

# **Empowering God's All Peoples : Concerns for Theological Education in North India**

**GODWIN R. SINGH\***

**T**his brief presentation endeavours to examine the priorities and their implications for theological education as ministerial formation and to envision what challenges and tasks the future holds for this in future pursuance under the auspices of seminaries and theological college belonging to the Serampore (University) College family and which are located in North India belt stretching from the Punjab in the North West to Bengal in the East. The North East Indian context is considered beyond the scope of this paper. This would mean to include Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, hill tracts with tribal population, Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, W. Bengal and some extent Madhya Pradesh being a predominantly Hindi speaking region with a large tribal and mixed population. As the focus is on North India understood in a broad sense the scope is somewhat limited. The objective is to project those emerging issues in the North Indian context on the agenda of the theological education which are likely to become crucial in immediate future and will grip the attention of theological educators. Such a projection is not only oriented to the future but will also draw heavily from history and past developments. This in totality would be the frame of reference and the locus of the priorities on the agenda of theological education facing the impending millennial transition and beyond.

Before undertaking this, a few basic assumptions have to be underlined. Theological education does not only address to the Christian churches alone but has the overarching concern of including all people in the given context. In the North Indian reality Christian Church is of recent origin and therefore the whole enterprise of imparting theological education as it concern is relatively in its early stages, mainly founded upon the result of the missionary endeavours of the last one hundred years. North Indian Christians cannot boast of an enviable past, leave aside an ancient tradition or an apostolic connection like some

---

\* *Rev. Dr. Godwin R. Singh is the Principal of Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur, India*

of the South Indian Christians claim. Even though remains of a Nestorian tradition with the Pahalavi influences were discovered at Charshada in NW India, now Pakistan by the British-Indian archaeologists but these relics since long have been lost to oblivion and are no more traceable.

By and large the Church in North India comprises poverty-stricken masses and built on the efforts and the result of the labours of the missionaries from the West. The presence of Christian churches, mission schools, hospitals and a few colleges came about during the course of the last one hundred years. The first quarter century was struggling and pioneering to establish the mission work, the second as the period when Christian churches, schools, hostels and orphanages came into existence, and the third as the beginning of medical work, work for women, pastoring of congregations and great expansion in the villages. The fourth quarter devoted to training members of the local churches for the large role they would have to play but also to greater effort in medical and literature work as well as evangelism among the low caste population.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in the North West where Protestant missionaries from the U.S., U.K., and Europe were active, mission stations were established at Rawalpindi, Lahore, Simla, Ludhiana, Saharanpur, Sabathu, Allahabad, Fatehgarh, Dehra Dun, Meerut and Roorkee, as these places were strategic British out-posts. The missionaries were encouraged in their work due to two factors. There was a growing demand made by high caste urban Indian for a western education in the English language so that they might be qualified for entrance into government service or the legal, medical, engineering and teaching professions. There was also the widespread desire among the lowest castes, particularly in the Punjab and the United Provinces to better their lot either by making themselves more respectable in traditional Hindu terms or by converting *en masse* to any one of a number of other religions such as Islam, Sikhism, Arya Samaj, Hinduism or Christianity. The low castes involved in what became known as the mass movements were Chamars, Chuhras, Lal Begis, Bhangis, Meghs and the Mazhabi Sikhs. Most of these subcastes were considered outcastes, or outside the *varna* system. They were treated unclean and therefore untouchables. They were denied access to the places of public worship, and they had to use separate wells and water resources. One of the reasons for this treatment was that their occupations of leather industry, scavenging and sweeping which were considered unclean and defiling.<sup>2</sup> No doubt, that at the initial stages of missionary efforts, some converts were drawn from high caste Hindu and Muslim backgrounds but later a large number of low caste

converts entered the church in North India and the church became a mixed community.<sup>\*3</sup> The rural mass movement converts generally entered the Christian community in groups comprising a portion of the entire Chuhra or Chamar or Lal Begi community. After baptism they continued to live in the same houses and in the same section of the village and with the same neighbours as before.

