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MAKING THE INDIAN CHURCH MORE SYNODAL

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Abstract

In view of the synodal movement, we need to acknowledge that the responsibility of transforming the Indian Church into a synodal Church is the task of every Catholic faithful. We have to encounter Jesus together. In the light of the synod's purpose and focus, this article explores possibilities of making the Indian Church more synodal than it is today. The synodal process seeks to facilitate the people of God to experience journeying together, to think and reflect together, and to discern and decide together. The ongoing synodal journey necessitates the entire people of God, leaving out none, to acknowledge their specific vocation in the Church and work towards the realisation of this vocation. Hence, for the Indian Church to be more synodal means to be more democratic, and to be more democratic necessarily entails to be more participatory and consultative in decision-making and implementation. Accordingly, this paper explores into different means and methods of making the Indian Church more synodal.

Keywords: Caste; Clericalism; Dalits; Democratic Process; Gender Equality; Indian Church; Synodality; Tribals; Voice of the Poor

Introduction

In view of the synodal movement, we need to acknowledge that the responsibility of transforming the Indian Church into a synodal Church is the task of every Catholic faithful. We have to encounter Jesus together. Pope Francis likes to remind us that the spirit of the

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ongoing synodal process lies in collective spiritual and ecclesial discernment, which is expressed concretely through prayer, adoration and dialogue with the Word of God. The purpose of the present synod is clearly enumerated in the Preparatory Document: "To plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands."¹ This is the vision envisaged by Pope Francis and the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, when they planned the synod on synodality with the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." The focus of the synod is certainly to discern and identify the wonderful ways in which God's grace is active in the Church, identify the weak points and listen to those excluded and in the margins with humility and openness.

In the light of the synod's purpose and focus, let us explore possibilities of making the Indian Church more synodal than it is today. The synodal process seeks to facilitate the people of God to experience journeying together, to think and reflect together, and to discern and decide together. The ongoing synodal journey necessitates the entire people of God, leaving out none, to acknowledge their specific vocation in the Church and work towards the realisation of this vocation. Hence, for the Indian Church to be more synodal means to be more democratic, and to be more democratic necessarily entails to be more participatory and consultative in decision-making and implementation. Accordingly, we shall inquire into different means and methods of making the Indian Church more synodal.

1. Rootedness in the Early Church and Freedom from Clericalism

The Church of Jesus Christ is by its very nature synodal. The word 'synodal' means 'journeying together.' The early Church and its members lived the synodal way in their daily life and activities. The ancient Christians deliberated upon issues as a community and arrived at a common understanding on matters of faith and morals. The leaders of the early Church facilitated this process of journeying together. The early Christians experienced the love of God as a community united in one spirit and they shared their God-experience with one another with a deep sense of joy and sacrifice. Later on, when the Church became more an institution or structure, the role of

¹The General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *The Preparatory Document*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021, no. 32.

the laity in the Church reduced, and concomitantly, the clergy began to dominate the affairs of the Church. Hence, this synod gives us the clarion call to return to our roots embedded in the life of the early Church, and also to eschew clericalism that has impoverished these roots.

Clericalism, which is a form of elitism, refers to “the application of the formal, Church-based, leadership or opinion of ordained clergy in matters of either the Church or broader political and socio-cultural import.”² Clericalism reflects a sense of entitlement that the clergy has appropriated to itself, whereby the clergy claims to own the power to administer the spiritual and material goods of the Church and to control matters related to women religious and the laity. Clericalism has led the clergy to believe that they are not accountable or answerable to anyone in the Church. Cases of paedophilia, sexual abuse of women and financial irregularities have their roots in clericalism.

Clericalism is a hindrance to synodality, not only in India but in the universal Church as well. Pope Francis constantly reminds us that we have to listen to God and also to the faithful. A clergy-oriented or clergy-centric Church does not give the laity and consecrated brothers and sisters the necessary freedom to enter into open dialogue and communion with one another. As far as our country is concerned, the Indian Church has to shun clericalism that has plagued its growth and mission. “The whole Church is called to deal with the weight of a culture imbued with clericalism that she inherits from her history and those forms of exercising authority on which the different types of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual) are grafted.”³ Any sincere effort to cleanse the Church of clericalism must include the experience of *kenosis* (self-emptying) by the clergy. The Indian clergy have to cede the administrative and decision-making space to the other members of the people of God in order to make the Indian Church more synodal. A more synodal Church is also a more egalitarian Church, because our biological, ethnic or social differences in no way affect our relationship with Christ.⁴

The Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) has established the Commission for Small Christian Communities and the latter’s objective is to promote gospel values at the grassroots level and ensure the participation of the entire parish community in the evangelizing mission. These days, the Commission for Small Christian

²George Therukattil, “Clericalism in the Church,” *Asian Horizons* 15, 1 (2021) 91-103, at 93.

