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## Challenge of Doing Theology in a Pluralistic Context Perspectives from India

### Introduction

Theology, to be relevant, must be contextual. Theology has to be a 'faith seeking understanding,' enriched by the resources of the particular socio-cultural and religious context, and responding to the challenges that the particular context poses. Thus, as Bishop Jonas Thaliath has beautifully articulated, theology is "Fides querens harmoniam vitae," ("Faith seeking harmony of life").<sup>1</sup> Theology is faith seeking harmony of life in the unique context of the person and community, which essentially includes the socio-cultural and religious context.

In this paper, we shall first have an overview of the ecclesial context of India, beginning with its historical origin and development. Following that we shall try to understand the scenario of ecclesiastical education in India, its unique features and challenges. Finally, we shall discuss the present context of doing theology in India and the challenge of doing theology in the pluralistic context of India. Although many of these would be applicable to all the Christian Churches, our specific consideration is the Catholic Church in India.

### Church in India: Historical Origin and Present Situation

Christianity arrived in India in the first century itself. St. Thomas Apostle arrived in Kerala in India in 52 CE.<sup>2</sup> The tradition is that he established seven Christian communities in Kerala and was martyred in India (at Mylapore, Chennai in Tamil Nadu) and was buried there. There are also opinions that from early centuries, Saint Thomas Christian communities were present in South West India, especially on the coasts of Karnat

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<sup>1</sup> See Dharmaram Pontifical Institute (ed.), *His Vision of Theological Formation*, in: Dharmaram Pontifical Institute Annual. Jubilee Souvenir 1957–1982 (Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram), Bangalore 1982, 32–33.

<sup>2</sup> Many works of Fr Bernard of St. Thomas and Placid J. Podipara give a systematic presentation of the history of St. Thomas Christians of India. Some other useful works: A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol 1: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century*, Bangalore 1984; George Nedungatt, *Quest for the Historical Thomas Apostle of India: A Re-reading of the Evidence*, Bangalore 2008; Eugène Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India: A History of the Syro-Malabar Church from the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, Calcutta 1957.

taka.<sup>3</sup> Besides, there are also historians who opine that St Thomas preached the Gospel in North West India as well.<sup>4</sup> In fact, there was only one Oriental Rite in India, that is, the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar, until the arrival of the Portuguese. When St. Thomas Christians were placed under the rule of the Portuguese bishops, it was not accepted by many among St. Thomas Christians, since the Portuguese bishops forcefully changed many of the traditions of the St. Thomas Christians. Consequently, there was a revolt against the Portuguese bishop/missionaries, which culminated in the Coonan Cross Oath, following which there was a schism in the Church. Later, a group of people who split away from the Catholic communion re-united with the Catholic Church and they were recognised as another Oriental Catholic Rite/Church, namely, the Syro-Malankara Church (in 1930). Thus, there are two Oriental/Eastern Catholic Churches in India. With the colonial powers, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European missionaries came to India, and they established many missions in different parts of India, thus establishing the Latin Rite in India. Later, the establishment of Propaganda Fide played an important role in the missionary work in India. Thus, today India is home for three Catholic Rites/Individual Churches—Syro-Malabar, Latin and Syro-Malankara, spread over 174 Catholic dioceses/Archdioceses. The interrelationship among these Rites is sometimes tensed, though the situation seems to have improved in recent decades.

In spite of all these, Christians remain a small minority in India. It is the third largest religion in India, but the total percentage of Christians is only 2.3.<sup>5</sup> However, this means that there are 27.8 million Christians. Of these, Catholics are more in number. Christians are there in all states of India. In a few North Eastern states, Christians are the majority. But, considering the number of Christians, Kerala ranks first. Although a small minority, Christians exert considerable influence in the society at large, especially as they run a number of educational institutions, hospitals, social service agencies, etc. Moreover, even in the universal Church, in spite of being a minority, the Indian Church plays an important role today, since priests, religious and other missionaries from India work in a number of countries. For example, the Indian Assistance of the Society of Jesus ranks first among all Jesuit assistancies worldwide. There are more than 2500 Salesians in India. Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), founded in Kerala in 1831 by three Indian priests, (and to which I belong) has about 2000 priests. Many other international congregations have provinces in India, and there are many con-

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<sup>3</sup> Cosme Jose Costa, *Apostolic Christianity in Goa and in the West Coast*, Pilar 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief historical study of St Thomas' missionary work in North West India, please see K. S. Mathew, *Arrival of St Thomas in India and His Missions: Historiographical Approach*, in: *Asian Horizons* 5 (2011) 3, 564–589.