The Christian missionaries in North India were sent by various denominational mission boards and they were interested primarily in preaching the Gospel and 'winning souls for Christ'. Accordingly the churches of North Indian Christians were established on denominational lines belonging to Methodists, Presbyterian, Anglican, the London Missionary Society, Baptists, the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholics missions. In the North West, the mass movement prospered in the Rohilkhand, Meerut and Agra divisions of the U.P. and the Sialkot, Lyallpur, Gurdaspur, Gujarat and Lahore districts of the Punjab. The main occupations of the North Indian Christians in the United Provinces and the Punjab have been supplying cheap labour for the landed peasantry, agricultural servitude and even bonded labour, for industries related with refuse matter, domestic and menial services. In course of time the upper social stratum of the urban North Indian Church which became an elitist minority, the churches' ecclesiastical structures, forms of worship, the social life and cultural values tended to be quite westernized. However, the pattern of life of the poor North Indian Christian remained in solidarity, socially and culturally, if not religiously, in continuity with their past.

The missionary era ended in the wake of the national independence and several of the denomination united in larger bodies like the Church of North India. There was transfer of leadership to the North Indian Christians with taking over management and administration of churches, institutions and properties. The overseas financial aid dwindled. The national government's policy of reservations and concessions to depressed classes and castes, who now were labelled as 'scheduled castes' and 'Harijan' and the legislation outlawing untouchability affected the Christians adversely. The concessions to the Harijans and factors of economic disability forced many poorer North Indian Christians to revert to their former pre-missionary status.

Surprisingly enough, despite statistical decline and sliding back due to the discriminatory policy of the government, a new stirring of the Spirit has been felt among the Christians in North India. Instead of despondency, there has been a vibrant struggle for regaining and asserting their identity. Recently, the

North Indian Christians of the so-called scheduled caste origin have adopted a new and singularly meaningful word 'Dalit' as a name for themselves, a name not given by others but of their choice for themselves. The word is loaded with rich connotation denoting their history and predicament. This epithet drives home the fact that they are an oppressed people. The word has a common bond which brings all *Dalits* together i.e., the oppression against them.

It is now being claimed that Christians in North India were *Dalits* before they embraced Christianity. Their coming to the church has been characterised as the Dalit movement. The first stage of this movement was characterised by mass conversions, the second stage covering the first two decades of the present century was when politics replaced conversion and the third and the present stage covering the post-independence period has witnessed experiment in 'compensatory discrimination' set forth in the present constitution of India which treats Christians from Dalits and Christian Dalits from other Dalits very differently and pushes them even further apart.<sup>4</sup> The Christian Dalits have the most outspoken and articulate advocacy for themselves through this new identity, sometimes touching virulency, notwithstanding the bitterness of their past and present lot. Some has gone to the extent of bluntness of accusing and declaring the Church hierarchy, its leadership, its structure of doing theological education having lost its mission and ceasing to be a monopoly of the elite. They challenge it to abdicate that role to the people, to Dalits of course ! The people are the Dalits, the broken, the torn, the rent, the split, the down trodden, the crushed !<sup>5</sup> They accuse the Indian Christian theology exponents, whose articulation and formulation have been on the agenda of theological education in India, in the past had tried to work out its articulation in terms of either Advaita Vedanta or Vishishta Advaita or by some branch of Yoga by the caste converts to Christianity. The result has been that Indian Christian Theology has perpetuated within itself the Brahminic traditions such as the *jnana marga*, the *bhakti marga* and the *karma marga*. They decry that the Indian Christian theology is obsessed with the Brahminic traditions. This pursuit has no inclination to reflect theologically on the *Dalit* converts who constitute the majority of the North Indian Church. There were times when the Indian Christian Theology had opportunities of cross-fertilization and inspiration by the Third World Theologies, the liberation theology and the black theology but somehow it went on ignoring the reality of the *Dalits* in North India. While most Christians in North India are of Dalit origin this fact alone is the most important commonalty cutting across

the various authentic liberation motifs for Indian Christian Theology.<sup>6</sup> If theological education in North India failed to perceive this in the past, there is all the more reason for waking up to the reality today and for applying seriously to do the task of doing *Dalit* Theology.

