimental to democracy."¹⁵ However in India the fourth pillar of democracy stands shattered today. If one closely observes the contents of the media today, one cannot but notice three facts in them: post-truth, fake news, and alternative facts.¹⁶ Several media persons who stood for justice and truth were killed or were faced with threats or are imprisoned. Most of the leading media in our nation is nothing but mouthpiece of the ruling party or the establishment. Even social media activists are closely monitored, and some have even been arrested.

Administrative Structures

Indian constitution has envisaged and constituted a number of constitutional bodies in the administration of the nation. Independent functioning of these backbones of nation without the interference of the government power is essential for the survival of democracy in India. The current scenario of these constitutional bodies is alarming and disheartening. Today the executive tries to control the other constitutional bodies and institutions. The Structures like CBI,

¹¹Hannes Kuch, "The Rituality of Humiliation: Exploring Symbolic Vulnerability," in *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated*, ed. Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Christian Neuhäuser and Elaine Webster, New York: Springer, 2011, 37-56, at 38.

¹²Cedric Prakash, "India @lynching.com," *Indian Currents* 30, 29 (2018) 26-27, at 26.

¹³Jose Vallikkatt, "Complex Web of Lynching," *Indian Currents* 30, 29 (2018) 22-25, at 25.

¹⁴A.J. Philip, "What a National Shame," *Indian Currents*, 30, 30 (2018) 11-14, at 11.

¹⁵Peenikaparambil, "Mobocracy to Derail Democracy," 18.

¹⁶Myron J. Pereira, "Post Truth, Fake News and Alternative Facts," *Indian Currents*, 29, 46 (2017) 33-34, at 33.

Reserve Bank and Election Commission are not treated with respect and hence the fundamentals of governance are disturbed.

In India, corruption, “the abuse of public office for private gain,”¹⁷ “has risen to the highest levels. The Government-Business nexus frightens the weaker citizens.”¹⁸ In India the situation is such that “the poor person has no choice but to ‘pay’ in order to get things done!”¹⁹ Earlier, bribes were paid for getting wrong things done, but now bribe is paid for getting right things done at right time. Corrupt practices like manipulating weight of products, adulteration in edible items, and bribery of various kinds are increasing in the society.

Independence of judiciary is important in the healthy function of a democratic nation. Whenever and wherever human dignity and rights are violated, a free and fair judiciary should intervene to restore dignity and rights. Yet signs of times show that everything is not free and fair in Indian judicial system. It was very evident when four of the senior most judges of the Supreme Court of India addressed a press conference and aired their views against the perceived interference of the government in the functioning of the judiciary.²⁰ The judicial system is defeating the individual’s dignity.

In her book *Fascism*, Madeleine Albright states, “[t]his is how twentieth century Fascism began: with a magnetic leader exploiting widespread dissatisfaction by promising all things.”²¹ We have many promises in India: *Sab ke sath, Sab ke Vikas, sabka viswas* (Together with all, development for all, the trust of all); *Ache din ayega*, (Happy days will come), *Gau Raksha* (Cow Protection). There is a sense of undeclared emergency throughout the country. A keen analysis of the affairs would make clear that it is one-man, and his aides who make decisions. In a fascist culture “we are not just becoming increasingly intolerant, but that the space for debate and dissent in our democracy is decreasing day by day.”²²

‘Might is right’ has become the norm in the Indian social and political environment today. On practical grounds, “if one has

¹⁷Vinay Bhargava, “Curing the Cancer of Corruption,” in *Global Issues for Global Citizens: An Introduction to Key Development Challenges*. Edited by Vinay Bhargava, Washington: World Bank, 2006, 315-359, at 341.

¹⁸Thomas Menampampil, “Saving our Freedom,” *Indian Currents* 30, 39 (2018) 12-16, at 13.

¹⁹Cedric Prakash, “Scourge of Violence,” *Indian Currents* 30, 41 (2018) 20-21, at 21.

²⁰The Hindu business line, January 18, 2018.

