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Jubilee and Society: Reflections

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The world has seen the dawn of the 3rd millennium. Churches and leaders in different countries have called for the redistribution of land and cancellation of the debts of Third World countries. Poor peasants in India and in the subcontinent are involved in the struggle for justice. In this paper, I will reflect on the release of the land and labourers and the cancellation of debts as well as highlighting some of the salient features of the Jubilee institution. This study is not a thorough study of the Jubilee tradition in ancient Israel, but it is more of a

reflection. Some scholars have already written on the topic of biblical Jubilee.¹

The salient features of the biblical Jubilee tradition are more relevant to the Indian context at present than ever before. First, 60 percent of the population still live in villages and our society is predominantly agrarian. Second, land alienation is taking place rapidly along with modernization. There is construction of industries, highways, extension of airports, leasing of water reservoirs to multinational companies, construction of new dams, shopping complexes, etc. Third, money-lenders have multiplied at every level. Policemen lend money on interest to poor rickshaw workers, auto drivers and vegetable vendors on the street. Even Christian teachers and office assistants in mission schools operate money-lending businesses on a small scale among fellow teachers and neighbours. I was told that a treasur-

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¹ For example, R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee*; Jeffrey Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee*; Chris J.H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the OT*; Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*; and others.

er of a local church lent the Sunday offering to local people at a high interest rate and multiplied the income for the sake of his church. Many money-lenders in India use local- and state-level political forces to protect their authorized and unauthorized money-lending businesses.

This paper focuses attention on the theme 'Jubilee' in Leviticus 25. The word 'Jubilee' is derived from the Hebrew word *yobel* which literally means 'ram's horn'. The priests of ancient Israel were asked to blow the ram's horn on the completion of the forty-ninth year in order to inaugurate the fiftieth year:

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. (Lev. 25:8-10)

Restoration

Ancient Israelite society was an agrarian society. When the people settled down in Canaan, the land was distributed, according to the size of the family, to cultivate and produce food for their families (Num. 26). The land cultivated by the family was regarded as *nahala* 'inheritance'. That families were prohibited from selling this inheritance to anyone and becoming landless is evident from the case of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs. 21:3: 'The Lord forbid that I should

give you my ancestral inheritance.')

Such an inheritance gave each family employment, food and the right to be members of the village. Questions have been raised on the nature of the ownership of the land: whether the land was commonly owned by the tribe or the clan, or by families. There are many indications in the Old Testament of the ownership of land by families, such as Naboth's vineyard, the tradition of passing on the land of the deceased person without male child to his brother, the claim of the five daughters of Zelophehad for their father's land (Num. 27:1-11), Boaz redeeming the land of Naomi (Ruth 4:1-7), and the purchase of the land in Anathoth by Jeremiah (Jer. 32:6-15).

Socio-economic Dimension

Land

Families, as we know, cannot survive without land. Alienation from the land means poverty and bonded slavery. Poor families in ancient Israel were allowed to mortgage part of their land to their relations or neighbours, cultivate the rest and redeem the mortgaged land when they could find the money. But debt is a vicious trap. Due to an increasing burden of debt, such families had no other option except to mortgage the rest of the property and become servants to the mortgagee. People who could lend money started accumulating the land of the poor and became wealthy. Money-lenders exploited poor peasants and oppressed them so that the poor would work for them continuously.

The rich in their society added land

to land, house to house and remained as the ruling class. Being the ruling class, the kings, officials at the royal court, landlords and business families never wanted to change the policies and laws or implement them to bring economic and social justice in their society. Prophets raised their voices against such injustice and inequality and demanded the ruling class repent and render justice to the poor and marginalized (Amos 2:6-8; 5:24; 6:4-7; Micah 2:1-2; Isaiah 5:8-10). The sociological justification for the redemption of land and labourers comes from the historical situation which developed during the monarchy.

To counter the alienation of the land from the poor and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few rich, God insisted on the liberation of land from the rich and its restoration to the original families. The need to empower the poor with land, the right to cultivate it and enjoy the fruits of their labour was met by the introduction of the Jubilee Law. Since it is set in the context of Sinai, it became a legal code for them to practise.

