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SEEKING COMMUNITY IN A DISCRIMINATORY WORLD

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Introduction

In this paper I wish to reflect upon the struggles of the Methodist Christian community in India as it strives to becoming a community that the Church in the world is called to be. I wish to draw upon a personal encounter at micro-level and situate its pains, fears, and hopes in the broader issues at the national level. Then I wish to highlight some of the pertinent issues which the Methodist Church in India is struggling with against the backdrop of the broader national issues as well as some Wesleyan injunctions.

I A case study

Not long ago I visited a Methodist congregation in a village in Gujarat. The congregation was dormant having been ignored by the pastoral charge. I had to take a walk around the main village to reach the Christian hamlet. Most Christians had been descendants of converts from the backward caste, while some were from the outcaste. When invited most of the congregation turned up for worship at the dilapidated church building.

A little later after the service I visited a family that

lived further away from the hamlet. The family was formerly an outcaste but the man in the house had acquired tailoring skill. His wife sat at the fire with head covered and three children of varying age roamed about the hut. After exchanging pleasantries, the man revealed his disillusionment with the society and the church. He talked of his struggles to make ends meet. But more painful was the rejection he experienced at a Christian wedding in the hamlet. For the host had discriminated between those belonging to his own caste (though the lower most caste in the system) and those of the outcaste (like the one I was visiting) making the latter wait till the others have feasted. "What is the use of going to the church if our own people act like this?" he asked. I could sense that mature experience had taught him that something was wrong if a person discriminated against another. Or, perhaps it was the early Christian teaching that may have set him argue with the visiting pastor the validity of discriminatory practices and the relevance of the church-life.

This case study raises questions that help me reflect on the theme of this Institute from an Indian context along the lines of broader issues like poverty, caste, communality and patriarchy.

II A discriminatory world: elaboration of broader issues within the Indian context

A preliminary observation about the above mentioned issues is their interconnectedness. Within the Indian society inheres a social structure that perpetuates poverty. The relations in this structure are of dominance and stratification is along caste lines. The situation of plurality of cultures and religions some times bring communities in conflict that is not without political or economic interests. The issues relating to women cut across all barriers. The following details the broader issues.

A. The poverty issue

Poverty in India is an undisputable phenomenon. It simply stares in one's face. Poverty in India is structural in nature.

Poverty is not only or mainly the problem of some individuals- however numerous they may be - who are deprived of the necessities of life, but a necessary corollary of a society which is organised and structured in a particular manner. (1)

From an economic view economic activities like economic growth and development, ownership of assets and control over the surplus determine the way a society is built. If within a society assets are unequally distributed, that will mean power is unequally distributed. Control over power shapes a social structure where some are powerful and others weak. An hierarchical social structure tends to perpetuate unequal pattern of distribution of assets. Poverty is the result of such unequal structural relations.⁽²⁾ Though India today may boast of economic growth, poverty has not totally vanished. In fact, today almost 36% of total population is living below the poverty line- or in absolute terms about 400 million people live in abject poverty. Among these the majority are in rural India. (3)

Psychologically, poverty tends to perpetuate a culture of dependence and/or resignation to the present condition (fate). The victims of poverty internalise their social status and live a life that can only be described as sub-human.

Then there is the social stratification called the caste structure. It is those at the lower rungs of this social ladder who are mostly poor. Poverty and social subjugation seem to go together.

The socially discriminated against have little say in decision making processes that may improve and empower them and

liberate them from socially subjugating fetters. On the contrary, the dominant ruling castes are powerful, controlling resources and bending political power to their own advantage. They create their own higher economic class and political patronage.

We can thus summarize that poverty, pollution, powerlessness and dehumanisation are bound up in an intricate nexus that is fabricated by human beings and which entails huge gaps between castes and classes.

B. The caste issue

Reference has already been made about the caste system in India. In the dominant religious community, that is, in the Hindu community, the society has traditionally been ordered as the caste hierarchy. It constitutes of the Brahmins, the kshatriyas, the vaishayas and the shudras. Those outside this system are called the outcastes. Today these outcastes are called the dalits. The caste system functions on the lines of hierarchy, endogamy, social immobility and purity-pollution principles. The dalits are considered impure. They pollute everything they touch. They have therefore been socially ostracized and made targets of inhuman treatment. Centuries of social ostracism combined with religious sanctions have forced the dalits to internalise their image and values given them by the upper caste people.