²¹“Fascism Quotes” <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/56577028-fascism> [Accessed on 12 September 2020].

²²Paul, “Truthing in a Post-Truth Political Society: A Hermeneutical Proposal,” 25.

muscle, money and political power s/he can have his/her ways, and remain untouched by the law-enforcing authorities.”²³ Anyone who challenges rich and the powerful disappears mysteriously. “Torture and murder of whistleblowers, RTI (Right to Information Act) activists, honest and disciplined government, police and administrative officials have become commonplace.”²⁴

Post-Truth Culture

The Oxford Dictionary defines post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”²⁵ “In post-truth era, the facts and figures as well as truth are secondary things and people go after religion, nationalism or other similar sentimental issues.”²⁶ In the present socio-political scenario what matters is “not the fact of the matter, but rather particular interpretations of the truth of the situations which played upon the emotions of the general public leading to a perfect case of emotions gaining an upper hand over objective facts.”²⁷ It is seen in India that “under a fundamentalist regime, ancient mythologies are presented as history. Modern mythologies of ‘*ache din*’ are presented as facts.”²⁸ The history is continuously rewritten. Fake data about India’s impressive progress is aired profusely. In our country the political leaders often make use the post-truth data to divide, polarise and rule the nation. The socio-political facts such as falling value of the Indian rupee, farmers rioting and committing suicide, frustration of jobless youth, women in danger and infants dying in hospitals, small scale business hard hit, infant mortality rate soaring, malnutrition and environmental pollution are taking giant strides forward, but are conveniently ignored in our nation. Playing with prejudices and fake news our nation is a victim of post-truth culture.

²³John Karuvelil, “Structural Legitimization of Dehumanization in India,” in *Doing Asian Theological Ethics*, ed., Yiu Sing Lúcas Chan, James F. Keenan and Shaji George Kochuthara, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 125-139, at 125.

²⁴Karuvelil, “Structural Legitimization of Dehumanization in India,” 127.

²⁵“Word of the Year 2016,” <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=it&lang=en&>

²⁶Saji Kanayankal, “Theological Education in the Post-Truth Era,” *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 12, 04 (2018) 727-740, at 729.

²⁷Amritraj Joshua Paul, “Truthing in a Post-Truth Political Society: A Hermeneutical Proposal,” *Mar Thoma Seminary Journal of Theology* 7, 01 (2018): 21-33, at 24.

²⁸Thomas Menampampil, “The Other Side,” *Indian Currents* 30, 05 (2018) 20-23, at 21.

People had been divided in India from time immemorial on various grounds. Divisions have been created tactfully and effectively by many agents. The present ruling party has proved to be adept in playing the communal politics. Hidden measures are taken to create 'one nation and one identity.' Methods and strategies are used in India to edge 'others' into oblivion. As a result of polarization every other is portrayed as anti-national, anti-Hindu, anti-ruling party, anti-Indian culture, anti-development, outsider, and alien.

Casteism

Casteism, though publicly denounced and criticized, still retains its bad face and antagonistic power in India and challenge basic human dignity. The underlying philosophy guiding the caste divisions is that "the poor (invariably *shudras* and untouchables) have duties and the rich (*dwijas*) have only rights."²⁹ Some people are always termed as untouchables and segregated from society. It causes the impression of the Dalits that they do not belong to society; this will eventually take them to be treated as 'no-people.'

The report of Human Rights Watch says:

Discriminatory and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of over 165 million people in India has been justified on the basis of caste...Caste divisions in India dominate in housing, marriage, employment, and general social interaction-divisions that are reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and physical violence...Dalits are particularly vulnerable to arrest under draconian security laws. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence by the police, which is used as a tool to punish Dalit communities.³⁰

No legal provisions have been able to eradicate this menace of Casteism from the minds of Indians.