³The General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *The Preparatory Document*, no. 6.

⁴Therukattil, “Clericalism in the Church,” 93.

Communities is working hard towards creation of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) at the parish level and these micro communities are modelled on the ancient (early) Christian communities. In a BEC there is no difference between the priest, religious and laity; all worship, listen and serve together as equals. The Church becomes a family or community of believers with one mind and one heart. The spirit of the Risen Lord inspires these people to worship together, share with one another and support one another in need. Retrieving the life and ministry of the apostles and early disciples of Jesus will help make the Indian Church more synodal and free of clericalism.

2. Equality to Synodality: Communion with the Dalit and Tribal Christians

The Church in India is a melting pot of varied cultures characterised by a diversity of traditions, ethnicity and languages. The multicultural nature of the people of God in India is a boon insofar as all are able to live harmoniously and peacefully and strive collectively to realize the kingdom of God on earth. However, this plurality can be a bane if we are divided by regional, caste and ethnic differences, and people are discriminated against on the basis of caste, ethnicity, region and language. On an urgent note, the Church in India has to address inequality and discrimination perpetrated in the name of caste, tribe and gender.

There is no doubt that much of the Church in India is plagued by caste-oriented discrimination. The caste system in India, based on the *varnashrama dharma*, is very powerful, as it is given divine sanction in the creation narratives of the Vedas. The *varnashrama dharma* denies equal dignity and rights to the people of the lower castes and the same has permeated the Church in India. The Dalit Christians of India continue to suffer discrimination and exclusion in leadership roles, admission into Church-run schools, employment, and sharing of resources and opportunities. In certain communities, separate burial places are assigned in cemeteries on the basis of caste.⁵ The Church leadership in India too acknowledges the presence of caste discrimination at the level of appointments to key positions in ecclesiastical offices and in sharing of common resources in religious orders and in the Church in general.⁶

⁵Shalini Mulackal, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Dalits," in *No Synodality Without...*, ed. P.R. John, Delhi: Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2022, 160-166.

⁶Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, *Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India: An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities*, New Delhi: CBCI Office for Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes, 2016, no. 30.

Journeying together with the Dalit Christian community entails binding up the wounds of all those individuals and communities, who were victims of exclusion and marginalization within the Church.⁷ Synodality also requires reconciliation and conversion of hearts; and hence, the Church has to seek forgiveness from the oppressed and marginalized groups. This will lead to greater participation of Dalit Christians in the Church's administrative roles and decision-making process.

The Indian tribal communities teach us a number of values, and the Church in India needs to take these people along in its synodal journey. The tribals live in communities, and therefore, a tribal seldom exists alone. In other words, a tribal exists always with other members of his/her community, with his/her ancestors, God and creation.⁸ This communitarian dimension helps in taking the tribal Christians along in the synodal process. Likewise, it is a tradition for the tribals to journey together as equals and co-pilgrims in the decision-making process. The entire community together listens, speaks, discerns and decides. Salvation is seen as the individual's ultimate communion with the individual, posterity, ancestors and God.⁹ Thus, the Church needs to reaffirm its own identity as the listening Church, listening to the stories of the tribals, being with them, responding to their existential, felt needs and, also witnessing to the value of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity and sharing. The ongoing synodal process seeks to offer the tribals of India the hope for a better social, cultural, economic and political life.¹⁰ In this process, the Church in India has a lot to learn from these tribal communities and can imbibe the values of solidarity, sharing and common decision-making in its synodal path.

Just as the Dalits suffer alienation and marginalization, the tribal communities of India too suffer discrimination, exclusion and exploitation. Introduction of Christian faith to the tribals of East-Central India by the Belgian missionaries was accompanied by justice. These missionaries focused on addressing the existential crises of the tribals, viz. land alienation and exploitation by the state and rich landlords.¹¹ Even to this day, land alienation and exploitation render these tribals vulnerable to poverty and

⁷Mulackal, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Dalits," 167-168.

⁸Francis Minj, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Adivasis," in *No Synodality Without...*, ed. P.R. John, Delhi: Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2022, 173-174.

⁹Minj, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Adivasis," 174-175.

¹⁰Sudhir Kumar Kujur, "Evangelization and Subaltern/Tribal Movement," *Sevartham* 44, 1 (2019) 37-50, at 50.

¹¹Minj, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Adivasis," 175.

marginalization. Hence, any talk of synodality must seek to address the existential crises of which the tribals in India are victims.

3. Gender Equity in the Synodal Journey

For the Indian Church to be truly synodal, gender justice or gender equity must be taken into serious consideration. This entails enabling women to participate fully in the Church's decision-making process through "explicit alterations of the Church's structures and norms, which hinder the full participation of women in the Church."¹² Pope Francis has clearly stated that "God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters."¹³ The Church in India needs to do much to realise these words of the Pope.

