RETHINKING MISSION IN ASIA

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Mission demands standing with people in pain to ensure people-hood, freedom, hope, peace and justice
- From They Left by Another Road

Christian Mission, Colonialism and Its Impact on Indigenous People

If the missionaries have not come and work among the tribals, what would be the condition of the tribals today? I am sure, we will be worst than what we are today. The missionaries were the first people to work for the liberation of the people. They were the first to open mission school, printing press, hospital, translation work and many others. Recognizing their genuine interest in the well-being of the oppressed people and commitment to bring the people to the gospel message of salvation, many oppressed people like the tribals, ethnic minorities and dalits embraced Christian faith in search of a more dignified life. While acknowledging many dedicated and selfless works rendered by the missionaries, we need to re-evaluate the work of the past to look for the future.

The spread of Protestant and Catholic missions coincided with colonial expansion. While the goal and project of colonial powers was political and economic, the missionary goal and project was primarily of religious – converting people into Christian faith. Speaking about the relationship between colonial power and Christian missionaries, Arthur Jeyakumar writes,

In obedience to the command of the Pope, the Portuguese colonizers got engaged in missionizing their territories in India by a diverse way….The Portuguese administration in Goa offered jobs to Christians only. It was decreed that public offices could be held by Christian alone. So some of the Indian in those territories embraced Christianity for the sake of government jobs. Christian faith was spread by direct evangelism too. At the same time there was forced conversion too. The Portuguese government prohibited in its territories the public worship of Hindu and Muslims. Moreover only Christians were given the power to own lands and possessions. Others were asked to leave the area or to embrace Christianity. Those who had their ancestral property, preferred to join the Church rather than leave the place ….1

Though in some contexts, missionaries opposed some of the colonial government’s policies, we have evidence that missionaries also functioned as colonial agents. In some places, missionaries were paid by the colonial government.2 The military

2 For example, William Pettigrew’s was a government appointed school inspector while at the same time working as a missionary in Manipur state. Recognizing Pettigrew’s reputation among the hill people, the colonial government sought for his help in the recruitment process and he did oblige with the request. Pettigrew was instrumental in recruiting many hill people to serve in the Labor Crops for the Allied forces during the First World war. See for further details, Yangkahao Vashum, “Colonialism, Missionaries and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal” in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol. XII, No. 2, July-December 2007, pp. 1-22.
was obliged to protect the missionaries from any hostile people’s resistance to evangelization, and the missions were to produce part of the sustenance for the regional military government. As a result, some scholars wentupto the extent of criticizing that “missionaries are there not for advocating a faith but for keeping imperialism alive.”

The colonial power and Christian missions (no matter from which denominations or missionary societies they came from) considered themselves “superior” in terms of religion, race, economy and culture and they consistently maintained an exclusive and negative attitude towards the traditional religions and cultures. They considered the ‘others’ as primitive, uncultured, uncivilized and savages. “Their description of the people ranges from people with no culture to inferior culture, life styles and ways of life. Their religion was derided as demonic, superstitious and evil.” The people’s characters and virtues also came under serious negative attitude and they were held at the lowest esteem. This superiority value system justified slavery system, colonialism, war, domination and replacement of native culture by the white culture and saw cultural conversion prerequisite to conversion to Christianity. Such an ideology was grounded in the beliefs of modernity, Christianity and rapid industrial advancement. The colonized people, like the tribals and dalits, who have been suffering under the caste system further led to internalization of native inferiority and the idealization of the white culture and religion. Even today many people think that their own religion, economy and culture are inferior and backward. Hence, “Conversion” was justified. The process of conversion, George Tinker noted four cultural disorientations:

First, the converts were separated from their native village and relatives in new communal enclosures; that is, the native persons were removed from their former mode of existence.

Second, once converted and relocated in the mission compound or in a new village, the converts were permanently proscribed from rethinking their conversion and returning to their own homes. In some context, the missionaries had military assistance at hand to hunt down fugitives and return them to their missions for discipline.

Third, converts were committed to a rigorous regimen of work to support the mission, the missionaries and their obligation to the military government.

Fourth, converts gave up all aspects of self-governance to live under the strict and authoritarian governance of the missionary priests.

Furthermore, the perception of cultural and intellectual superiority motivated missionaries to promote western scientific rationality informed by the European enlightenment. This campaign for a new rationality against the traditional wisdom of the natives was conceived as a civilizational imperative and carried out with utmost earnestness. The new scientific rationality was presented as the only norm for growth and prosperity.