<sup>5</sup> [http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad\\_Campaign/drop\\_in\\_articles/04-Distribution\\_by\\_Religion.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/drop_in_articles/04-Distribution_by_Religion.pdf), According to the Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php> (date accessed: 16.3.2020) Christians constitute 2.3 % of the population, Catholics account for 1.5 % of the total population. The next census is in 2021.

gregations which were founded in India. Similarly, there are a number of women religious congregations in India. Franciscan Clarist Congregation has more than 7000 sisters; Congregation of Mount Carmel has more than 6500 sisters; there are many congregations of women religious with thousands of members. All these congregations have missions in different parts of India and different countries of the world. Dalit and Tribal Christians form the majority of Christians in India, and there are complaints that their role in the hierarchy or positions in the Church is proportionately very low.

## Theological Education in India

Theological schools and centres play a major role in the development of theology. Hence, it may be helpful to get an idea of the number of theological schools in India. However, it is not easy to get an idea of the exact number of institutions or students. There are 11 faculties (in 8 institutions; that is, three institutions have two faculties each) recognised by the Congregation for Catholic Education. Besides, there are two institutes of Canon Law aggregated to the faculties in Rome: for Latin Canon Law at St. Peter's Institute, and for Oriental Canon Law at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram. The faculties are in different parts of India: Paurastya Vidya Pitham (Kottayam, Kerala), Pontifical Institute (Alwaye, Kerala), Sacred Heart College Satya Nilayam (Tamil Nadu), Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Bangalore), St Peter's Pontifical Institute (Bangalore), Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (Pune), St Albert's College (Ranchi) and Vidyajyoti College (Delhi). Hundreds of students are enrolled for ecclesiastical studies in these institutions: for example, Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (Pune) and Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Bangalore) have about 700 students each; Pontifical Institute, Alwaye, Paurastya Vidya Pitham, Kottayam and St Peter's Pontifical Institute (Bangalore) have more than 400 students each. Number of students in other faculties could be around 100 or more. Most of these faculties/institutes offer courses at various levels: undergraduate (theology and philosophy), post-graduate (Systematic theology, Biblical theology, Moral theology, Missiology, Eastern theology, Spiritual theology, Formation and Counselling, Family Studies, Pastoral management, Canon Law, etc.), doctoral and post-doctoral (theology and philosophy). Besides, there are many institutes/colleges of ecclesiastical studies affiliated to these faculties. Most of them have 50-100 students. Moreover, there are many institutes/colleges which are affiliated to faculties in Rome and in other European countries, or which offer courses in philosophy and theology as required for priestly ordination. Altogether, there are more than 100 institutions of ecclesiastical education in India. There are also theology institutes run by women religious congregations which offer one or two year diploma courses.

These institutions are run by regional bishops' conferences or religious congregations.<sup>6</sup> In general, the degrees are recognised by the Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome. In some other cases, there are no formal degrees, but courses are recognised by the dioceses concerned, as requirement for priestly ordination. Some of the institutions also have simultaneously sought recognition of their programmes through universities or faculties recognised by the Indian government. There are also a few Departments or Chairs of Christianity in some of the universities recognised by the Indian state.

In general, the vast majority of the students who enrol for ecclesiastical studies are seminarians, priests and religious men and women. At the undergraduate level, philosophical and theological studies are undertaken mainly as a requirement for priestly ordination, and hence majority of the students are seminarians. In general, religious women and non-clerical religious men study theology only in view of taking up specific tasks in their congregations. Evidently, the curriculum in these faculties were developed in light of the directions given in *Optatam Totius* (especially nos. 13–22), and *Gravissimum Educationis*, and the subsequent document *Sapientia Christiana* (1979); recently all have revised the curriculum according to *Veritatis Gaudium*.

Only very few lay people enrol for courses in ecclesiastical studies. The main reason is that employment possibilities for lay people are not many, that is, even now there is no possibility for lay people to obtain a job which would offer them sufficient salary, based on their degree in theology. The number of women religious who enrol for ecclesiastical degrees has increased in recent decades, but even now compared to men, the number of women religious is very low.