If the Indian Church has to be truly and fully synodal, we "cannot ignore the reality of women in the Church, who [...] are individuals with diverse experiences, gifts, expertise and contexts."¹⁴ One important element of the context of Indian women is that they have, in some way or the other, been victims of the patriarchal structure of the society and Church.¹⁵ Consequently, women are denied basic rights, such as education, safety and employment. Likewise, cases of female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, harassment for dowry, sexual harassment and rape continue to be reported across India.¹⁶ Hence, the need of the hour is to transform the male-dominated social and ecclesiastical structures to make way for broader opportunities for women to play an active and constructive role in the society and Church. The Gender Policy of the Catholic Church (2010), published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), is a ray of hope for all those engaged in proactive efforts to forward gender equity in the Indian Church. If implemented with honesty and commitment to women's causes, this policy can change the power imbalances in the Church.¹⁷

Women are endowed with unique experiences, wisdom, gifts and culture and all these could contribute immensely to the mission of the

¹²Prabina Rudum, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Women," in *No Synodality Without...*, ed. P.R. John, Delhi: Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2022, 188.

¹³Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, 3 October 2020, Trivandrum: Carmel, 2020, no. 5.

¹⁴Rudum, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Women," 191.

¹⁵Rudum, "No Synodality Without the Participation of Women," 191.

¹⁶Vimala Chenginimattam, "Gender Equity: An Analytical Research and Ethical Explorations," in *Indian Moral Theology: Historical Studies and Future Prospects*, ed. Mathew Illathuparampil, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 129.

¹⁷Chenginimattam, "Gender Equity," 134.

Church. This can happen only when men change their attitude towards women's role in the society and Church and are willing to renounce the long entrenched patriarchal mind-set. The Indian Church will be truly synodal, when all women and men freely journey together, in communion and participation towards a more fruitful mission.

4. Participatory Pastoral Planning

At present, the Indian Church lacks sufficient participatory pastoral planning. The dioceses have a number of bodies and associations, which function as consultative or administrative wings of the Church. The canonical bodies, such as the College of Consultors¹⁸ and the Council of Priests (Priests' Senate),¹⁹ are wholly represented by the clergy. The Diocesan Pastoral Council²⁰ and the Diocesan Finance Committee,²¹ which are canonical bodies, need to be strengthened in terms of their lay representation and lay empowerment. The Diocesan Synod²² is another canonical body that can be effectively utilized to increase lay participation in diocesan matters. The diocesan synod facilitates laity-religious-clergy cooperation and coordination in the Church's mission. In the process, the people of God of a particular diocese listen to each other; and the exchange of ideas and views is bound to enrich the pastoral mission of the diocese.

On a more serious note, questions arise about the effectiveness of lay associations like the Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Committee, *Mahila Sangh* (Catholic Women's Associations), Indian Catholic Youth Movement (ICYM) and others. The fact is that in some dioceses these associations are either inactive or are not sufficiently empowered, and hence do not reflect lay representation in the parish administration. The Church is the Body of Christ and a spirituality of communion. The members of the Church have their own charisms and all have to make the most of these charisms for the realization of the evangelizing mission of the Church.²³ The parish is a place of worship, a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his people. Besides, the parish is a community of

¹⁸*The Code of Canon Law*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1993, c. 502.

¹⁹*The Code of Canon Law*, cc. 495-501.

²⁰*The Code of Canon Law*, cc. 511-514.

²¹*The Code of Canon Law*, cc. 492-494.

²²*The Code of Canon Law*, cc. 460-468.

²³Congregation for the Clergy, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*, nos. 108-114; published on 29 June 2020 in Rome; available at <http://www.press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>; accessed on 31 August 2022.

communities. In the parish, the parish priest acts in collaboration with his associate priests, deacons, consecrated men and women and the laity for the integral growth of the parish community.²⁴

In order to empower the diocesan as well as parish associations, the diocesan bishop and parish priests have to be open to change in thinking and an interior renewal. The bishops, the college of priests, the religious men and women and the laity, through a process of common discernment, strive to empower the diocese and parishes as places where Christians encounter Christ and have a living relationship with the Lord in communion with one another. In this direction, new bodies or associations could be formed for better lay participation in the parish life. We need to ensure that these groups actively participate in the decision-making process, and this in turn will empower these groups and enrich the parish.

5. Listening to the Voices of the Poor

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, states, “In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters [...] it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers.”²⁵ A large part of India’s population is poor and marginalized and is denied the most basic rights and benefits. Basic human rights include the right to life, liberty and dignity; and these rights are guaranteed by the Constitution of India and enforceable by the court of law.²⁶ The Church has the obligation, not only in charity but more in justice, to fight for the restoration of these rights.