The lower caste and outcaste people have been deprived in the areas of control over economic assets, entry to religious places and education, besides many others. They generally become innocent victims of violent atrocities whether at work place or at home. The numerous news reports of the upper caste - dalit conflicts reveal swift reprisal by the upper caste on the dalits, while the police often witness it apathetically. Sometimes the police itself perpetrate brutality

on the dalits since many in the department are from higher castes. (4)

Caste and politics are also inseparable. Until recently the upper castes dominated the political scene of India, while the dalit politicians in power were very few. Today the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (B S P) made up of the dalits is a force to reckon with in Uttar Pradesh. Some castes form their own organisations which offer easy vote bank for the politicians while negotiating benefits for their members. (5) The dalits, on the other hand, aim at "... achieving for our people respectability, political participation and security."(6)

C. The communal issue

Within the plurality of religious communities in the Indian nation has risen the problem of communal conflicts. Along with the dominant Hindu community exist minority communities like the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Parsees, et al. Conflict usually occurs between the dominant community and any one of the minority communities. So far the minority communities to have conflicted are the Muslims, the Sikhs and the neo-Buddhists (the dalits). The problems of the minorities have been broadly classified as i) security of life and property and ii) economic and educational backwardness. (7)

Communal conflicts occur because of many reasons. Among these the political and economic interest as well as the issue of the selfhood of the dominant religio-cultural community in a democratic secular framework seem to be the prime ones. Contrary to the widespread perception the role of religion in many a communal riot is instrumental rather than causative. (8) Religion is politicised and riots are flared up in order to gain economic advantage and/or political power by interested parties over the other community. Needless to add that in such

riots it is the poor and the weak, the women and children who become easy prey.

D. The patriarchy issue

The status of women in India is far below the idealized equality embodied in the Constitution. The society has been and remains patriarchal. The subjugation of women cuts across economic, casteist, religious and political distinctions. Exploitation and alienation of women increases as one goes down the ladder of economic class, caste hierarchy - especially the dalit, and the political pyramid. A poor, dalit, voiceless woman is therefore alienated many times over. In a male dominated world it is difficult for a woman to survive. But they are staging a comeback. The consciousness and voice of women is steadily rising. Many women's organisations are at work giving voice to women's issues, providing relief, conscientizing women and men of women's potential and challenging patriarchy. (9) Governments are also taking appropriate steps within their purview. But in the end the mindset of the people will have to be challenged and changed.

III Seeking community: reflections from a Methodist viewpoint

The Methodist Christian community in India is drawn mostly from the lower castes and the outcaste, from many a linguistic and cultural context and from mostly an economically backward class. (10) Converting to Christian faith has given them space for upward mobility in society. Early advantage of educational and health facility has advanced the converts especially in urban contexts. Those in the rural areas benefitted mostly when they migrated out. The remaining ones succumbed to poverty mainly due to the church's negligence and governments' mis-directed development policies. The rural Methodists in Gujarat are a poor lot. The situation may not be much different in other parts of the country. Methodist community in India faces

problems which slow down the process of building a truly Christian community that will witness to the values of God's reign.

One reason for the inertia in building community in India is the mentality of dependency. Since the foreign missionaries brought funds, the nationals did not learn self-reliance. They remained inert even after the missionaries left. (11) The question of finances plagues the Methodist Church even today. It reflects in the way ^{the} urban and rural Methodists are catered to. It is the urban middle class Christians who benefit from the Church-run schools, hostels and technical institutes. Whereas the people in real need are the rural poor. How will the Methodists in India truly make a community if the poor among them are languishing? Should the prosperous among them not rise up to John Wesley's exhortation, "Do not you know that God entrusted you with that money... to relieve the wants of all (hu)mankind"? (12) Or, be warned by 'the curse of Wesley'?

Before any of you either lay up treasures on earth, or indulge needless expenses of any kind, I pray the Lord God to scatter you to the corners of the earth, and blot out your name from under heaven! (13)

At times when the poor are becoming poorer, sharing of resources becomes an imperative.

Another reason for inertia in community building is the carry over of the caste system into the church from the pre-Christian society. Methodists in the church expected equal treatment among members, but some soon found out that it was not to be. Even though the converts were depressed castes and outcaste, they continued discrimination within their smaller fold. As a result leadership in the church was taken up by the higher ups in that small hierarchy, or, by those who had economic advantage. If an outcaste got into a position of

leadership, the stigma of being outcaste remained and corresponding treatment was meted out. The outcaste continued to be discriminated against. Some from higher castes made concession. They made distinction between spiritual and societal communion. They agreed to spiritual communion together with the outcaste but refused social get-togethers. (14) The Methodist church in India faces a real problem when its structure is penetrated by caste practitioners. It fails to be a community whose unity "... is based upon the Christian koinonia in the Holy Spirit." (15) Can the self-perception of the church as the new community, a community of believers, a paradigmatic community help overcome casteist separation? Will not the breaking of the bread together create space where the poor and the so called outcaste find acceptance and identity in the community ? (16)

A further reason for inertia in community building is the minority consciousness of the Christians in India. At times such consciousness seem to strengthen the community bonding. For example, when a bill that restricted freedom of religion was introduced in the Parliament, Christians of all denominations united together to protest. But such bonding turns a community into^a communal association (in a pejorative sense) vis-à-vis other communities in the vicinity. At such times fires of communal tension can be easily flared/ inflamed. The physical location of the Christians on the periphery of the village makes them particularly vulnerable to arson and violence. How does Christian, particularly Methodist, community relate with other communities? Usually, they keep distance from others, at least at the level of religious exchange. Most of the evangelistic strategies continue to be offensive, continuing the missionary legacy. The Church's thinking on new ways of mission and evangelism have yet to percolate down to the people at grassroot level. Building bridges across com-

munities therefore remains a necessary task. The Methodist Church in India needs to find ways in which the least of its members can enter meaningfully to create a community with other members and with people of other faith communities. Methodists need to reflect the interfacing of/ within the Trinity in their own interaction with others as transcripts of the divine. For, is not the image of God in human beings to be understood in communitarian terms in as much as God is community?

