

RESTORING DIGNITY: JUBILEE HOPE FOR MARGINALISED GROUPS

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Abstract

This article, *Restoring Dignity: Jubilee Hope for Marginalised Groups*, offers a theological re-examination of the biblical Jubilee tradition as a paradigm for justice, liberation, and restoration in Asia's contexts of marginalisation. Drawing on Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61, and Luke 4:16-21, the article argues that Jubilee embodies a divine mandate for socio-economic renewal, ecological balance, and communal dignity. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates theological-liberationist hermeneutics with socio-analytical insights, it situates Jubilee within Asia's pressing realities: economic inequality, caste exclusion, gender injustice, religious persecution, and ecological devastation. It contends that the Jubilee tradition provides both a theology and a praxis of hope: a transformative, communal, and embodied resistance to despair grounded in God's preferential option for the poor. Through its fourfold praxis: debt cancellation, land restitution, liberation of captives, and ecological renewal, it

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demonstrates how Jubilee functions as a holistic system for restoring dignity and fostering integral human development. Moreover, it envisions the Church in Asia as a Jubilee community, called to prophetic witness, pastoral accompaniment, interfaith solidarity, and ecological conversion. Ultimately, the article affirms that Jubilee hope is not a deferred eschatological dream but a present reality that summons the Church and society to participate in God's ongoing work of liberation, reconciliation, and the renewal of creation.

Keywords: Jubilee theology, liberation, marginalisation, dignity, Asia, hope, ecclesial praxis.

1. Introduction

The biblical tradition of Jubilee is one of the most striking expressions of divine intent for justice, liberation, and restoration. Far from being an obscure ritual of ancient Israel, Jubilee is a theological declaration that speaks urgently to the present moment. The central texts (**Leviticus 25**, **Isaiah 61**, and **Luke 4:16-21**) depict a God who wills not only the spiritual well-being of humanity but also the socio-economic, political, and ecological dimensions of life. These texts are not relics of an ancient socio-religious imagination but profound resources for envisioning a transformed world marked by justice, equity, and peace.

As the universal Church celebrates a Jubilee Year focused on the theme of hope, this biblical and theological tradition invites a radical rethinking of what it means to live as a community of faith in contexts marked by marginalisation. In Asia¹ in particular, the Jubilee summons the Church to prophetic solidarity with the poor, the excluded, and the displaced. The lived realities of informal or casual workers trapped in cycles of debt, indigenous peoples dispossessed of their land, refugees stripped of legal identity, and communities suffering ecological devastation all highlight the urgency of a Jubilee vision that restores dignity.

The central claim of this study is that the **Jubilee tradition offers not only a theological vision of hope but also a praxis of restoration for marginalised groups**. Jubilee is a disruptive hope, one that challenges entrenched systems of oppression and reveals God's

¹ A continent characterised by both immense cultural richness and deep structural inequalities.

preferential option for the poor.² It is not a passive optimism for the future, but what Jürgen Moltmann famously described as “a hope that resists despair” and dares to anticipate God’s new creation in the present.³ This hope is communal, embodied, and transformative, calling the Church in Asia to reimagine its mission in concrete solidarity with the marginalised.

This paper therefore seeks to address the following question: **How can the Jubilee tradition function as a theology of hope that restores dignity to marginalised groups in Asia?** To do so, it will proceed in several steps. First, it will outline the methodological framework employed in this study, integrating theological hermeneutics with socio-analytical tools. Second, it will explore the biblical foundations of the Jubilee tradition in Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61, and Luke 4. Third, it will critically engage Asia’s contexts of marginalisation, highlighting economic oppression, social exclusion, displacement, and ecological crisis. Fourth, it will propose Jubilee praxis as a concrete way of restoring dignity in these contexts. Finally, it will reflect on the Church’s role as a Jubilee community, embodying prophetic witness and transformative hope.

By adopting this approach, the study does not merely seek to provide pious reflections on the Jubilee theme. Rather, it aims to develop what Felix Wilfred calls a “critical theology of hope” that emerges from the struggles and aspirations of Asia’s peoples and that refuses to divorce theological reflection from social transformation.⁴ In this sense, Jubilee is understood not only as a biblical tradition but as a **living paradigm for reimagining justice, restoration, and communal well-being** in our time.

2. Methodological Framework

The methodology employed in this study is **interdisciplinary and liberationist** in orientation, combining biblical exegesis, theological reflection, and socio-analytical insights. It follows a hermeneutical circle that moves between **text, context, and praxis**.

² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), 275.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 21.

⁴ Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 82.

2.1 Theological-Liberationist Hermeneutic

At the theological level, the study draws on the liberationist tradition that emerged in Latin America and has been received and reinterpreted in Asia. Gustavo Gutiérrez's seminal definition of theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word"⁵ provides a methodological foundation: theology must be accountable both to the biblical witness and to the lived experiences of the poor. This hermeneutic insists that theological inquiry cannot remain detached from concrete struggles for liberation but must be oriented towards transformation.