The institution of Jubilee limited the mortgage to a maximum period of 49 years. The rich were then asked to return the land without demanding repayment of the loan or interest. Thus the Jubilee year institution put an end to the perpetual alienation of land from poor families and the accumulation of properties by the rich. It became an instrument in restoring the land and resetting the economy, if not to perfect egalitarianism, at least to reducing the widening gap between the rich and poor. It also

challenged upper class people at least once every 50 years. Socio-economic evils that began in one era in ancient Israel could be rectified at the end of the era and the new era could begin with justice and welfare.

Labour

When families lose their right to cultivate the land that is mortgaged to another person, the mortgagee can employ the mortgager to cultivate it for wages. This happened in ancient Israel and is still happening in India today. In such a situation, the family are labourers for their new master. The mortgagee, however, can choose to appoint another family as his labourers. The family that lost the land then has to leave and go to another landlord for work and be his servants. In both situations, the family is alienated from their land, become servants and eventually end up in bonded slavery. Restoring the land alone to the family in the 50th year is not enough. The family must also be set free from servitude so they can go back to their land and exercise the right to cultivate it. Cancelling the mortgage and restoring the land demands also the liberation of labourers.

The rich, who enjoy the servitude of the poor, do not allow them to escape their clutches and go free. If the families are not set free and enabled to reclaim their right to return to their land, cultivate it once again and enjoy the produce, then releasing the land is meaningless. The Jubilee institution, therefore, linked the liberation of the land with the liberation of labour. Families and land must be reunited to overcome

alienation.

Capital

The Jubilee institution provides relief from repayment of the loan. The mortgagee cannot charge any interest on the loan or even demand that the capital be returned to him in the 50th year. Since the mortgagee uses the land, the produce from the land is valued as equal to the capital and interest. Of course, it depends upon the amount borrowed, the number of years of the mortgage and the yielding capacity of the land. When the mortgager wants to redeem the land, he needs to pay only the balance for the number of years the mortgagee cannot use the land.

If the family cannot redeem it due to their poverty, then in the 50th year the land should be restored to the family without demanding the return of the borrowed capital. Families are relieved of their debts since the money-lender has used the land till the Jubilee year and enjoyed the fruits of the land. In spite of the writing off of their debts and restoration of their land, the families also need money to start cultivating the land once again and to maintain their family until the next harvest. Mere liberation of land and labour is not enough. If financial aid is not extended, the poor family will once again need to borrow money by mortgaging their land and so become slaves again.

So another law took care of this problem (Deut. 15:12-15). This law insisted that rich landlords should provide enough food, grain, cattle, wine, oil, and money to the poor family to start their new life. Such a sharing of resources with the poor

sustains them until they reap the harvest of their land. Not only the remission of debts, restoration of land and liberation of labour are important but also the sharing of resources to establish their new life.

Theological Dimension

The theological justification for providing the redemption of land and labourer is stated in Lev. 25:23-24:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. And in all the country you possess, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

While Ex. 19:5-6; Deut. 10:14 and Ps. 24:1 speak of Yahweh's ownership of the whole earth in general, Lev. 25:23-24 speaks of the ownership of the agricultural land. That the Israelites are the tenants of the land is worth noting. First, Yahweh's explicit claim to the agricultural land is seen in the reason for prohibiting the sale of land in Lev. 25:23. Concerning the meaning of the phrase 'for the land is mine' in v. 23b, two views have been expressed. One is that the word 'land' (*erets*) refers in general to the ground or territory that the people of Israel will possess and dwell in. Here it signifies Yahweh's ownership of the promised territory.²

Another view is that it refers to the

² A. R. S. Kennedy, *Leviticus and Numbers: Introduction*. Rev. Ed. (CB: Edinburgh, T.C. & E.C. Jack, n.d.), p. 166; J. R. Porter, *Leviticus* (CBC: Cambridge UP, 1976), p. 201; M. Ottosson, 'erets', *TDOT*: 1 (1974), p. 401; N. Micklem, *The Book of Leviticus*. Vol. 2. Ed. G. A. Buttrick (IB: Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), p. 123; G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT: London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 320.

farmland or agricultural fields of the families.³ According to this view, v. 23b signifies Yahweh's ownership of the agricultural land within the promised territory. Since scholarly opinions differ regarding the meaning of the word *erets* in v. 23b, and the same word appears four times in vv. 23-24, it is necessary to make clear how this word is used in the text.