The educational ministry of the missionaries had the most significant impact on the life of the people. Arthur Jeyakumer writes,

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5 Ibid.
It not only enabled them to read and write, it also sowed the seed of nationalism. It started a renaissance. It paved the way for reforms in the society. Missionaries by opening their educational institutions for everybody irrespective of caste, creed, colour, or status began to revolution in more than one sense.\(^8\)

Mission schools were used as instrument for civilizing local people and integrating indigenous people into imperial/colonial structures.\(^9\) Gangmumei Kamei also observed that modern education was “designed to inculcate European liberal ideas, literature, and science in the Indian mind, and to produce educated persons who could be conveniently employed to run the colonial administration.”\(^10\) Even if the missionaries did not consider themselves agents of colonial powers, they participated, wittingly or not, in advancing the colonial project.

The education process, medical practice, reduction of languages into written form and the production of first literary texts, introduction of new housing, hygiene, clothing, time, history led to complete disorientation of traditional cultural structures of existence that give a people a sense of holistic and communal integrity. No longer did the life of the people revolve around the soil-centred culture, but revolve around church services, prayer meetings, revival camps, Christian Endeavor, etc. This process had contributed to the lost of identity and spirituality rooted in the soil.

Approaches to Mission

We may underline three dominant approaches to mission developed during the colonial era.

a) **Civilizing mission:** During the colonial era, Christian mission was primarily understood as “civilizing people”. It emphasized on absolute and exclusivist language. The task of the Christian mission was seen in terms of demolishing native culture and establishing Christianity. Often military and warfare language such as “army”, “advance”, “attack”, “battle”, “campaign”, “crusade”, etc were used as motivational means for missions. Even other words like “pagan”, “darkness” and “heathen” have been used to refer to our friends, relatives, neighbours and other faiths. In the process of aggressive evangelization “local people abandoned their own cultures and betrayed their countries in order to follow a foreign mission. Following Christ in practice meant “accepting the existence of colonialism and the abolition of local cultures and languages.”\(^11\) The civilizing mission approach led many indigenous people lost their land, their mother tongue, cultural and social structure. The aggressive attitude had kept and continues to keep the Asian churches away from the mainstream of Asian culture and political life as a community. The church is seen as a stranger to many people.

b) **Charity mission:** The charity mission is an empire model of doing mission. It is seen in the form of gifts of food and clothes for the poor, consolation to the sick and other human services. Charity oriented mission is the product and extension of industrialization in Europe and North America during the 19th century. Charitable mission creates subject-object relationship between the giver and the recipients and helps

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8 History of Christianity in India, pp. 30-31.
9 Ward Churchill observed that “since schooling was brought to non-Europeans as part of empire … it was integrated into the effort to bring indigenous peoples into imperial/colonial structures.” See his boon Since Predator Came (Colorado: Aigis Publications, 1995), p. 245.
to maintain the status quo based on unjust power relations. It is seen as “reproducing dependency relationships and failing to account for the subjectivity of the poor and need.”\textsuperscript{12} It also fails to restore and recreate the identity of the people with justice and dignity.\textsuperscript{13} The people of other faiths see it as a ploy to attract the poor and needy into the church and eventually to baptize them.

c) Development mission: Mission was/is understood as developing the underdeveloped people, a dominant model till today. It identified that the problem of poverty and malnutrition, and even the disease like HIV and AIDS are the result of ‘underdevelopment’, lack of skills and resources and therefore it is a mission imperative for the churches to help the poor communities around the world to ‘develop’. Development hence assumed the nature of a missiological witness of the charity and compassion of Christ expressed through the Body of the Church. Even the communities and nations who were critical of development paradigm were brought under the grand design of the capitalist development ideology through the committed and uncritical work of the church bodies.\textsuperscript{14} Theological assumptions regarding unity, freedom, humanization informed by the values of self-hood, democracy and more directly development were symbolic of the trapping in the project of modernity.\textsuperscript{15} The understanding of mission as “developing” slowly reduced the churches to act as faithful NGOs who function as an implementing agency of the projects designed by those hold the capital. Many churches have reduced themselves as local agents for development assistance from western economies, banks and governments, to the communities of the poor. Is it not a replica of the mission agencies of the colonial period?

People-Centre Mission

Christian identity in Asia is still associated westernization,olonilization/ decolonilization and anti-Asian. Christian mission is very much dominated by charity and developmental oriented approach. It has not taken its root in Asian soil and reality.