Within Asia, theologians such as **Aloysius Pieris** and **Samuel Rayan** have appropriated this hermeneutic in ways that are attentive to Asia's multi-religious context and cultural particularities. Pieris emphasizes that Asian liberation theology must be rooted simultaneously in "the struggle of the poor and the spiritual heritage of Asia's religions."⁶ Rayan, in turn, insists that theology must be "a cry of the poor and a song of liberation," challenging the Church to embody solidarity with the oppressed.⁷ These insights inform the present study's emphasis on Jubilee as a theology deeply embedded in social struggles while remaining open to interfaith dialogue and cultural plurality.

2.2 Socio-Analytical Approach

The second methodological element is socio-analytical. The study engages on empirical data and social analysis to illuminate the contexts of marginalisation in Asia. It uses resources from international bodies such as the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, which highlights the precarious situation of casual workers,⁸ and the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**, which documents the growing number of displaced persons in the region.⁹ Such data prevent theology from becoming abstract by situating reflection in concrete socio-economic realities.

⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 11.

⁶ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 73.

⁷ Samuel Rayan, *A New Humanity: A Theological Pilgrimage* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1975), 45.

⁸ International Labour Organization, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* (Geneva: ILO, 2018), 45.

⁹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2024), 78.

This socio-analytical lens is not merely descriptive but critical. It interrogates the structures of neoliberal capitalism, caste hierarchies, ethnic conflicts, and ecological exploitation that perpetuate marginalisation. As Jon Sobrino reminds us, the task of theology is to take the “crucified peoples of history” as the *locus theologicus*, the privileged place where God’s revelation is discerned.¹⁰ By engaging Asia’s crucified peoples, the Jubilee vision acquires both urgency and specificity.

2.3 Integration and Praxis

The final methodological step is to integrate theological reflection and socio-analytical insights into a praxis-oriented framework. Stephen Bevans and Robert Schreiter describe contextual theology as a “dynamic interaction of gospel and culture” where theology emerges from engagement with lived realities.¹¹ For this study, the praxis orientation means that Jubilee is not treated as a purely exegetical or theoretical construct but as a **transformative paradigm for restoring dignity**.

In this light, the method adopted here follows a **scientific theological process**: (1) observation of context (socio-analytical), (2) interpretation through the lens of Scripture and tradition (hermeneutical), and (3) application in transformative praxis (pastoral and prophetic). By maintaining this dialogical and praxis-oriented approach, the study ensures that theological reflection remains accountable to both the biblical witness and the struggles of Asia’s marginalised communities.

3. Biblical Foundations of Jubilee Hope

3.1 Leviticus 25: Land, Debt, and Rest

The Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 provides the primary textual foundation for the tradition. Situated within the Holiness Code, the Jubilee emerges as a radical socio-economic institution: every fiftieth year, debts are cancelled, slaves are set free, and land is restored to its original owners.¹² At its heart lies a theological claim about ownership: “*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you*

¹⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 50.

¹¹ Stephen B. Bevans and Robert J. Schreiter, *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 9.

¹² John Barton, *Leviticus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 203.

are but aliens and tenants" (Lev 25:23). This affirmation reframes human economic relationships by grounding them in God's sovereignty.

Walter Brueggemann emphasizes that this principle undermines absolutist notions of private property.¹³ Land is not a commodity but a covenantal gift entrusted to the community for the sustenance of all. As Christopher Wright observes, Jubilee insists that "economic life must be so ordered that every household has access to the means of livelihood."¹⁴ Debt cancellation and land restitution thus serve as mechanisms to prevent structural inequality from becoming permanent.

A second major theme is the liberation of persons. Leviticus 25:39–41 mandates that Israelites enslaved because of poverty must be released in the Jubilee year. While modern readers may be troubled by the text's acceptance of servitude, its radical thrust is to curb perpetual slavery and affirm the dignity of those reduced to debt bondage.¹⁵ The Jubilee affirms that poverty does not nullify a person's status as a member of God's covenant community.

Finally, the Jubilee integrates ecological dimensions through the sabbatical rest of the land (Lev 25:4–5). Ellen Davis argues that this ecological rest reflects a theology of creation in which the earth itself participates in God's covenant.¹⁶ The land is not merely a resource to be exploited but a living partner in the covenantal economy of God. The Jubilee's ecological mandate is particularly relevant in Asia, where extractive industries and climate change disproportionately harm marginalised communities.

In sum, Leviticus 25 envisions an economy ordered by divine justice, in which dignity is restored through debt release, land restitution, personal freedom, and ecological renewal.

3.2 Isaiah 61: Prophetic Reinterpretation

The prophetic text of Isaiah 61 reinterprets and expands the Jubilee tradition. Emerging in the post-exilic context, the proclamation: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent*

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 48–49.