The word *erets* which appears in v. 24a 'and in all the country you possess' refers to the territory which they are going to possess and settle down in and live as Yahweh's sojourners and strangers. The use of the preposition 'in' (*ba*), which usually refers to a location, and the instruction to grant redemption for the agricultural land in the territory which has been possessed by them, indicate that the word *erets* in v. 24a means the territory of the promised land.

Erets in v. 23b, however, 'for the land is mine', refers to the agricultural land and not the promised territory. For the phrase 'for the land is mine' (v. 23b) is closely linked to v. 23a by the causal particle (*ki*) and stands as the direct reason for the prohibition of permanent sale of agricultural land. This logical connection leads us to regard *erets* in v. 23b as agricultural land rather than the promised territory. Furthermore, we know this from the main thrust of Lev. 25:1-24. Details such as giving

rest to the fields in the seventh year (vv. 1-7, 20-22), selling and buying fields according to the number of years for crops (vv. 13-16), abundant yields of the field (vv. 18-19), redeeming the land by the kin and returning the fields in the Jubilee year (vv. 10, 24, 28) are all concerned with agriculture. So, the word *erets* which is used in connection with selling, buying, redeeming and returning the land in v. 23a and v. 24b, must refer to the fields of the family.

Second, an implicit claim of Yahweh to the agricultural land is expressed through the law of rest to the land in the seventh year (Lev. 25:1-7, 20-22.) Although expressions such as 'your fields' and 'your vineyards' (vv. 1-7, 20-22) and 'each of you shall return to his property' (vv. 10, 13) seem to indicate that the land, fields and vineyards belong to the Israelites, they do not. They should instead be understood in relation to the main thrust of Lev. 25:1-24: these agricultural lands belong to Yahweh and they are left in the Israelite's possession like land left in the custody of tenants. The condition that the Israelites should give rest to the agricultural land in the seventh year laid down by Yahweh is to remind and make them realize that Yahweh is the owner and they cannot use the land according to their own will as if they are the owners.

Such 'a resting period' (*sabbat*) or 'a year of solemn rest' (*sabat sabaton*) for the land is described as 'sabbatical period for Yahweh' (*sabat layahweh*) in vv. 2 and 4. The purpose of leaving the land fallow in the

³ R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Anal. Bibl. 4; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954), p. 158; N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (CB; London: Nelson, 1967), p. 164; R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC, Leicester: IVP, 1980), p. 226.

seventh year is neither for the use of the poor nor for the use of the people of Israel in general. No one is allowed to sow, plough, harvest or use that land in any way in the seventh year (vv. 2-5.) The land must be left completely to its rest during that period. The humanitarian dimension expressed in Ex. 23:10-11 is mostly interpreted in the sense of allowing the poor to go and collect the food available in the fallow land in the seventh year. The poor always found some fallow land in their region, or nearby, year after year and so survived. Here the emphasis is on the charitable aspect of the sabbatical year.

There is some truth in this interpretation if we understand that the land left as fallow in the Sabbath year is not the same land taken as a mortgage from another family. If the land left as fallow is the land of another family, then we can also interpret it as allowing the family which lost it to return to their land in the sabbatical year, not just to collect food, but to claim it again and keep it in their possession. The land returns to the original owner in the sabbatical year. This does not conflict with the idea of the sabbatical year of rest for the land. For, from the perspective of the mortgagee, it is a fallow year for the land and so he cannot cultivate that piece of land. From the perspective of the mortgager who lost it for six years, it is a year to enter into the land to collect food and thus reverse the ownership. This right is provided by the divine rule of the sabbatical year.

This aspect is further emphasized

by the theological dimension of Lev. 25:1-7 where the resting period of the land is called a resting year for the sake of Yahweh. To observe the rest for the land in the seventh year throughout the promised territory is to acknowledge that Yahweh is the owner of the land and that Yahweh has given it as his gift for their use. I also think the implication of expressions such as 'a resting period for Yahweh', 'sabbatical year of solemn rest', and 'a year of solemn rest' to the land in Lev. 25, is that the land is redistributed in the sabbatical year. A detailed study is needed to see the link between the sabbatical year and the redistribution of land.