The history of Christian countries in the west shows that Christianity was used as an instrument to expand imperialism. The Crusade was waged nine times by Christians against Muslims and Jews. Indigenous Christian communities were also not spared. The crusaders killed those who resisted, and destroyed and confiscated crops and properties by force. The Pope blessed the soldiers, offered forgiveness of sins to all soldiers, and the soldiers who died during the Crusades were elevated as martyrs of faith. The Crusades were war of invasion to obtain supremacy of empire and to control the Mediterranean trade.

Though Edinburgh 1910 was convened to challenge the denominational oriented mission, the unity effort started by the mission agencies in New York in 1900, and at Edinburgh 1910 conference reiterated that the colonial expansion was the providence of God to take the good news to heathen lands. In Edinburgh conference, among the 1200 participants, only three came from the people in the periphery. The conference was held under the patronage of colonial powers. The people who sent greetings to Edinburgh conference included the King of England, the President of US and other colonial heads. \textit{Oikoumene} in Edinburgh pretended that Christian unity is possible even without removing and transforming the structures of oppression and exploitation. In fact, the

\textsuperscript{12} Josef P. Widyatmadja, \textit{op.cit.} p.99.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.} p. 99
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.} p. 214.
Edinburgh conference co-opted the poor and marginalized into the scheme of western empire.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Asia sorely realize that peace and justice have remained distant hopes and dreams. The situation of the poor has turned from bad to worst. The violence of cultural nationalism against the minorities is on increased. The attack of Christian in Orissa during Christmas celebration in 2007 is a concrete example. The anti-conversion ordinance some of the states in India e.g. Arunachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, and other states and the BJP enterprise of 'saffronization of education’ are examples of institutional forms of violence, inflected by evangelists of the gospel of cultural nationalism, genocide and ethnic cleansing of certain communities of India today are expressions of direct forms of violence of cultural nationalism.\footnote{George Mathew Nalunnakkal, “Mission as if People Mattered: An Indian Perspective” in Re-routing Mission: Towards a People’s Concept of Mission (Tiruvalla: CCA, 2004), p. 98.}

The global market turns human beings and their cultural activities and earth’s resources into commodities for profit. The weak, namely the migrant workers, farmers, consumers, small entrepreneurs and the whole eco-system are the victims of globalization. Asia has become a source of raw materials, cheap labor, and food needs. The unjust financial system, ever increasing ideology of consumerism, materialism, individualism, competition and greed erode life-affirming values, fragments communities and increase poverty; the value system which are driven by the powerful financial co-operations. The poor are deprived of their rights to celebrate life in the midst of all those problems. Justice and peace remain the urgent cries of millions who remain in the state of utter poverty and marginalization. To be relevant to the context, mission priorities in Asia have to be life-centred, seeking ways to establish peace and justice, overcome violence while affirming the rich contributions of pluralistic communities and traditions. Therefore, the future of church in Asia lies in its ability to create counter movements against all these oppressive powers and structures. This counter movement is possible through strengthening and building grassroots or local social movements.

John England uncovers that the Christian presence in Asia goes back to 2\textsuperscript{nd} century and mission was understood as common sharing and respect of one another\footnote{Ibid, pp.40-49.}. He further argued that during the first 15 centuries of Christianity in Asia, there is clear signposts of Christian’s engagement in various secular vocations. There was courageous missionary endeavours, monastic movements, long traditions of state service, education and medical care, a mutual beneficial co-existence with neighbours of other faiths, survival despite repression and persecution, creative biblical interpretation, theology and spirituality.\footnote{Ibid, pp.40-49.} The record of pre-1500 shows a clear signpost of wholistic mission. Christian communities in many countries at that time were not only co-existed peacefully with those of other faiths, but also happily exchanged understandings of religious faith and life. For example, Buddhist terms and imageries were used freely to present New Testament teaching. There is also clear evidence of Christian influence in Mahayana teachings. From the earliest period in Persia (pre-400 C.E.), until the later history of Mongol ascendancy (pre-1400 C.E), Christians played key roles in various professions, and their commitment to all that promoted people’s welfare, is widely recorded. In all these periods, there was a “non-institutional” Christian presence which was authentically rooted in secular worlds and a new pattern of Christian community life, study, and
prayer.\textsuperscript{19} It is imperative that we revisit these early traditions in our attempt to re-root mission in our context.