¹⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 210.

¹⁵ Barton, *Leviticus*, 205.

¹⁶ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 78–80.

me to bring good news to the oppressed" (Isa 61:1) frames Jubilee not only as legislation but also as a divine mission.

Joseph Blenkinsopp highlights that this chapter is addressed to a community devastated by exile, whose land, identity, and dignity have been stripped away.¹⁷ The proclamation of liberty to captives and comfort to mourners speaks directly to their longing for restoration. The imagery of rebuilding ruined cities (Isa 61:4) situates Jubilee within a social reconstruction project that includes political, cultural, and economic renewal.

For liberation theologians, Isaiah 61 embodies God's preferential option for the oppressed. Gustavo Gutiérrez interprets the prophet's message as an announcement that "God takes sides with the poor in their struggle for life."¹⁸ Similarly, Samuel Rayan reads this passage as a call to solidarity with Asia's excluded communities, insisting that "to announce good news to the poor is to commit oneself to dismantling the systems that make them poor."¹⁹

Isaiah's reinterpretation underscores that Jubilee is not a one-time event but an ongoing divine initiative for liberation. Its significance lies not only in economic reforms but also in the comprehensive restoration of human dignity through justice, healing, and communal rebuilding.

3.3 Luke 4:16–21: Jesus' Jubilee Manifesto

In Luke's Gospel, the Jubilee reaches its Christological climax when Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...*", and declares, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*" (Lk 4:21). He identifies his messianic mission with the Jubilee.

Joachim Jeremias argues that Jesus' citation of Isaiah 61 was not a casual choice but a deliberate manifesto announcing the inauguration of God's reign.²⁰ Luke's framing emphasises the present reality of liberation: the Jubilee is no longer deferred to the future but realised in the person and mission of Jesus. N. T. Wright similarly asserts that

¹⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 212.

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 112.

¹⁹ Samuel Rayan, *Living Water, Living Flame: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 92.

²⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 98.

the Nazareth manifesto is "a programmatic statement" in which Jesus declares the restoration of Israel and the renewal of creation.²¹

The implications of this proclamation are radical. By announcing good news to the poor, release to captives, and freedom to the oppressed, Jesus directly confronts the structures of exclusion in his society. Joel Green notes that Luke consistently portrays Jesus as one who identifies with the marginalised, including tax collectors, women, lepers, and Samaritans; and that the Nazareth episode encapsulates this trajectory.²²

Asian theologians have found in Luke 4 a profound resource for contextual mission. C. S. Song describes Jesus as "the Asian face of God's Jubilee," who speaks to the brokenness of Asia's peoples and invites the Church to embody God's healing in their midst.²³ For Chung Hyun Kyung, Luke 4 reveals a Spirit-centered liberation that includes not only social justice but also ecological healing and the affirmation of women's dignity.²⁴

Thus, Luke 4 presents Jubilee not merely as a socio-economic programme but as the very essence of Jesus' mission, which the Church is called to continue in every age and context.

3.4 Theological Significance of Jubilee

The convergence of Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61, and Luke 4 reveals a multi-dimensional theology of Jubilee with enduring significance:

1. **Economic Justice:** By mandating debt release and land restitution, Jubilee affirms that economic systems must serve human dignity rather than enslave people in poverty.
2. **Social Liberation:** By proclaiming freedom for captives, Jubilee confronts social structures that perpetuate exclusion, whether through caste, ethnicity, or gender.
3. **Ecological Renewal:** By granting rest to the land, Jubilee acknowledges creation's dignity and the need for ecological balance.

²¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 229–231.

²² Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78.

²³ C. S. Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit: Sketches in Asian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 45.

²⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 64.

4. **Eschatological Hope:** By being fulfilled in Christ, Jubilee transcends mere legislation to become a sign of God's Kingdom breaking into history.

As Moltmann observes, Christian hope is "eschatology that becomes ethics,"²⁵ and the Jubilee embodies this integration. It is a vision of God's reign that simultaneously confronts present injustices while anticipating the fullness of the new creation.

For Asia's marginalised communities, the Jubilee tradition serves as a powerful theological resource. It dismantles despair by affirming God's solidarity with the oppressed and by envisioning a transformed world where dignity is restored. As Felix Wilfred aptly states, "The future promised in the Jubilee tradition becomes the horizon of struggle in the present."²⁶

4. Marginalisation in Asia: A Critical Context

4.1 Understanding Marginalisation: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

Marginalisation is the systematic exclusion of individuals or groups from full participation in social, political, cultural, and economic life.²⁷ It is not merely a sociological phenomenon but also a theological concern, since it denies the image of God (*imago Dei*) in the excluded. Social scientists often classify marginalisation as both **structural**, embedded in political and economic systems, and **cultural** shaped by values, stereotypes, and ideologies.²⁸

For this section, I adopt a **multidisciplinary method**, integrating insights from sociology, postcolonial studies, and theology. The **scientific method** applied here involves: (1) identifying key categories of marginalised communities in Asia; (2) analysing empirical data from credible sources (World Bank, UNDP, Asian Development Bank); and (3) interpreting these realities theologically in light of the Jubilee tradition.²⁹

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 327.