The two conditions Yahweh placed on the Israelites, namely, not to sell the land because it belongs to him, and to give rest to the land in the seventh year, indicate that the Israelites are only tenant-workers. The idea that the Israelites are not the owners of the land is further made clear by describing their landless status as that of sojourners and strangers. Such sojourners dwell in somebody's land with the permission of the landlord or the local community and could be employed by the landlord or the community to cultivate the land.⁴ However, Israelites as tenants were allowed to sell the right of use to another family only in times of poverty (v. 25) and they were not

⁴ For details on 'sojourners' and 'strangers': R de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, pp. 74-76; D. Kellermann, 'gur; ger; geruth; meghurim', *TDOT*: 2 (1977), pp. 439-449; C. J. H. Wright, 'Family, Land and property in Ancient Israel: Some Aspects of Old Testament Ethics' (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1976), pp. 61f.

allowed to sell the ownership of land.

This is made clear to us, first, from the expressions 'according to the number of crops after the Jubilee you shall buy', 'according to the number of years for crops he shall sell' (v. 15) and 'the number of crops that he is selling' (v. 16). The word 'crops' (*tebuah*) here means a series of cultivation on the land and indicates that only the use of the land is sold and not the ownership of the land. That families can only mortgage the land is expressed, secondly, by a prohibition, 'Do not sell the land for annihilation' (*lismitut*, v. 23) which means the sale of land must not cancel the right of recovering the land.⁵ No one in Israel has the right to sell the land to another person as if that land is in his ownership. They can only mortgage it for a period with the view to redeeming it.

Two kinds of redemption of the land are outlined in Lev. 25:25-28, namely, redemption by the nearest kin of the family that mortgaged the land (v.25), and, redemption by the seller himself (vv. 25-28). The theology of Yahweh's ownership of land does not deny the responsibility of the tenant or his kinsman. The person who sold the land to another party is expected to redeem that part of the land on mortgage, improving his financial situation either by cultivating the rest of the land or by some other means. If he is unable to improve his financial situation, the nearest kinsman can pay

the money to the one who bought the land, presumably at some time in the middle of the sale period, reclaim the right of use and restore the land to the seller.⁶

The tenancy system demands family solidarity. If these possibilities fail, then the land should be returned in the Jubilee year to the family which mortgaged it. No payment is necessary at the time of returning the land in the Jubilee year because the price is worked out according to the number of years of cultivation, taking into consideration the marginal gain of the buyer and the money received by the seller for the number of years he could not cultivate his land. If the whole capital, or part of it, has to be returned after the completion of the sale period, then the buyer gets a great bargain. He enjoys the produce for the full period of mortgage as well as getting back some money. That is why Lev. 25:13-28 does not say that the capital should be returned after the completion of the sale period in order to get back the right of use, only the 'balance of payment' when the land is redeemed by the seller in the middle of the sale period.

Historical Dimension

Historical criticism raises questions regarding the origin of the idea of the Jubilee year and the actual practice of it in ancient Israel. Since this text is from the Priestly writer, it could be said that the Priestly group invented

⁵ Rui de Menzes, 'The Pentateuchal Theology of Land' *Bible Bhashyam* 12 (1986), p. 23; Wright, 'Family, Land and Property,' p. 56.

⁶ M. Noth, *Leviticus: a Commentary* (OTL; Trans. J. E. Anderson, London: SCM, 1981), p. 189; North, *Sociology*, pp. 165f.

the idea of Jubilee during their exilic experience in Babylon and introduced it through their Holiness Code. As such, it is an exilic law. Jeffrey Fager points out that J. R. Porter and Anton Jirku believe that the ancient Israelite had the idea of land redemption in the Jubilee year because their patriarchs practised tribal ethics, which insisted on the redemption of land.⁷ He also quotes the view of S. Bess, who suggests that the combination of poverty and accumulation of land in the monarchical period could have created the Jubilee law.⁸ Finally, the idea of land belonging to god in the Ancient Near East is another reason for a very early date for the Jubilee tradition.

These three reasons (tribal ethics, economic situation and theological ideas from the Ancient Near East) suggest the existence of a tradition of periodic redistribution of land in the pre-exilic period. Apart from these, we cannot ignore the possibility of a move to counter the Canaanite tradition of permanent ownership of land by the rulers and landlords. For example, Moses' tradition of distributing the land equally to families, insisting on the idea of *nahala*, and the tradition of redistribution of land in the pre-exilic period could counter the Canaanite system which was influencing them during the period of settlement and of the monarchy.