Besides these theological faculties or institutes for ecclesiastical studies, many theological, liturgical, catechetical, intercultural and dialogue centres have been established by bishops' conferences, dioceses and religious congregations. Many of them conduct regular training programmes and organise conferences and seminars for priests, religious and lay people. National Biblical, Catechetical Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore, run by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Pastoral Orientation Centre (POC), run by Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference are examples of such centres.

A number of journals in theology are published from the ecclesiastical faculties and other theological centres in India. Jeevadhara Journal of Theology,<sup>7</sup> Vidyajyoti Journal of Theology, Journal of Dharma, Indian Theological Studies, Asian Horizons – Dharmaram Journal of Theology, Journal of Indian Theology, Kristu Jyoti and Third Millennium are among the prominent theological journals published from India. These jour-

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<sup>6</sup> However, at Jnana Deepa Vidyadeep is also established a papal seminary, but entrusted to the Jesuits. There are also two theological institutes run by the Conference of Religious India.

<sup>7</sup> Jeevadhara is nearing 50 years of its publication. It is published every month, in English and Malayalam on alternative months (not translations).

nals give the possibility to Indian theologians to share their theological views with the wider world, and to develop Indian theology further. Besides, theologians from other countries also write in these journals and thus they become platforms for networking of theologians from around the world and for East-West and North-South dialogue in theology. There are also theological associations which meet regularly and which are actively involved in theologizing: Indian Theological Association, Association of Moral Theologians of India, and Biblical Theologians' Association are some of them.

Indian Catholic Church has also contributed theologians of international reputation. Raimundo Panikkar, Placid J. Podipara, Michael Amaladoss, Soares Prabhu, Felix Wilfred, Mathias Mundadan, Joseph Pathrapankal, Kuncheria Pathil are a few among such theologians in the last few decades. Besides, some of the theologians like Jacques Dupius and L. Legrand had the major part of their academic career in India.

Most of the institutions of ecclesiastical education, journals and theological associations, as well as individual theologians try to develop an indigenous theology, making use of the rich cultural and religious traditions of India. In philosophical and theological education, due importance is given to the study of Indian philosophy and theology. In many institutions, even up to fifty percent of the courses are on Indian philosophy, but clearly, without excluding Western philosophy. Until recently, Indian philosophy was considered mainly in terms of Vedic/Aryan philosophy. In recent decades, there is a growing importance given to other indigenous philosophies, Dalit philosophy, Tribal philosophy, South Indian philosophy, and so on. Besides, regional theologates and philosophates are founded where students can study philosophy and theology in close contact with the life of the people, their culture and religions. However, many such attempts sometimes face scepticism from the part of the hierarchical authorities. It is high time that universities of ecclesiastical education are founded in India. Considering the number of students and professors, there are institutions which deserve to be raised to the status of universities. This would give momentum to development of theology in India. But, such requests are not often met with favourable responses from the authorities.

## Doing Theology in India: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities

The unique context of India offers challenges and opportunities for theological development. Let us highlight some of the important areas of those challenges and opportunities.

### 1. Post-Colonial Perspectives

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, India was colonised by Europeans (mainly the British). The struggle for freedom from the colonial powers started much before the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

and in 1947 India gained independence. The freedom movement attempted not only to regain political independence, but also to re-discover the social, cultural and religious heritage of the land. However, this process of re-discovery has not been easy. Centuries of Western rule radically changed the perspectives and life-style of Indians, creating confusion with regard to its own cultural identity. Some of the elements of the Western culture were voluntarily accepted by a good number of people. This may include not only clothing style, food habits and languages, but also ideas about individual freedom, man-woman relationship, sexuality, marriage and family, relationship between parents and children, religious practices, etc. These differences in the perspectives and life-style have often led to conflicts within the societies themselves. Sometimes, resistance and opposition to Western culture have been strong and even violent. It is not rare that following Western life-style or attempts to popularize Western style has been presented as cultural colonization. With regard to religious life, this opposition has been much evident. For example, in spite of the fact that Christianity had its origin in Asia, and in India Christianity reached in the first century itself, it is often presented as a Western religion. That the religion of the Western rulers was Christianity is not the only reason for this. Colonial period was also the period of vigorous missionary activity, and at least in some parts of the country the growth in the number of Christians was associated with forceful conversions, or tactics to attract people by offering them financial and other benefits. Moreover, other religions and their gods were sometimes presented as coming from the Devil. Consequently, in some cases at least, conversion to Christianity was not always out of conviction and a spontaneous and natural process, but a process that created tension between Christianity and the indigenous religious traditions. The missionaries might have been motivated by their good faith and convictions, but this was often viewed as 'cultural and religious colonization' and strengthened further the attempts at political liberation. After gaining political freedom, this resistance to the Western culture continued or was even strengthened. It is also not rare that this resistance to the Western culture and Christianity has been utilized for political gains, as is evidenced by the current political situation in India.