²⁶ Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 119.

²⁷ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.

²⁸ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 7–9.

²⁹ World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), 3–5.

Theologically, marginalisation is understood through what Jon Sobrino terms the "crucified peoples", those whose lives reflect the suffering of Christ in history.³⁰ This hermeneutic situates socio-economic analysis within the Christian faith, enabling Jubilee hope to be contextualised as both critique and promise.

4.2 Economic Marginalisation: The Poor and Landless

Asia is home to both unprecedented economic growth and extreme inequality. The World Bank reports that while East Asia lifted over 800 million people out of poverty between 1990 and 2015, the gap between rich and poor has widened dramatically.³¹ In South Asia, particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, rural landlessness remains one of the most persistent forms of economic marginalisation. Land is often concentrated in the hands of elites, leaving millions dependent on exploitative wage labour.³²

Debt bondage is another enduring reality. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that South Asia accounts for over 60% of the world's bonded labourers.³³ These individuals – often women and children become trapped in cycles of debt repayment for generations, mirroring the systemic enslavement the Levitical Jubilee sought to abolish.

From a theological standpoint, the Jubilee's call for land redistribution (Lev 25:10) challenges the concentration of wealth and resources. As Aloysius Pieris argues, Asian poverty is "a poverty amidst plenty," in which the poor are excluded not by absolute scarcity but because of structural injustice.³⁴ Jubilee hope, then, envisions not mere charity but systemic transformation – ensuring access to the means of livelihood for all.

4.3 Caste, Ethnicity, and Cultural Exclusion

The caste system in India and South Asia is one of the most entrenched forms of cultural and social marginalisation. Dalits, who constitute nearly 200 million people, continue to face exclusion despite

³⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), 32.

³¹ World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020), 45–48.

³² Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 22–24.

³³ International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (Geneva: ILO, 2017), 36.

³⁴ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 54.

constitutional protections.³⁵ They are denied equal access to education, housing, and employment, and are often subjected to violence.

Similarly, ethnic minorities across Asia, including the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Kurds in the Middle East, and the hill-tribes in Thailand face systemic discrimination.³⁶ These exclusions manifest as statelessness, denial of citizenship, and forced displacement.

From a theological perspective, the concept of *imago Dei* affirms the equal dignity of all human beings. Asian theologian Felix Wilfred stresses that “any theology in Asia must reckon with the scandal of caste and ethnicity as denials of God’s image.” The Jubilee proclamation in Isaiah 61 “good news to the poor and liberty to captives”, resonates as a divine critique of such cultural exclusions.

Moreover, Dalit theologians such as Arvind P. Nirmal interpret Jesus’ solidarity with the outcasts of his time as a paradigm for Dalit liberation today.³⁷ By appropriating the Jubilee motif, Dalit theology affirms the dignity of those considered “untouchable,” transforming their exclusion into a locus of divine presence.

4.4 Gender and Patriarchal Marginalisation

Patriarchy remains a dominant reality across Asia, perpetuating the subordination of women in family, society, and religion. The UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index highlights South Asia as one of the most unequal regions globally, with women’s labour-force participation significantly below men’s and high rates of maternal mortality.³⁸

Trafficking and sexual exploitation further compound this marginalisation. The Global Slavery Index estimates that India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh together account for millions of women and girls in forced labour and sexual slavery.³⁹

Asian feminist theologians have critically engaged with these realities. Chung Hyun Kyung, for example, insists that “women’s struggle for dignity is inseparable from the Spirit’s liberating work in

³⁵ Anand Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 15.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023* (New York: HRW, 2023), 250–254.

³⁷ Arvind P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1991), 23.

³⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2021/2022* (New York: UNDP, 2022), 188.

³⁹ Global Slavery Index, *Global Findings Report 2022* (Perth: Walk Free Foundation, 2022), 57.

history."⁴⁰ For her, Jubilee is not only about economic justice but also about reclaiming the dignity of women's bodies, voices, and agency. Similarly, Indian theologian Shalini Mulackal argues that the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55) should be read as a feminist proclamation of Jubilee hope, where God "casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly."⁴¹

Thus, Jubilee in Asia must be gender-sensitive, confronting patriarchal structures and affirming women's equal dignity as bearers of God's image.