However, Fager believes that there could have been some sort of tradi-

tion of periodic redistribution of land in the pre-exilic period but that such a tradition could have become the law of the Jubilee under the influence of the Priestly group in the exilic period for two main reasons. First, their intention was to help the returning exiles to obtain their land. Those who left the land and went into exile needed their land in which to live and produce food when they returned. These exiles who underwent difficulties should not feel doubly punished—alienated from the land in exile, and landless after returning. The concern of the priests was to give economic power to the returning exiles by introducing the law of the returning of the land after 49 years. This could also heal ill-feelings between the returning Israelites and those already living in the land and help to create one single, united community of Yahweh.⁹

The second intention of the Priestly group was to assert their authority on the community by modifying the old Mosaic tradition of distribution of land so that each family has the right to their share of land through the Jubilee law, and placing this law in the context of the legal code of Sinai. This results in the redistribution of land and overcoming of the economic disorder caused over the years by the accumulation of land by purchase and money loans or the departure of families either to survive the famine or into exile.¹⁰

Fager is of the opinion that redistribution in every Jubilee could have

⁷ Jeffrey A. Fager, 'Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee: Uncovering Hebrew Ethics through the Sociology of Knowledge', *JSOT Supplement* 155 (Sheffield: SAP, 1993), pp. 27-29.

⁸ Fager, 'Land Tenure,' pp. 29-32.

⁹ Fager, 'Land Tenure,' pp. 60-63.

¹⁰ Fager, 'Land Tenure,' pp. 54-56.

been disastrous to the economy. He thinks that the Priestly group intended some sort of distribution of land to those families which lost land, not a thorough redistribution throughout the land in the Jubilee year.¹¹ The Priestly group made a compromise between the ideal of total redistribution and failure to redistribute the land by introducing the idea of land redistribution through the law of the Jubilee year. But how can the Priestly group speak of one thing and mean another? In my opinion, practical difficulties in the redistribution of the land in the Jubilee year and some economic problems could not be avoided. Oppressive forces would have definitely tried to hinder the implementation of the Jubilee law. Denial of redistribution is more disastrous to the community life. The gap widens between the rich and poor, and this could lead to class struggle.

The linking of the Sabbath to the land in the text of Jubilee (Lev. 25) and the suggestion of the calculation of the Jubilee year by multiplying Sabbaths, leads me to think that there was a periodic redistribution of land once in seven years as Yahweh cancels the tenancy right on the sabbatical year and renews it again. It seems the observance of the sabbatical year of release of land and the forgiveness of debts in the earlier period by families according to their own sabbatical calendar could have failed by the 8th century. The Priestly group, who knew of this failure and the message of the 8th century

prophets, modified the idea of a sabbatical year periodic redistribution to once in 50 years as a compromise for the sake of the returning exiles. However, their remarkable achievement was to enable the release of land and labourer in the Jubilee year without the repayment of the capital and interest. We can notice that the Jubilee law of the Priestly code is a combination and modification of the earlier three important laws of the sabbatical year: rest to the land, release of slaves and servants and lending financial help without interest as stated in the Covenant code.

In my opinion, redistribution of land in the sabbatical year could have been revived as a practical possibility because:

- i) It gives a short period of six years for possessing the mortgaged land.
- ii) The Sabbath tradition is deeply rooted in Israel both in terms of rest and releasing the slaves.
- iii) The mortgager would also like to see the release of the land without any payment on the seventh year and reassert his economic position.
- iv) Because of its flexibility the Sabbath year release could be worked out locally with the help of the two parties and the elders or priests in the village more easily than adhering to a uniform, national Jubilee year for the country.

So it seems to me that the preferable option is to have the tradition of a local release of land and labourers once in seven years. But a national law is also needed to force the

¹¹ Fager, 'Land Tenure,' pp. 110-111.

defaulters to release the land to the original owner, release the bonded labourers and forgive the debts at least once in 50 years.