In^eertia in community building also comes about when women are sidelined or marginalised in the church. To relegate women members to periphery is to overlook the contribution of almost half the membership of the church. The Methodist Church in India has been sensitive to women's issues. Besides a place for women in the deaconesses' ministry in the church (17) women have also been ordained as elders. While some other denominations are still debating women's ordination, the Methodist Church in India has already opened its arms to women ministers. Women representation in conferences and committees is made sure by Disciplinary provisions.(18) However, women at the base have not been much affected. No one woman is liberated unless all women are liberated from the shackles of patriarchy. This is where the church needs to work more. The church needs to empower women to attain self-sufficiency and self-dignity. Esther Mabry says:

Empowerment of women can only become stronger when oppressive structures are changed, allowing not only women but also men to see how they oppress each other, knowingly and unknowingly. Commitment to dialogue and revisioning of a society where persons are given their due worth will bring us closer to God's intent for the whole creation.(19)

Women and men in community will strengthen the paradigmatic

nature of the church.

Conclusion

As I think more about that family in Gujarat, I begin to realize more and more issues networking within which it struggles to survive. Its relation to the church helps to amplify our perception of the church's struggle to be a community reflecting the values of God's reign in the world. I have sought to look at this struggle along the lines of four major issues interfacing the church and society in India today. Each in its own way hinders that community from being born. They are debilitating not only individually but also together in a systemic complex. They pose a sure challenge to the Methodist Church in India as it moves towards the reign of God in hope, faith and love.

Endnotes

1. F. Franco, "The Structural Nature of Poverty in India", Poverty in India: Challenges and Responses, edited by J. Murickan. Bangalore: The Xavier Board of Higher Education in India, 1988, p.37.
2. Ibid., pp. 37-38.
3. News report in People's Reporter, Bangalore 10:8 (16-30 April, 1997), p.5.
4. The recent incident of the desecration of an Ambedkar statue in Mumbai is a case in point. "A Case of Bloody Mischief" by Saira Menezes Outlook Mumbai, III:30 (July 30, 1997), pp.14-15.
5. G.M.Shah, Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990, p.114.
6. Prakash Ambedkar in an interview with the Outlook, "Deep-rooted Conspiracy", op.cit., p.15.
7. K.S. Durrany, State Measures for the Welfare of Minorities, Delhi: ISPCK for CISRS, Bangalore, 1997, p. 13.
8. This distinction is to be attributed to Asghar Ali Engineer who has analysed roots and causes of communalism in India

by studying communal riots at various places. See also, Shah, op. cit., pp.40-42.

9. See, Gabriele Dietrich, Women's Movement in India: Conceptual and Religious Reflections, Bangalore: Break-through Publications, 1988.
10. References abound in J.N.Hollister, The Centenary of the Methodist Church in Southern Asia, Lucknow: LPH, 1956.
11. Such dependency has been documented for other churches as well. See, Graham Houghton, The Impoverishment of Dependency: The History of the Protestant Church in Madras 1870 - 1920, Madras: CLS, 1983, pp.236f.
See also, C.I.Itty, "The Church and the Poor in Asian History", Separation Without Hope: The Church and the Poor During the Industrial Revolution and Colonial Expansion, edited by Julio De Santa Ana. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980 (US edition), pp. 146-147.
12. "Danger of Increasing Riches". Works (J) 7: 362 as quoted by T.W. Jennings, Jr. "Wesley and the Poor: An Agenda for Wesleyans," The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition, edited by M. Douglas Meeks. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995, p.23.
13. Jennings, Jr., ibid., p.37, quoting from "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion", Part II, Works (J) 8:187.
14. Manilal C. Parekh, a convert from Jain community was one such Christian in Gujarat who maintained that distinction between spiritual and societal communion.
15. Essays of Albert C.Outler: The Wesleyan Theological Heritage, edited by Thomas C. Oden and L.R.Longden. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, p.218.
16. cf. Kosuke Koyama, Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1984, pp.242-43.
17. The Book of Discipline. Bombay: The Methodist Church in India, 1982, pp. 111-114.
18. Ibid., Such representation is built into the constitution of each committee or conference.
19. Esther Galima Mabry, "Women and Health: A Closer Look at the (Une)quality of Life." in Hunter P. Mabry edited Doing Christian Ethics: Context and Perspectives, Bangalore: BTESSC, 1997, p.58.