4.5 Religious Minorities and Persecution

Religious marginalisation is another critical issue. In Pakistan, blasphemy laws disproportionately target Christians and Ahmadis. In Myanmar, the Rohingya Muslims face what the UN has described as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."⁴² In India, rising Hindu nationalism has intensified violence against Christians and Muslims.⁴³

The Jubilee message challenges such exclusion by affirming that religious freedom is intrinsic to human dignity. The Vatican's *Gaudium et Spes* insists that "the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person."⁴⁴ Asian Christian theologians echo this, highlighting interreligious solidarity as a form of Jubilee praxis. For instance, Raimon Panikkar's theology of dialogue envisions the Jubilee as "a horizon of harmony among religions, where each tradition contributes to human flourishing."⁴⁵

4.6 Ecological Marginalisation

Finally, ecological devastation constitutes a form of marginalisation, disproportionately affecting Asia's poor. Rising sea levels threaten island nations such as Maldives, while industrial pollution devastates rural communities in India and China.⁴⁶ Climate

⁴⁰ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 64.

⁴¹ Shalini Mulackal, "Mary and the Magnificat: A Feminist Reading," in *Asian Women's Theology* (Bangalore: ATC, 2005), 141.

⁴² United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar* (Geneva: UNHRC, 2018), 4.

⁴³ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 301.

⁴⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §26.

⁴⁵ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 72.

⁴⁶ Asian Development Bank, *A Region at Risk: The Human Dimensions of Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: ADB, 2017), 17.

change exacerbates food insecurity, displacing millions of climate refugees.

Eco-theologians such as Leonardo Boff remind us that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable.⁴⁷ Jubilee's call for the land to rest (Lev 25:4) provides a biblical foundation for ecological justice. Asian theologians like Michael Amaladoss argue that ecological restoration is central to any Asian theology of liberation: "Jubilee is as much for the land as for humanity."⁴⁸

Thus, ecological marginalisation must be addressed not only as an environmental crisis but also as a matter of human dignity, since the poorest bear its heaviest costs.

4.7 Synthesis: Marginalisation and the Need for Jubilee Hope

The analysis of economic, cultural, gendered, religious, and ecological marginalisation reveals the multifaceted nature of exclusion across Asia. These realities constitute what Samuel Rayan calls the "crucifying structures" of Asia – systems that deny life to the poor and vulnerable.⁴⁹

Against this backdrop, the Jubilee tradition functions as a theological resource for hope. By affirming the release of captives, the redistribution of land, and the rest of creation, Jubilee dismantles despair and restores dignity. As Moltmann insists, hope is not optimism but "anticipation that transforms the present in light of God's future."⁵⁰ Applied to Asia, Jubilee hope becomes both a critique of unjust structures and a promise of liberation.

5. Restoring Dignity through Jubilee Praxis

The biblical Jubilee is not merely an idealized socio-religious practice of ancient Israel but a paradigm that calls the Church to enact God's liberating justice in history. Its mandates—debt cancellation, land restitution, the liberation of captives, and ecological renewal—offer practical avenues for restoring dignity to Asia's marginalised groups. In what follows, four interconnected dimensions of Jubilee praxis will be critically explored: economic dignity through debt

⁴⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 30.

⁴⁸ Michael Amaladoss, *Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 144.

⁴⁹ Samuel Rayan, *Living Water, Living Flame: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 91.

⁵⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 20.

cancellation, justice through land restitution, the liberation of captives through social inclusion, and ecological renewal as a holistic expression of dignity.

a. Debt Cancellation and Economic Dignity

Debt cancellation lies at the heart of the Jubilee tradition (Lev 25:10, 35–38), which prohibited the perpetual enslavement of Israelites due to economic hardship. In the Asian context, the debt crisis, whether borne by states or individuals, remains a persistent cause of marginalisation. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Laos have faced crippling foreign debt, forcing austerity measures that disproportionately harm the poor through cuts in social services and rising unemployment.⁵¹ Microcredit schemes, initially hailed as instruments of empowerment in Bangladesh, have in many cases reproduced cycles of indebtedness, particularly among women, who are compelled to take multiple loans at exorbitant interest rates to sustain their families.⁵²

Theologically, debt cancellation affirms that life and dignity cannot be commodified indefinitely. As Walter Brueggemann observes, the Jubilee asserts that "the economy of Yahweh interrupts and contradicts the exploitative economy of Pharaoh,"⁵³ exposing the idolatry of debt systems that perpetuate poverty. In Catholic Social Teaching, *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) emphasize the "structures of sin" that sustain economic dependency.⁵⁴ Pope Francis has echoed this in urging wealthy nations to cancel the unjust debts of impoverished countries, especially in light of ecological and humanitarian crises.⁵⁵

From a praxis perspective, Asian Churches have sought to embody this Jubilee mandate. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has spoken against exploitative lending practices in rural

⁵¹ International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Asia and Pacific* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2023), 52–54.

⁵² Lamia Karim, *Microfinance and Its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 88–112.

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 175.

⁵⁴ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), §26; John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), §36.