Jesus always speaks of God as “Someone,” a person, who is understood as loving, merciful and compassionate. The God proclaimed by Jesus is moved by and is sensitive to what happens to people and what concerns them. The biblical God is a dynamic God, who is touched and affected by what happens to his people, literally by their history. He never abandons his people but strives to remove

²⁴Congregation for the Clergy, *The Pastoral Conversion*, nos. 7, 27-28.

²⁵Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2015, no. 158.

²⁶Charles Irudayam, “Social Teachings of Indian Bishops,” in *Indian Moral Theology: Historical Studies and Future Prospects*, ed. Mathew Illathuparampil, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 86.

their affliction and restore their rights. Consequently, the two important qualities of God are mercy and justice.²⁷ Hence, the Church feels obliged to exercise mercy and justice in its mission for the poor and vulnerable sections of the population. Mercy encompasses justice without stifling it, and justice takes on mercy in itself without diminishing its true essence. In order to listen to the voices of the poor, we need to think and act both out of mercy as well as out of justice.²⁸

The Church in India has worked for the welfare of the poor and marginalized. The needy and vulnerable sections of the population have been the beneficiaries of the Church's selfless service. The Church has insisted upon the faithful to show solidarity in the removal of all injustice and the promotion of the common good. The Catholic Church in India is very much aware that in order to eliminate injustice and reduce poverty, the unjust structures need to be healed and the root causes of injustice and oppression be addressed.²⁹ Nonetheless, more needs to be done in response to Pope Francis' call to opt for the poor in solidarity. If the Church is able to listen to the voices of the poor in its thinking and acting, inspired by inner urges of mercy and justice, the Indian Church will be on its way to becoming truly synodal. Moved by mercy we could make sincere efforts to go to the peripheries and share table fellowship with the poor and listen to their cries for justice. Furthermore, as an act of justice, we have to strive to restore their rights to life, dignity and liberty.

6. Further Suggestions to Make the Indian Church More Synodal

Besides the five ways to synodality discussed above, there are a few other areas that we need to devote our attention to in order to make the Indian Church more synodal. We shall briefly mention these below:

* *Unity among the three Catholic rites in India:* Unity among the three ritual Churches in India needs to be strengthened so that the Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara synods are able to walk together in communion, participation and mission. All Catholics through the sacrament of baptism share the same mission entrusted by Christ. Besides, all Christians in India share similar social, economic and cultural contexts. Hence, the presence of common existential realities demands better unity and coordination among the ritual Churches in the synodal journey.

²⁷Roger Burggraeve, "A Christian Inter-Human Ethics with Two Pillars: Mercy and Justice," *Asian Horizons* 4, 1 (2010) 153-166, at 154-155.

²⁸Burggraeve, "A Christian Inter-Human Ethics with Two Pillars," 166.

²⁹Irudayam, "Social Teachings of Indian Bishops," 92-93.

* *Efforts towards ecumenical unity and inter-religious dialogue:* Sustained efforts towards ecumenical unity and inter-religious dialogue can make the Indian Church more synodal. Catholics can learn much from the life and mission of the separated brethren and also from the life and sacred texts of other religions. The Church in India can be the catalyst in promoting the three-fold process of “thinking, deciding and acting together.”

* *Climate change and its consequences:* Climate change and its consequences cannot remain untouched by the synodal journey. Care for creation must be integral to the debate on synodality. At the individual level, we can opt for more sharing, choose to reject the use of plastic, avoid wastage of consumer goods and facilitate reuse and recycling. At the community level, the Church leaders could make policies that encourage sustainable development with the pledge to reduce the presence of harmful substances in the environment.

Conclusion

The Indian Church can become more synodal than it is now, if there is true intent and determination among all, including the Church leaders. Based on the above analysis, five areas of importance need our urgent attention: freeing the Indian Church from the iron clutches of clericalism, integration of Dalit and Tribal Christians into the mainstream, ensuring gender justice in the decision-making process, real participatory pastoral planning and listening to the cries of the poor and the marginalized sections of the society. In addition to these, we have made some further suggestions to make the Indian Church more synodal: unity among the three Catholic rites in India, sustained efforts towards ecumenical unity and inter-religious dialogue, and finally, care for creation. This calls for action from all Catholics, both at the individual and community level.

A truly synodal Church will promote and facilitate growth and progress. Individuals, families and institutions will grow continually and bear fruit thirty-fold, sixty-fold and hundred-fold. In such a situation, all must feel free to express their creativity, spontaneity and relationality in their journey towards human flourishing.

To close the discussion, let us respond to Jesus’ summons to personal conversion, which is the point of departure in this synodal journey. We, the Indian Church, are a wounded Church, and in need of conversion and healing. If we all are able to walk together, think together, decide together and act together, we can transform the Indian Church into the kind of Church that Jesus wants.