Christian witness and mission are about bringing healing, wholeness, and new life into the lives of individuals, communities and nations. Breaking down barriers, seeking justice and dignity for all, building community, enabling reconciliation and peace among all peoples are at the heart of mission. Any mission that builds barriers, divides the world into the ‘saved’ and ‘unsaved’, that makes people narrower, that alienates neighbours, that promotes enmity and rivalry, that is not built on self-giving is not mission. It is a counter witness to God. It betrays God, and in the Christian context, is alien to the spirit and message of Christ.\textsuperscript{20}

The churches in Asia need a transformative mission. Mission in Christ’s way is God’s mission amidst people in pain is the one which is transformative. It is giving protection and justice for the weak in the house, in the community, in the nation and also in all creation. This is not a mission by conquest but mission according to the way of the cross. Mission amidst people in pain meant fellowship and peace among communities and nations. This cannot be attained without justice. It involves struggle for transformation of a social system that ensures social, economic, political and cultural justice. This Peace and fellowship cannot be realized when people still have to struggle to meet their basic needs. Jesus could able to bring justice through organizing people’s movement. “Only when people are able to organize themselves for social justice can the oppressed regain their dignity and help secure justice and dignity for all.”\textsuperscript{21} The churches have to take the position of, and for the poor and become the voice of the poor and exploited.

The absolutizing and exclusive language that churches inherited from colonial Christianity has very little room for expression of collective and interdependent life and faith in the Divine. Any language of God that fails to answer the cry of the marginalized for total freedom and right to fullness of life is not wholistic.\textsuperscript{22} That means, the God-talk should be free from the institutionalized-patriarchal-hierarchical religions and be a living reality for people. We need a God-talk where God is perceived as fellow sufferer, a great comforter, divine power not as a dominating or controlling power nor as dialectical power in weakness but as liberating and transforming power that is effective in compassionate love, care and service. Mission is also to be understood as “servant-hood” in God’s liberating act. We need a radical departure from the imperial theology of mission to people-centred mission.

Churches in Asia need ‘people-centred’ mission. Jesus mission was a people-centred mission. Churches can make a difference by turning and rerouting to Jesus of Galilee movement. In Jesus’ movement, we see a decisive reversal from empire to people in pain, from ruler to ruled, from oppressor to oppressed. Jesus’ movement was people-centred movement against the power of destruction and death. He stood for a different value system - peace, love, service and liberation of poor were the message of Jesus, but not the power, sword, military and mammon. Jesus became the voice of the oppressed and voiceless. Since Jesus stood for the people against the powers and principalities of the Roman Empire and Jews collaborators of the Romans, he was

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 104.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} M.P. Joseph, \textit{op.cit.}, 219
\end{itemize}
crucified, his disciples became martyrs, and his community of faith bore the wounds by the empire. His movement was anchored in the hope of resurrection of all living beings. To resist oppressive structure for the liberation of the poor is the imperative and theo-praxis in our context.

Though Jesus stood for the universal salvation of all people, he deliberately took the side of the oppressed and liberate and redeem them from all oppressive system. The option of, and for the “people in pain” requires sacrifice and radical departure from the power, institution and mammon. The three wise men were asked by the empire to report about the birth of Jesus. But instead of obeying the imperial obligation, they left through a different route, a route to Galilee to protect the life of Jesus. They choose life rather than imperial order. Churches should become a movement that protects life from death. The disciples of Jesus choose Jesus’ way of doing mission. The two disciples of Jesus were walking to Emmaus. It was the place to flee to; a safer place for refuge. It was a time when the disciples of Jesus were under the threat of life. But when they recognized that the one who walked, talked, listened and shared sorrow with them was none other than their Master Jesus, they decided to return to Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified by merciless rulers, the place of crosses, the suffering, the major and minor injuries; it was the place where people were tortured, caused fear, made people sad and lost hope. It was here that people were oppressed, made powerless, discriminated and roped by merciless rulers through unjust system. The two disciples returned to Jerusalem to struggle with people in pain. They choose struggle and hardship rather than comfort and safety. If we want churches wants to be prophetic, it has to take the position of the wise men and the two disciples of Jesus. They took the position of “people in pain” like their teacher Jesus. We can make a difference in our mission by choosing the way of Jesus.

Conclusion

The Christian Conference of Asia has celebrated its 50th Anniversary in March 2007 in its birth place in Indonesia and called the churches “to seize its kairos to commit oneself to come back to be on the side of the poor and to discern the prophetic task in the future”23 The churches around the world is preparing for the 100th years celebration of the first World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, UK in 2010. In connection to Edinburgh 2010 Mission Conference, several mission consultations are taking place around the world and the debate on mission continues.

I hope this volume will challenge to think and search for new ways of doing mission from Asian and global perspectives.

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