The *Dalit* theology has been defined as a theology about the *Dalits* or theological reflection as the Christians, responsibility to the depressed classes. It is also defined as a theology for the depressed classes to which theological education must respond. Thirdly it is an emerging theology from the depressed classes which *Dalits* themselves would aspire to expound, formulate and articulate. The historical *Dalit* consciousness is the primary datum of such a theology. The question of *Dalit* consciousness is the question of *Dalit* identity or the question of the *Dalit* roots. The historical *Dalit* consciousness in India depicts that deep anguish or pain or dehumanisation which may be similar to the Korean concept of 'Han'. *Dalits* as outcastes were also surviving as cast out from the village on the fringe in *Dalit bastis* (localities) and suffered the inhuman oppression at the hands of high caste communities. They were forbidden literacy, education, even an adequate dress on their bodies and were denied access to public water resources and were banned from entering places of public worship. This historical consciousness must inform any attempt at doing Christian *Dalit* Theology. For a Christian *Dalit*, theologizing cannot be merely reassertion and gaining of the deprived rights, benefits of reservations and privileges offered by government or churches, but the fulfilment of this theologizing that is the realization of full humanness and full divinity, the ideal of the *imago Dei*.<sup>7</sup> Both the 1935 Constitution under the British rule in India and the 1950 Constitution of the Indian Republic deprived Indian Christian *Dalits* of the economic rights, political rights, privileges and reservations. The Indian Christian *Dalits* have been reduced to "no people". It is always the "no people" who are God's very own people.

The radically minded *Dalit* Christians are demanding that in order to reformulate a new system of frame a new construct for theological education in North India, the first step before launching this is to dissociate from the current practice of theological education as being taught in the North Indian seminaries and which largely tends to legitimise the *status quo*. So accordingly Christian theological education and theologians in North India have to make the option in favour of the *Dalits* and to "declass" themselves.

Such a reconstruct of theological education for North India has to be based on a *Dalit* theology that is, a theology by, for

and of an oppressed people. It is a people's theology. The primary datum for doing such a theology is people themselves. It will be a counter theology to other dominant theologies. The distinctive identity of this theology is linked with the identity of the *Dalit* people. This will counter the perceptions which dominate the current theological education prevailing on the North India scene and influence the ministerial training and church perceptions which encourage maintenance of the *status quo*. The current theological education and the official theology of the churches in North India tend to be influenced by the ideology of the higher castes reared in the climate of indifference to the realisation of the socio-cultural factors and to the fulfilment of *Dalit* aspirations. The *Dalits* and the Tribals have to fall into line laid down by the mainstream seminary training with its emphasis on abstractions and limitations of Western theologies.<sup>8</sup> The Christian *Dalits* are twice-alienated. They are regarded by the Indian Society's non-*Dalits* in the same way as the *Dalits* and also again suffer from the same economic, social, and educational disparities at the hands of their co-religionists.

The mass movements of the 1920s and 1930s had tremendous potential of possibilities for a movement of social change in the lot of the *Dalit* Christians in North India. These mass movements in the North Indian Church was a work of the Spirit rather than of human.<sup>9</sup> It may be claimed that current resurgence of the *Dalit* consciousness is also the work of the Spirit against the predicament of destitution, dehumanisation, degradation and oppression.

*Dalit* Theology as the basis of the new construct of theological education in North India has authenticity because it is from "below" and uses *Dalit* peoples' languages and expression, their stories, their songs of suffering and joy, popular wisdom, their values, proverbs, folklore, myths to interpret their history and culture and to articulate a faith to live by and to act on. This is doing theology in community within the context.