When we think about theology in post-colonial India, it should be in the background of the above mentioned realities. FABC has called for triple dialogue, considering the three main Asian realities of life: dialogue with the vibrant religious traditions (*inter-religious dialogue*), ancient cultures (*inculturation*) and teeming millions of Asian poor (*option for the poor*).<sup>8</sup> Indian theology has been emphasising this triple-dialogue in various ways, especially in the post-colonial period.

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<sup>8</sup> The statement and recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC, No. 12, 19 as reproduced in FAPA-I, 14, 15. The call for this triple-dialogue is more clearly stated in both the Fifth and Sixth FABC Plenary Assemblies. See #Franz-Josef Eilers (ed.), FABC V, No: 3.1.2, in: For All the Peoples of Asia: Vol. 1: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991,

## 2. Dialogue as a Way of Life

Indian theologians, in general, are convinced that theology in India will be meaningful only through dialogue—dialogue with the cultures, religions and the poor. Indian Church is or has to be a Church in dialogue.

*Dialogue with Cultures:* One of the serious issues that Christianity in India has been facing is that of indigenization and inculturation. Though people were open to the Christian faith, most of them resisted any attempts of dilution of their culture. During the colonial period, at least initially, Christianity was introduced in the Western cultural garb, even attempting to replace the indigenous cultures. As already mentioned, this is one of the major reasons behind the perception that Christianity is a foreign/Western religion.

This does not mean that the Indian Church from the beginning did not try for indigenization and inculturation. For example, St. Thomas Christians in India had developed a system of indigenization that worked for centuries. Fr Placid, a renowned Church historian, beautifully presents the Church of St Thomas Christians as, “Hindu in culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship.”<sup>9</sup> But, this process of inculturation was hampered to a great extent during the colonial period when the St. Thomas Christians were ruled by the Latin bishops and missionaries, who considered many indigenous practices as pagan and unchristian. Following the end of the colonial rule, St. Thomas Christians in India are still struggling to re-discover their cultural heritage, independence and autonomy.

In the post-colonial period, there has been an emphasis on the need of inculturation and indigenization. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council and those of the FABC gave momentum to this. There is a strong feeling that if the Church has to be relevant in India, it has to enter into a more profound dialogue with the Indian cultures and integrate these cultures into its life. These attempts have taken place especially in the areas of liturgy, theology and spirituality. Although such attempts have sometimes caused controversies and have led to conflicts with the official Church, these attempts are continued at least to a certain extent.

*Dialogue with Religions:* The need of interreligious dialogue has been felt in India for long time. We cannot ignore that the colonial period was sometimes marked by hostility towards other religions. However, in the post-colonial period, there is a deeper awareness of the need of interreligious dialogue. This is not merely to face practical difficulties due to the rise of fundamentalism in various religions, but mainly due to a

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Quezon City 1997 280; Franz-Josef Eilers (ed.), FABC VI, No. 3, in: For All the Peoples of Asia: Vol. 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996, Quezon City 1997, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Placid Podipara, Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship, in: Ostkirchliche Studien (1959), 89–104; CW II, 531–540.



theological conviction that the Spirit of God is at work in other religions as well. The 1974 meeting of the FABC makes clear the Asian theology of religions:

“In Asia especially this [evangelization] involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?”<sup>10</sup>

Summarising the FABC theology of religions, Amaladoss says:

“All religions can facilitate salvific divine-human encounter, so that people belonging to other religions are saved, not merely in spite of, but because of practicing those religions... All religions are called to dialogue in providing a common moral foundation to personal and social life in the world, making harmony in the heart of the world and of the Trinity making cosmotheandric communion—to use Panikkar’s neologism.”<sup>11</sup>