Pro-Rich Economic Policy

Various surveys and data aired by the present government shows that India makes a steady economic progress and India is heading to be an economic super power shortly. Yet, "India presents a perpetual paradox where millions go to bed hungry while the country has the third highest number of billionaires in the world."³¹ According to The Global Hunger Index, India ranks 103rd position among 117

²⁹ V.T. Rajshekar, *Hinduism, Fascism and Gandhism*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1985, 28.

³⁰ "Hidden Apartheid," https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/india_0207webwcover_0.pdf [Accessed on 17 September 2020].

³¹ Jaswant Kaur, "Inequality-Galloping Gap," *Indian Currents* 30, 39 (2018) 22-24, at 22.

countries.³² In India it is estimated that 73 million people live in extreme poverty.³³

It can very well be said of India that “perhaps the most common violation of human dignity is hunger and poverty, since almost every individual personality is dependent on a sufficient satisfaction of the person’s basic needs.”³⁴ Poverty is a sign of being excluded from the society as well. The economic policies of the present government “throw a common man’s life topsy-turvy even as the government claims it has brought ‘*acche-din*’ to most Indians.”³⁵

Dignity of Woman

India had many touted myths that Indians worship the woman, non-violence is the creed of Indians and woman is Lakshmi or goddess of wealth. It is evident that other than some slogans like ‘*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*,’ (save the daughter, educate the daughter) the government has not taken any serious measures to safeguard the ‘*Betis*’ (daughters) of India.

Life and dignity of women is at stake in our nation without any limits. There are reports of widespread rape, kidnapping, abduction, dowry related crimes, domestic violence, molestation, sexual harassment, eve teasing, female infanticide, enforced prostitution, widow burning, sale of enslaved females, wife battering, pornographic exploitation, incest, etc. “From the apparent sanctity of Churches to the apparent safety of one’s home, they are at the receiving end of evil deeds committed on them.”³⁶

After the death of Nirbhaya³⁷ the nation witnessed nationwide outrage and campaign demanding the safety of women and girl children. New laws were made, funds were raised, and new slogans were created, all aimed at the safety and security of girls and women. But there seems to be no improvement. The

³² “Global Hunger Index,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Hunger_Index#Ranking [Accessed on 17 September 2020].

³³ “Poverty in India,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_India, [Accessed on 28 September 2020]

³⁴ Ralf Stoecker, “Three Crucial Turns on the Road to an Adequate Understanding of Human Dignity,” in *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated*, ed. Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Christian Neuhäuser and Elaine Webster, New York: Springer, 2011, 7-17, at 15.

³⁵ Khosa, “Adding Fuel to Fire,” *Indian Currents* 30, 38 (2018): 18-20, at 18.

³⁶ Prakash, “Scourge of Violence,” 21.

³⁷ Nirbhaya is the nickname given to a girl who was gangraped by six men in a moving bus in Delhi in 2012.

environment in India is such that “it is dangerous to be a woman, a girl in India.”³⁸

Human Dignity in Indian Democracy: Already or Not Yet?

Sequeira tells of the present socio-political situation that “[C]ain killing his own brother Abel and after the event not even wanting to accept and tell where his brother is or what he has done to him (Gen 4:8ff) is what is seen to take place and that continues to be the common occurrence even to our own day.”³⁹ An analysis of the socio-political situation of the present Indian situation shows that although Indian constitution emphasizes human dignity, in practice it is far from realized in daily practice. Instances where human dignity is challenged and people being treated devoid of any dignity are not sporadic events. We live in a situation where one sees the other person or an opponent as less human and therefore does not deserve adequate moral consideration. In India certain groups do not see *the other* as ‘equally human.’ It seems that the underlying philosophy is that some think that the lives of victims were “lives not worth living.”⁴⁰ In India some are perennially viewed as inferior, evil, or criminal.

Should the church sit and lament that people have forgotten God, that is why all this has happened in our country? Even if there is no quick solution as *one-size-fits-all* the time demands a way out where human life and dignity is respected and protected in Indian democratic milieu. In this precarious situation that the nation goes through the desire and wish of Vatican Council II is relevant: “the council wishes to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time” (GS 10).