The next significant reality after the *Dalits* with which an authentic and credible theological education reconstruct has to reckon with is the reality of the tribals in North India particularly the concentration of the Santhals, the Mundas, the Oraons, the Korukus in Chhotanagpur and Jharkhand in Bihar, in Mayurbhanj in Orissa ; the Bhils, the Bhilale and the Minas in Rajasthan and Malwa ; the Gonds, the Baigas, the Pradhans and the Panakas in Madhya Pradesh and the former Bastar Raj. This listing does not overlook the pockets of wandering tribes in Punjab hill tracts, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, the Terai and Garhwal in U.P. and North Bengal. All

of them have been penetrated with the Gospel by evangelists and missionaries from the Indian plains and have come under the influence of dominant "Hindi" culture. These Christian tribals have distinct cultural, historical, political and economic experience and aspirations. The search for identity by the Christian tribals in North India has taken significant direction.<sup>10</sup> The tribals and aboriginals assert that they are the indigenous people of the land and call themselves the *Adivasis*. Sadly they too are reduced to a colonial situation and are completely dominated by a system of values and institution maintained by the dominant ruling group. The North India Theological reconstruct must have this perspective of a truly *indigenous theology*.

It is a known fact that Christ and his Gospel were brought to the Christian tribals in North India by foreign missionaries. So the tribal society in North India was presented Christ and accepted him in the medium of foreign and sophisticated (Western or Hindu or Muslim) analytical, abstract and philosophical categories through foreign languages either Hindi or Parsi or Arabic or English, or Greek, or Latin or German. In Christian teaching and formulation of the new faith no care was taken to express these in tribal terms and idioms. The result has been a shallowness and naivete in the grasp of Christian faith in North India tribal areas. The irony is that it is equated with simplicity and the tribal Christians in North India are not conscious of this. Overseas Christian denominational polity is behind the organisation and liturgy among Christian Tribals in North India represented by the Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican or the Roman Catholic Churches of North America, Germany, England and Belgium and other parts of Europe. Recently some efforts have been made to use the rich tribal heritage and resources but initially, tribal motifs, culture and resources were rejected for the worship and liturgical life and even the tribal language was discouraged. A North Indian reconstruct of theological education for the tribal context must not ignore the indigenous form and idiom. For facilitating a conscious adaptation, provision of analysis and understanding of theological implications in the tribal way of envisioning and dreaming are essential and these tasks have to be undertaken by the tribals themselves. Theological education has to provide the basis of relation between the Gospel and the tribal culture and milieu. In the tribal, life is a unity and there is no dichotomy of sacred and profane in life. An authentic system of theological education should reflect this unity of life. The tribal sense of the supernatural, the spiritual or the unseen power which plays a crucial part in tribal life must be vitally

related of theological education. This consciousness of the unknown spirit must not generate fear complex but lead to the awareness and presence and power of the Holy Spirit of God. The tribal social structure based on kinship and clan exogamy and tribal endogamy and moral codes should be renewed and brought into fellowship of the Body of Christ. This will be a formidable task for theological education. The great importance given to tribal community should be related to the understanding of the Church as a community which transcends all individual identity. The cult of ancestors, the idea of communion of the living and dead should enrich the idea of the communion of saints. To guard against the negative factors of tribal clanishness, self-centred and insular mentality, an understanding of solidarity with non-tribal and other tribals must be inculcated through theological education. The simplicity and honesty of the tribals must not be exploited as ignorance by the non-tribals which already have brought untold suffering and deprivation. Rich resources of tribal consciousness, its understanding in caring for the nature, the habitat, eco-balance and indigenous medicine, forests and natural resources should be tapped by theological education.<sup>11</sup>

Any proposal for reconstruct for theological education in North India must also reckon with the reality of the Christian *Dalit* women, *Dalit* women and women at large in the North Indian Society. *Dalit* women are the *Dalit* of the *Dalits* in Indian society and the thrice opperessed victims of centuries of social, political, economic, cultural and religious oppression. They live a precarious existence combining abject poverty with grinding labour in the fields, work places and in the homes, abused and used, powerless and exploited. At the very bottom of the oppressive existence are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed *Dalit* women.<sup>12</sup> Theological education must build an awareness of this sad and tragic reality.