This in fact shows the growing Asian conviction and the importance given to dialogue with other religions. As Kuncheria Pathil underscores,

“Therefore, the only practical option before us is a third alternative: dialogue, positive relationship, collaboration and common pilgrimage and search for truth in view of the welfare, salvation and unity of the whole humanity... Dialogue is basically relationship, life-together, interconnectivity and common search for the welfare, liberation and salvation of the entire humanity in communion with the entire cosmos.”<sup>12</sup>

In the post-colonial India, especially following the Second Vatican Council, a number of initiatives were undertaken to promote interreligious dialogue. A number of theologians tried to develop a theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. Study of the scriptures, philosophy and theology of other religions became part of the curriculum in the theological faculties and seminaries. Theological associations were formed, which have tried to emphasise the importance of dialogue. Many centres for interreligious dialogue were established. Christian Ashrams were founded, integrating the spirituality of other religions with Christian spirituality, and where people belonging to

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<sup>10</sup> Eilers (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Vol. 1* (see note 8) 14.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *The FABC Theology of Religions*, in: Vimal Tirimanna: *Harvesting from the Asian Soil: Towards an Asian Theology*, Bangalore 2011, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Kuncheria Pathil, *Pluralism, Dialogue and Communion*, in: Shaji George Kochuthara (ed.), *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal, Vol. I: Keynote and Plenary Papers of the DVK International Conference on Vatican II*, Bangalore 2014, 329.

other religions were welcomed. Indigenous forms of music, dance, art, architecture, etc., were utilized to make the Christian message more intelligible and meaningful to the context. There were also attempts to form Basic Human Communities [like Basic Ecclesial Communities/Basic Christian Communities] where all people could come together and collaborate irrespective of religious affiliation.

One of the recent questions in interreligious theology is that of multi-religious belonging. It is pointed out that the theoretical models of interreligious dialogue have originated from the West. These models have been exclusivist or pluralist, which “assume a Christian starting point and a certain degree of Christian uniqueness and incompatibility with other faiths.” Recently, theologians challenge this either/or model, and propose dual or plural belonging. It is not merely integrating some cultural elements from other religions, but going further. For example, can one be Christian and Buddhist at the same time? “The starting point is accepting a ‘real’ experience of and relationship with both Buddha and Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Evidently, this is a question yet to be explored. However, this points to a new direction in which Interreligious theology is slowly developing. This multiple religious belonging can be found in the life of many Indian people belonging to other religions. For example, there is a movement called “Khrist Bhakta Movement”, where many Hindus worship Jesus, and claim to be followers of Jesus, but without changing their Hindu identity, or without receiving baptism.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, we may find many Hindus worshipping or venerating Jesus or Mary. They do not find any conflict in their Hindu identity and worshipping Jesus at the same time. Christians may discard it, as saying that since Hindus are polytheistic, it is not difficult for them to worship Jesus or Mary and Krishna or Rama at the same time. But, instead of discarding this as too simplistic, it may be worth considering it more profoundly to develop new avenues for an interreligious theology which is basically Indian and Asian.

*Dialogue with the Poor:* In India, we find teeming masses of the poor. Some of the poorest people of the world live in India. This is true regarding Christians in India as well. In some regions, Christians belong to the poor sectors of the society. There cannot be a relevant theology for India forgetting the poor. This preferential option for the poor is also found in the Church’s stance for justice for the poor. For example, in

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<sup>13</sup> Edmund Tang, Identity and Marginality: Christianity in East Asia, in: Felix Wilfred (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia, New York 2014, 95–96. In the same book, in another article: Multiple Religious Belonging or Complex Identity? An Asian Way of Being Religious, 493–509, Albertus Bagus Laksana explores this question in detail, mainly based on his experience of the *ziārah* culture in Java.

<sup>14</sup> See some of the reports: Khrist Bhakta – a Catholic Spiritual Movement – in Northern India – Varanasi – a City Holy to Hinduism, <http://go.wvu.de/nrm7q> (date accessed: 16.3.2020); Gaurav Mandal, In Modi’s Varanasi, Christianity is growing fast, though stealthily, <http://go.wvu.de/skkq0> (date accessed: 16.3.2020); Nirmala Carvalho: Khrist Bhakta: Tens of Thousands of Hindus Fascinated by Christ, <http://go.wvu.de/7ehw5> (date accessed: 16.3.2020).