God and Human Dignity

Human dignity has sound biblical and theological foundation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that “the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.”⁴¹ So to be human means (with no attributes attached) to be in a dignified existence. Hare, in his book *God’s Command* argues that

³⁸George Plathottam, “How many more Nirbhayas must we Mourn?,” *Indian Currents*, 29, 17 (2018) 16-19, at 18.

³⁹Andrew Anil Sequeira, *Living Christian Life*, vol. 1, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2015, 184-185.

⁴⁰William Brennan, *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games takes Lives*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995, 69.

⁴¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1700.

human dignity is not an imparted value, but is an *intrinsic* value.⁴² Secondly, the priestly creation narrative presents an intelligible order of creation in a hierarchical ordering of creation. In this order human is made on the final day of creation, on the sixth day. The unique position of human beings is evident in the description of creation as well.

Judeo-Christian tradition depicts God treating human beings with dignity. God is the author, protector and defender of human dignity. "God is portrayed throughout this tradition as treating men and women with respect, never as things."⁴³ Bible constantly narrates the divine interventions to liberate, save and protect the human beings from inhuman conditions where human dignity is at stake. "A situation of freedom affirms and actualizes human dignity while a situation of bondage is a negation of human dignity."⁴⁴ Hence the prophets demand from the Israelites to give up all actions, attitudes and behaviours that deny, negate and neglect human dignity. Where human dignity is at stake, the rituals done on behalf of God do not become a tribute to God's glory. If God gives so much importance to human dignity what are the political significance of this perspective?

Dignity in Democracy: The Political Ramifications

God takes care of the political, social and spiritual life of the people. "God is concerned about the public life of humanity and not only about the inner, private life of individuals, that he is concerned about nations and events and not only about the salvation of souls."⁴⁵ Ideally the spirituality and morality of a Christian should go hand in hand. The Church has to understand that "the Church's social mission is a consequence of its religious mission."⁴⁶ This religious mission is not limited to gaining souls in terms of allegiance to the Church or, keeping up the traditions both of institutions and sacramental life, but transforming the society as a catalyst in order to make the 'city of men,' namely the state more perfect. "The Church in the Modern World gave theological principles for a social ministry to

⁴²John E. Hare, *God's Command, God's Command*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 28.

⁴³James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986, 279.

⁴⁴Antony Arulraj, "Biblical Vision and Notion of Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity in Catholic Social Thought*, ed., Charles Irudayam, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2014, 1-12, at 2.

⁴⁵John C. Bennett, *The Radical Imperative: From Theology to Social Ethics*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, 12.

⁴⁶Kenneth R. Himes, *Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching*, New York: Paulist Press, 1998, 20.

the dignity of the human person and the unity of the human community.”⁴⁷ As envisaged by GS our religious mission should lead us to social “commitment to the defence of human dignity, promotion of human rights, fostering unity among members of the human family, and the discerning of the deeper significance of human work and activity.”⁴⁸

Participation in Democracy

Christians – individuals and institutions – as citizens of the nation, should educate the masses through their life and example to respect and adhere to the norms and values enlisted in the Constitution of India. “Our constitution is the ONLY Sacred Book, which belongs to every citizen of our country.”⁴⁹ The Christians should hold fast to the human values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, which are at the heart of the preamble of Indian constitution. These values are nothing but the core Gospel values. The secular and socialist aspects of the constitution, fundamental rights – the right to life and liberty, to equality, to freedom of speech and expression, to freedom of religion – are to be taught and practiced.

We Christians take pride and recite enthusiastically the prayer “Our Father...” Let us not forget the practical implications of this prayer in the daily life of our socio-political context. Let us recite with the same fervour and enthusiasm the Pledge of India which can be viewed as the interpretation and practical application of “our father...,” where we say “India is my country and all Indians are my brothers and sisters...”⁵⁰ We shall find the real dignified faces of our brothers and sisters in their real encounters of life.