⁵⁵ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), §273.

communities.⁵⁶ Civil society movements, such as the Asian Jubilee South Coalition, have called for cancellation of illegitimate debts and demanded accountability for exploitative loans imposed by international financial institutions. These movements embody the Jubilee hope by restoring economic dignity to those who live under the crushing weight of financial bondage.

b. Land Restitution and Justice for the Displaced

The Jubilee required that land be returned to its original owners (Lev 25:23–28). Because land was considered God’s property, entrusted to families as their inheritance, its alienation violated covenantal justice. Land restitution, therefore, was not a mere economic measure but an act of restoring dignity and community identity.

Asia’s land struggles underscore the urgency of this mandate. In India, farmers’ movements, such as the 2020–2021 protests against agricultural reform laws, reflected deep anxieties about land dispossession and corporate capture.⁵⁷ In the Philippines, peasant organizations like the Kilusang Magbubukidng Pilipinas (KMP) have demanded agrarian reform and protection from land-grabbing by multinational corporations.⁵⁸ Indigenous communities in Indonesia, threatened by palm oil expansion, face displacement from ancestral territories, leading to cultural erosion and poverty.⁵⁹

Biblically, land is the locus of covenantal blessing and the basis of community sustenance. As N. T. Wright stresses, Jubilee reaffirms that “land is gift, not possession,”⁶⁰ an insight that challenges Asia’s neoliberal economic order. Catholic Social Teaching consistently affirms the universal destination of goods, as articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), which holds that “the right to private property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good.”⁶¹ Pope

⁵⁶ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, *Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice* (New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 2016), 14–16.

⁵⁷ Harsh Mander, “India’s Farmers’ Protest: A Struggle for Democracy and Dignity,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 56, no. 7 (2021): 12–15.

⁵⁸ Walden Bello, “Land, Peasants, and Resistance in the Philippines,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, no. 3–4 (2015): 655–672.

⁵⁹ Marcus Colchester, *Palm Oil and Indigenous Peoples in South East Asia* (London: Forest Peoples Programme, 2011), 22–34.

⁶⁰ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 289.

⁶¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §69.

Francis further sharpened this point in *Laudato Si'*, condemning land grabbing and the exploitation of indigenous peoples.⁶²

Concrete praxis in Asia includes the Church's active solidarity with displaced peoples. In Myanmar, Christian leaders have called for international attention to the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially ethnic minorities facing land seizures by the military.⁶³ In India, grassroots Jesuit initiatives like the Jharkhand-based land rights campaigns have supported Adivasi (tribal) communities in reclaiming ancestral lands.⁶⁴ In such efforts, the Jubilee principle of land restitution becomes a lived theology of hope for restoring dignity to displaced groups.

c. Liberation of Captives and Social Inclusion

The Jubilee mandated the release of those enslaved due to debt or oppression (Lev 25:39–41; Isa 61:1). In the Asian context, "captivity" takes multiple forms: bonded labour, caste-based exclusion, gender oppression, human trafficking, and migrant exploitation. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), South Asia accounts for over 15 million bonded labourers, many of them Dalits, women, and children.⁶⁵ In the Gulf states, Asian migrant workers endure systemic exploitation under the kafala system, often working in inhumane conditions without adequate rights or protections.⁶⁶

Theologically, the liberation of captives is at the center of Jesus' Jubilee proclamation (Lk 4:18). It extends beyond physical freedom to encompass social inclusion and the restoration of dignity. Samuel Rayan, reflecting on Asia's poor, argues that "God's grace is God's solidarity with the least,"⁶⁷ making the struggle against exclusion a theological imperative.

The Church in Asia has sought to embody this mandate. In India, ecclesial movements have engaged with Dalit theology, affirming the

⁶² Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §146.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch, *An Atmosphere of Fear: Political Repression in Myanmar* (New York: HRW, 2022), 43–45.

⁶⁴ Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2012), 119–121.

⁶⁵ International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery* (Geneva: ILO, 2022), 17–19.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch, *"I Already Bought You": Abuse and Exploitation of Female Migrant Domestic Workers in the United Arab Emirates* (New York: HRW, 2014), 9–11.

⁶⁷ Samuel Rayan, *A Rainbow in the Dark: Essays on Justice and Liberation* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 42.

equal dignity of those historically excluded by caste hierarchies.⁶⁸ In the Philippines, Catholic groups have advocated for migrant workers' rights, both domestically and in collaboration with diaspora chaplaincies abroad.⁶⁹ These actions concretely express Jubilee hope by embodying liberation and fostering communities of belonging.

Moreover, the call to liberate captives extends to dismantling the stigma associated with marginalised identities. Feminist theologians such as Chung Hyun Kyung highlight that women, particularly in patriarchal Asian societies, continue to bear the brunt of systemic captivity through gender-based violence and exclusion.⁷⁰ Integrating these perspectives into the Church's praxis reflects a Jubilee-inspired inclusivity that restores dignity to all, especially those systematically silenced.

d. Ecological Renewal and Rest

The Jubilee also mandated ecological rest: the land itself was to observe a Sabbath (Lev 25:4). This principle recognises creation's intrinsic dignity and rejects exploitative anthropocentrism. In Asia, where ecological crises are most acute, this mandate speaks directly to environmental degradation and its disproportionate impact on the poor.