India, various branches of theologies such as Dalit Theology, Subaltern Theology, Tribal Theology, etc., have developed from the conviction that Christian commitment requires us a determined commitment for the poor, the less privileged in the society. Theologians also address the issue of caste system in India, and other inhuman social structures. One of the reasons for the attacks on Christians in some parts of India is the Church's stance against discrimination and its fight for justice and equality, though other accusations may be levelled against it. Struggle for the basic human rights, especially of the poor, is a salient feature of the post-colonial Indian theology, though this preferential option for the poor has to be more assertive.

The Church's educational and social apostolate have taken a liberation perspective, especially in the post-colonial period. In the social apostolate, besides financial assistance, empowering the people has become a major focus. Many educational institutions have reserved a percentage of seats for students belonging to the marginalised groups. However, there are apprehensions whether such activities and institutions of the Church are being influenced by the market-driven and success-oriented neo-colonial ideology. This risk is heightened by the fact that in many parts of India, Christians are still a small minority, and hence the only means to reaching out to the society is through the institutions, especially educational institutions.

Gender Justice and empowerment of women have been addressed as an integral dimension of the liberation perspective. Although this is a worldwide phenomenon, in India this assumes a vital importance, since the Indian society is still deeply rooted in the patriarchal system. It is an encouraging sign that a growing number of women theologians and feminist theologians and activists are contributing towards a gender-just society in India. Kochurani Abraham, Shalini Mulackal, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Julie George, Rekha Chennattu and Virginia Saldanha are among the prominent women theologians in India. Developing a theology of gender and gender justice, and ensuring empowerment and equality of women are urgent concerns in India, especially as the violence against women is on the increase.

Globalization has given a new face to the struggle for justice and preferential option for the poor. On the one hand, globalization is welcomed as an ideal of international collaboration and cooperation. But, on the other hand, it becomes another tool for the market-driven economy to exploit the poor and weaker sections of the society. So, Indian theologians especially call for globalization with solidarity.<sup>15</sup>

Here it is pertinent to consider the ecological crisis as well. As Pope Francis has pointed out in *Laudato Si'*,<sup>16</sup> there is integral connection between ecology and the poor. A true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach ... "so as to hear *both the*

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion on globalization from an Indian/Asian perspective, see, Shaji George Kochuthara, *Globalization in Solidarity: Reflections on Globalization from India*, in: *Political Theology* 15 (2014)1, 53–73.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis I., *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si*, <http://go.wvu.de/npucj> (date accessed: 16.3.2020).

*cry of the earth and the cry of the poor* (emphasis in original)” (LS, 49). It also calls for a preferential option for the poor, since they are more harmed by ecological degradation (LS, 158). LS clearly says that the crisis of ecology is also a social crisis: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS, 139). Commitment to the liberation of the poor involves also a commitment to protect “Our Common Home.” Particularly to be mentioned is the care that LS gives to indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. LS emphatically states that they are not one minority among others, but should be considered principal dialogue partners.

“For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values” (LS, 146).

The Pope is aware of the problems that indigenous people face with regard to their land, that is, in the name of development, for agricultural and mining projects, the indigenous people are forced to abandon their land. It has to be remembered that, for indigenous people, “taking away land means not only that their livelihood is robbed, but they are totally uprooted from their culture.”<sup>17</sup> This is particularly true about countries like India. For example, in the last couple of decades, several bills have been passed by the governments (both state governments and the central government) which allow them to acquire land belonging to and tribal people.

However, this process of dialogue—with the cultures, with the religions, with the poor—has not been always a pleasant task for the Indian Church. Many such attempts had to face scepticism and resistance from the part of the hierarchical Church. Many theologians also had to face discouraging and painful experiences. Besides, within these countries, many elements of the Western culture and theology continue to exert their influence and hence the process of dialogue is not easy.