A Christian cannot merely hope for and live for *a life to come*. He /she is a social being, a political being and an economic being who cannot simply run away from his/her surroundings. We are dependent on the state for the realization of our personal existence. Hence in order to be diligent heralds of human dignity in the present perilous democratic environment that the nation undergoes the Christians are to have “active participation in the processes of democratic citizenship.”⁵¹

⁴⁷Thomas Hughson, *The Believer as Citizen*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, 21.

⁴⁸Himes, *Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching*, 20.

⁴⁹Cedric Prakash, “Justice for We, the People,” *Indian Currents* 30, 04 (2018) 20-25, at 21.

⁵⁰ “National Pledge of India,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Pledge_of_India [Accessed on 27 September, 2020].

⁵¹Himes, *Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching*, 38.

Divine commandment to 'love thy neighbour' impels the Christians to be active in the political environment. This commandment demands us to be responsible to the neighbour's needs which are not merely spiritual, but physical, social and material also. "We cannot fulfil the command to love our neighbor solely by preaching the Gospel. In fact, the only way to care for some of our neighbor's needs may be to get involved in the political process to bring changes that will help them."⁵²

Political participation is indeed an inevitable facet of Mission Commandment as well. Even when one adheres to the command to preach, one has to understand that Gospel is not preached by word alone, but through deed as well. In his earthly life "Jesus not only attends to the spiritual needs of the people, but ministered to the physical and material needs of the people as well. Jesus lived in the world, though he was not of its own. "The power of God's reign must reach out to transform all aspects of human existence; it must not be reduced to some otherworldly realm apart from temporal lives."⁵³

Hence the present socio-political environment where human dignity is challenged in multiple manners, a Christian has to have civic responsibility. The importance of civic responsibility is paramount to the success of democracy and philanthropy. "Individuals lead good lives when they make contribution to the good of the city-state."⁵⁴ By engaging in civic responsibility, citizens ensure and uphold various democratic values such as justice, freedom, equality, diversity, authority, privacy, due process, private property, participation, truth, patriotism, human rights, rule of law, tolerance, mutual assistance, self-restraint and self-respect. When such values are nurtured, sustained and celebrated in the daily lives of each and every citizen of India, human dignity becomes a present reality in the Indian democracy.

Conclusion

We have been trying to make an analysis of the present socio-political situation of India from the perspective of human dignity. The constitution of India beautifully and authentically envisages that human dignity of every citizen is respected. No religion, so race, no language, no sex, or any other parameters should become a

⁵²John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1993, 393.

⁵³Himes, *Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching*, 19.

⁵⁴David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University, 2003, 11.

hindrance in respecting one's human dignity. Yet the daily happenings and practices are threatening the great vision of the visionaries of the constitution. Human dignity is being violated immensely and rampantly. Ethical norms that should govern the society are trampled upon. It is to be remembered that no nation can survive without adhering to ethical norms. If a nation does not follow ethical norms, it is likely that it will ultimately lead to national collapse, economic ruin, social disintegration and political catastrophe.

William E. May beautifully explains a human person and human dignity thus: "to be a human being is to be, first and foremost, a being of moral worth or person, a bearer of transcendent value, the subject of a dignity and a sanctity that ought to be recognized by others and protected by society."⁵⁵ This vision is a guiding light in the vision of human person in the society. Hence the situation demands that the Christians in India should rise to the occasion and become catalysts that adhere to the constitutional and theological vision of human dignity in India. Every Christian should be in the forefront to regard the Indian Constitution as a sacred book and hold fast to the perennial values it advocates. We should take our national pledge and heritage seriously and participate actively in the democratic process. Jesus says, "Kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21). Every Christian and the Church as a community have a moral responsibility to treat people with dignity and to defend human dignity, and thereby to ensure an experience of the kingdom of God for every citizen.

⁵⁵William E. May, *Sex and the Sanctity of Human Life*, Christendom Publication, Virginia, 1984, 11.