Climate change-induced disasters such as Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013), recurrent flooding in Bangladesh, and widespread deforestation in Indonesia and Malaysia illustrate the ecological vulnerability of Asia's poor.⁷¹ These communities often experience "double marginalisation": excluded socially and economically, while also bearing the brunt of ecological destruction caused by industrialised economies.

Theological responses have emphasised the interconnectedness of creation and human dignity. Aloysius Pieris argues that "the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth are one and the same,"⁷² echoing Pope

⁶⁸ James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christianity* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 65–71.

⁶⁹ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Pastoral Statement on Migrants and Overseas Workers* (Manila: CBCP Publications, 2014).

⁷⁰ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 104–107.

⁷¹ Asian Development Bank, *A Region at Risk: The Human Dimensions of Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: ADB, 2017), 28–39.

⁷² Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 114.

Francis' insistence in *Laudato Si'* that the ecological crisis is inseparable from social injustice.⁷³ Asian eco-theologies, such as those developed by Chung Hyun Kyung, have underscored the sacredness of the cosmos as a partner in human flourishing.⁷⁴

In practice, Asian Churches have engaged in ecological advocacy: tree-planting movements in the Philippines, watershed management in India, and anti-mining campaigns in Indonesia represent faith-based ecological initiatives rooted in the Jubilee vision. These efforts reflect an integrated praxis of ecological rest and the restoration of human dignity, showing that hope is not abstract but grounded in concrete acts of ecological justice.

As seen so far in this section five, the Jubilee praxis: cancelling debts, restituting land, liberating captives, and renewing creation constitutes a holistic vision for restoring dignity in Asia's fractured realities. Each mandate directly addresses structures of marginalisation: economic bondage, displacement, social exclusion, and ecological destruction. By embodying these principles, the Church not only reclaims its prophetic role but also offers tangible hope to marginalised communities. As Moltmann reminds us, "hope is not only expectation but participation in God's coming future."⁷⁵ Jubilee praxis is thus not a distant eschatological dream but a present struggle for dignity and liberation that mirrors the Kingdom of God.

6. The Church as Jubilee Community

The Jubilee vision articulated in Scripture moves beyond an abstract theological construct to call the ecclesial community to embody its transformative implications in history. The Church in Asia, amid deep inequalities, displacement, and ecological crises, is challenged to become a *Jubilee community*: a body that witnesses to God's justice, inclusion, and liberation. In this sense, the Church's role is prophetic, pastoral, and dialogical, rooted in solidarity with the marginalised and open to collaboration with diverse religious traditions.

6.1 The Prophetic Role of the Church

At its core, the Jubilee tradition calls the people of God to proclaim freedom and restoration (Lev. 25; Lk. 4:16–21). The Church, therefore, bears a prophetic responsibility to denounce unjust structures and to

⁷³ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §49.

⁷⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 121–124.

⁷⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 18.

announce the possibility of a new order grounded in dignity and equity. Asian liberation theologians have long underscored this dimension. Samuel Rayan affirms that “the prophetic Church is the conscience of society, interrogating its structures in the name of the poor and oppressed.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Michael Amaladoss calls on the Asian Church to act as a leaven of transformation, making God’s kingdom visible by challenging systems that perpetuate exclusion.⁷⁷

In concrete terms, this prophetic witness includes advocacy for debt cancellation, land justice, the protection of migrants and refugees, and ecological preservation. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) has repeatedly emphasized that the Church cannot remain a “neutral spectator” but must actively engage in the struggle for life and dignity.⁷⁸ Prophetic praxis is not confined to verbal denunciation; it demands symbolic actions, such as offering sanctuary to refugees or promoting community-based ecological projects that embody the hope of Jubilee.

6.2 The Pastoral Role of Accompaniment

Beyond prophetic denunciation, the Church is called to pastoral accompaniment, nurturing the dignity and hope of marginalised groups. Jubilee is not only about structural reform but also about the healing of broken lives. Asian pastoral praxis requires a spirituality of presence, listening, and accompaniment. Aloysius Pieris stresses that the Asian Church must practice a “double baptism”, immersion into the religious traditions of Asia and in the suffering of the poor.⁷⁹ This double solidarity places the Church in a unique position to mediate reconciliation, healing, and empowerment.

Pastoral accompaniment involves developing educational initiatives for marginalised children, pastoral care for migrant workers, and psycho-spiritual support for survivors of conflict and displacement. It also requires liturgical expressions that incorporate the laments and hopes of the oppressed. Such practices communicate

⁷⁶ Samuel Rayan, *A New Earth: Essays in Asian Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 114.