### 3. Eastern Churches

The Catholic Church is a communion of 24 Individual Churches. Of these 23 are Eastern Catholic Churches and two of them are in India. Tensions between the Roman/Latin Church and Eastern Churches have led to many divisions in the past. Especially from the colonial period, as already mentioned, the Church of St. Thomas of Christians was controlled, dominated and restricted by the Latin Church, it was the indigenous Church of India. Respecting its full autonomy, freedom and identity is a matter of minimum justice. Moreover, the St. Thomas Christians had developed a style of integrating with other indigenous cultures and hence it can contribute greatly to developing Indian way being Church. I do not want to claim that it is a perfect Church. It is also pointed out that these Churches have to respond more creatively to the changing

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<sup>17</sup> Kochuthara, *Globalization in Solidarity* (see note 15) 65.

contexts, not only focusing on restoration of the liturgy and tradition, but on renewal as well. Developing Eastern theology in the Indian context will enrich theology as a whole.

#### 4. Challenge of Fundamentalism and Terrorism

Especially in recent decades, India has been facing the challenge of religious fundamentalism, and that too of the fundamentalist tendencies in the majority religion, namely, Hinduism. Indian Church is also a Church that is facing persecution. Persecution and discrimination against Christians continue in various forms. The attack on Christians in Kandhamal in Orissa was a severe form of this persecution. Since the ruling party of the present government is following the ideology of building up a Hindu nation, and since they are in power in many states as well, attacks on Christians (as well as on other minorities) have become very frequent. The Indian Church is trying to respond through dialogue, developing further a theology of religions. On the other hand, the Church has to assert its rights. Theology in India shows the way of living as a minority religion, engaging in dialogue, but at the same time keeping its identity and uniqueness.

#### 5. Theology in the Public Square

In Asia, religion cannot be excluded from the public life. Religion and religious experience are important parts of life. For example, in India, secularism does not mean that no religion is important, but that all religions are equally important. Religion is not something private. This does not mean that religion has to form political parties, or try to intervene in the daily affairs of the government. But, religion should play its role in the public life, to ensure values in public life, to defend justice and human rights. Indian theologians try to engage in dialogue with the public sphere by joining people's struggle for justice, freedom and equality.

Sometimes, this also brings about tensions between the Church and the government. For example, the institutions of the Church are sometimes targeted because of its stance against injustice and exploitation of the poor. In spite of such tensions, the Indian Church is in the process of engaging the public sphere and many theologians are trying to find ways for that.

#### Concluding Remarks

Various attempts at inculturation, indigenization and dialogue can be found even during the colonial period. However, in the post-colonial period, there is a deeper conviction that dialogue is the way being a Church in India. Indian theologians in the post-colonial era have enthusiastically taken up this task of dialogue with the cultures, with

the religions and with the poor. However, many such attempts were discouraged not infrequently by sceptical attitudes, especially from the part of the authority. In spite of experiences in the long history of the Church, it seems that even today some people have difficulty in accepting the fact that in the Church unity does not mean uniformity. Unity in the Church was threatened (and continues to be threatened), not due to variety, diversity and plurality, but due to centralization, lack of respect for diversity and plurality and lack of dialogue. Authority in the Church is a symbol of unity in diversity, not a power centre to destroy diversity. Many Indian theologians are surprised and even feel humiliated to learn sometimes that even after a life-time commitment to the Christian faith, their authenticity is doubted, that even after almost twenty centuries of keeping the faith alive, the authenticity of the faith of their Church and the maturity of the faith of the Church are doubted! Respecting the reality of pluralism, respecting the maturity and authenticity of the Indian Church is a necessary step in promoting the life of the Church in India, so as to make it really Indian.

Indian theology is not merely for India or for Asia. Every individual Church, every local Church is a unique way of being the Church. It is the communion of these Churches with their plurality and diversity that enriches the Church. No Church should isolate itself from other Churches, no Church should consider itself as superior or inferior to others. Rather, they are equal in dignity, learning from each other, fraternally correcting each other whenever necessary, and enriching each other. The Church is global and local at the same time—it is 'glocal'. Only when the local Church with its diversity, variety and indigenous forms is respected by everyone else, the Church becomes really 'catholic' or universal. Just like the Church in India should learn from the Church in Rome or Germany or France or United States, or Latin America or Africa, those Churches also should learn from the Church in India. Only then the communion and unity of the Church becomes a real unity and a real communion. This message of pluralism and dialogue is one of the important dimensions that Indian theology can offer the universal Church.

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