The dehumanising poverty of the peoples in North India makes it imperative to seek for a soul-searching analysis of the roots of the evil. The tools for such an analysis have to be provided by a new framework of theological education. This North Indian reality has to be seen as a continuation of what is told in biblical revelation. The reflection on oppression and liberation in the Bible is not to be regarded simply as a hermeneutical study within the curriculum of theological education. Rather oppression and liberation are the very substance of the entire historical context within which divine revelation unfolds and only by reference to this central fact, the meaning of faith, grace, love, peace, justice, sin and salvation are understood. Theological education should make it possible to analyse the

root causes of the denial of all basic rights, the methods and motives of oppression, the style of tyranny. In the Bible, oppression is the basic cause of poverty. The language of the Bible is always concrete. In Biblical theology "oppression" refers to real experience that is directly related to agents of oppression.<sup>13</sup> Authentic theological education must provide tools for such hermeneutics. Theological education in North India has to equip the local Christian congregation for God's mission, not as another minority communal entity within the larger whole but as the salt or yeast in the dough with all the disabilities and limitations of its minority characteristics. This will bring into play the pastoral dimension of the ministry for which theological education is organised. The ministry is for enabling, encouraging, equipping and empowering the all peoples of God for his mission. In North India, it seems that the established system of Theological Education so far has conspired with the contemporary social, cultural and economic factors to produce and perpetuate *status quo*, dependence and thereby oppression. The Theological Educational enterprise in North India has to plunge headlong into the process of transformation. It must seek and give credence to its commitment to justice and has to revise its purpose, style, method and content. The North Indian theological education is faced by so many models of doing theology, the *Dalit*, the basic ecclesial communities, the *Mtn jung*, the Asian, the African, the feminist. She or he has to evolve a North India model of theologising based on the contextual experience of suffering and struggling. This theological education is to be seen more than a professional academic and technical training. It has to be infused with the redemptive motive or purpose of God. The North Indian Christians have to re-read their Bible and devise a new process of hermeneutic and interpretation in line with the context. A new construct of theological education in North India cannot have the luxury of being neutral and mercenary. It has to take sides. More so, when the *Dalit* Christians, a majority of the Church in North are so organised and mobilised in an angry and aggressive mood may bypass the elitist hierarchical church and take over the struggle for their rights and justice into their own hands. It will be tragic if the Church is left behind. If the Church and present structure of theological education do not join hands to strengthen the struggle for justice and remain silent, then as Jesus retorted — if these remain silent, the very stones would cry out.<sup>14</sup> The Spirit is like the wind and blows where He wills. The Church leaders and theological educators must discern the signs of time and take up the prophetic challenge. It is not that the Church leaders and the

educators give voice to the voiceless, give face to the faceless ; the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed already have it. It is how the Church including its structure for Theological education is going to be in solidarity with the peoples and be empowered and renewed in this process. As long as the pursuit of theological education in North India remains an enterprise for the experts, the specialists, the elite, it will remain as an exercise distanced from the realities and complexities of the context. It will fail to respond to the challenges of the present time, and may not eventually cater to the needs of the Church; and thus may be doomed as irrelevant. It must reclaim its mandate for the mission of God otherwise there is truth in the generalisation that it is the luxury of the few who sit in the ivory tower at the expense of others. The Church in North India can ill-afford it particularly when financing has to be looked for elsewhere.

### References

1. John C. B. Webster : *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India*, Macmillan Company, Delhi (quoting E. M. Wherry's letter to Dr. Speer, 2 December 1909), p.6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
4. John C. B. Webster : *The Dalit Christians, A History*, I.S.P.C.K., Delhi, 1992. p. iii.
5. Arvind P. Nirmal (ed) : *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Gurukul Theological Institute, Madras. p. 54.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
11. *Tribal Awakening, A Group Study*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1965. p. 216.
12. Arvind p. Nirmal (ed) : *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, op. cit. p. 130.
13. Elsa Tamez : *The Bible of the Oppressed*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1985. p.3.
14. Luke 19 : 40 (R.S.V.).