⁷⁷ Michael Amaladoss, *Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 58.

⁷⁸ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 1: FABC Documents 1970–1991*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 14.

⁷⁹ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 107.

concretely that God's Jubilee promise is "good news for the poor" (Lk. 4:18).

6.3 Interfaith Solidarity and Dialogue

Asia's multi-religious fabric necessitates that the Jubilee hope be embodied in interfaith collaboration. The FABC has repeatedly taught that dialogue is "the new way of being Church in Asia."⁸⁰ Jubilee, with its emphasis on communal well-being, ecological care, and justice, provides a framework for solidarity across religious boundaries. Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Indigenous spiritual traditions all possess rich resources for liberation and ecological harmony. Pieris notes that Asia's poor are also deeply religious, and therefore, authentic Christian engagement must integrate interreligious solidarity.⁸¹

Practical expressions of this dialogue include joint ecological initiatives, interfaith advocacy for refugees, and cooperative programmes for poverty alleviation. Such collaboration enacts the biblical vision of Jubilee as a communal renewal, extending beyond confessional lines. In this way, the Church becomes not an isolated enclave but a partner in humanity's shared struggle for justice and dignity.

6.4 Ecclesial Renewal as Jubilee Witness

Finally, the Church itself must embody Jubilee principles in its internal life. The call to forgiveness, inclusion, and equity challenges hierarchical and clericalist tendencies that risk alienating the faithful. Ecclesial renewal requires fostering participatory structures, empowering the laity (especially women), and ensuring transparency in resource allocation. Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino reminds us that "the Church is credible only when it becomes the Church of the poor, the crucified peoples of history."⁸² In Asia, this entails aligning ecclesial structures with the voices of the excluded and ensuring that liturgy, catechesis, and mission reflect their realities.

Moreover, the ecological Jubilee compels the Church to adopt sustainable practices in its institutions, reducing carbon footprints, protecting land, and promoting ecological spirituality. Pope Francis,

⁸⁰ FABC, *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 2: FABC Documents 1992-1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 29.

⁸¹ Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 112-15.

⁸² Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 211.

in *Laudato Si'*, calls the Church to ecological conversion, recognising that care for creation is inseparable from care for the poor.⁸³ A Jubilee community is thus one that models a new lifestyle, offering hope by demonstrating that another way of being is possible.

This section six (6) is at the point that to be a Jubilee community in Asia is to embody a holistic praxis that is prophetic, pastoral, dialogical, and reformative. The Church is summoned not merely to preach about hope but to incarnate it by restoring dignity in concrete or tangible ways. In becoming a sign of Jubilee, the Church not only responds to Asia's present wounds but also points toward God's eschatological promise of a renewed creation.

Conclusion: Restoring Dignity through Jubilee Hope

The Jubilee, as rooted in the Scriptures (Lev. 25; Isa. 61; Lk. 4:16–21), is not merely a relic of Israel's socio-religious past but a living theological paradigm that addresses Asia's contemporary realities of marginalisation, displacement, economic injustice, and ecological devastation. It embodies God's radical vision of liberation, forgiveness, and restoration. The Jubilee commandment dismantles systems of despair and proclaims the dignity of all creation by affirming that the earth belongs to God, not to exploitative structures or empires.

This study has argued that restoring dignity through Jubilee hope requires a holistic engagement that is **biblical, theological, prophetic, and practical**. In Asia's complex landscape, the marginalised: migrant workers, indigenous peoples, refugees, women, and ecological refugees, are privileged interlocutors of God's Jubilee promise. Their suffering and resilience make visible the crucified Christ in history and call the Church to solidarity and transformative praxis.

Theologically, Jubilee hope disrupts complacency by affirming God's preferential option for the poor. It is not a passive optimism but an active, prophetic trust that God's liberating will can break into history. Practically, this hope must take shape through debt cancellation, land reform, ecological stewardship, interfaith solidarity, and pastoral accompaniment. The Church, called to be a Jubilee community, is summoned to embody these commitments through its

⁸³ Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §217.

prophetic voice, pastoral ministry, interreligious dialogue, and ecclesial reform.

In Asia's multi-religious and pluralist context, Jubilee hope fosters common ground for collaboration across traditions, uniting communities in the pursuit of justice and ecological harmony. It is also deeply eschatological: pointing not only to immediate reform but also to God's promised renewal of creation, where tears will be wiped away and dignity fully restored (Rev. 21:1-4).

Ultimately, *Restoring Dignity: Jubilee Hope for Marginalised Groups* emphasises that the Jubilee vision is not an optional ideal but a mandate for the people of God. To embrace Jubilee is to live into the Kingdom of God here and now, proclaiming release to captives, standing with the poor, healing the broken, and safeguarding creation. In doing so, the Church and society alike participate in God's transformative work of renewing life in its fullness, a sign of hope that refuses despair and embodies the liberating character of God's love.