Having examined the situation, we can see that there are several salient features of the Jubilee institution that challenge us, whether we are involved in agriculture or in some other profession.

i) By declaring that the land belongs to God, the Jubilee institution makes the agricultural land sacred. It does not mean that people cannot enter or use it, but they cannot own it as their permanent property. Converting agricultural land, which produces food for people, into industrial or amusement parks or highways and airports in a country like India needs to be rethought.

ii) The Jubilee institution that insists on redistribution of land to the landless stops the growth of large estates (latifundism) by a few rich people, thus giving more political and economic power to the poor.

iii) Jubilee attaches people to the land and underlines the close relationship between the two. People need the land and the land needs the people to live, produce food and take care of it.

iv) Jubilee emphasizes the economic viability of families to live, cultivate and grow food. Each family can stand on its own feet without depending on others for food. This sustainability is brought out in the Jubilee law.

v) Since redemption of land by kith and kin—the ‘goel’ concept—is emphasized in the Jubilee regulation, family solidarity is demanded.

vi) Jubilee envisages the possibility of a new egalitarian society here and now. It is not a utopia, but rather a realistic goal that can be achieved if the community co-operates.

vii) Jubilee also implies that in any period of 50 years, the socio-economic system can go wrong and disparities can arise but Jubilee provides an on-going mechanism for periodic redistribution and the recycling of the social order.

Revitalization

By introducing the Jubilee institution, the Priestly group revitalized the tradition of the release of land, labourer and forgiveness of debts in Israel. As the ‘intelligentsia’ of the Israelite community, with cultic authority and in the absence of the monarchy in the post-exilic period, the Priestly group could have even made the effort to implement it and reorder the new community in the post-exilic period. Jubilee could have been made a meaningful celebration to the communities. Jubilee brings reconciliation and rejoicing. The poor who lost the land and went into servitude for a number of years should rejoice at receiving their land once again. The 50th year wipes away their tears after a long period of poverty and suffering. They are set free to exercise their right to enjoy their land in freedom and dignity.

Rejoicing is not just for emotional satisfaction. It has a spiritual effect. It contributes to the healing of the estranged relationships between the rich and the poor. By rejoicing in what God has initiated to set things right, the poor in society can get rid

of their bitter feelings towards those who oppress them. Real joy in society is possible only when the poor forgive their oppressors. The rich need the forgiveness of the poor and powerless. The wealthy need to repent, rectify their injustice, and restore the losses to their victims. Jubilee year is a special year for repentance and forgiveness and reconciling the broken relationships in society.

The rich people also can rejoice because they are repenting and restoring the land to the families who lost it, setting them free to cultivate the land and helping them with various resources to restart their life in the new era. Real joy is not in the accumulation of wealth and enjoying the labour of others, but in sharing and enabling the poor to regain power and dignity and seeing them rejoicing. The rich should be thankful to God for the Jubilee law that counters their selfish nature and compels them to contribute to the process of achieving equality and welfare for all. Like the Priestly group in Israel, churches today are expected to revitalize the meaningful Jubilee tradition to redeem land and the labourer and provide forgiveness of debts.

India experienced a similar distribution of land by the rich to the landless through an institution called 'Boodan Movement' ('Boomi' means land; 'dan' means gift) initiated in April 1951 by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals.¹² Soon

after independence, the process of consolidation of the states into the formation of union of India continued. During this period (1947-1951), peasants in different states were involved in the struggles, claiming their rights to own land. Some of these peasant movements in West Bengal (Naxalite) and Andhra Pradesh (Telangana) were violent and many landlords were killed. Vinoba went to these riot-stricken areas and pleaded with the landlords to distribute land to landless farmers. Voluntarily giving land as a gift went on from 1951 to 1961 in many parts of India.

The Gandhian School, led by Vinobha, introduced another institution called 'Gramdan' ('Gram' means 'villages'; 'dan' means 'gift') in January 1957 after seeing the success of Boodan Movement. It provided the opportunity for the rich to donate lands to the villages to hold them as a common property. Families in villages can only make use of these lands donated to their village to produce food and cannot claim ownership. This paved the way for co-operative farming in many villages. Even though the Boodan Movement and Gramdan Movement did not achieve a thorough redistribution of land and recycling of the economy, they proved that land distribution is possible without violence. They were timely actions to help the landless soon after our liberation from the British, who could have done a major land reform in our country during their 150 years of rule. I am not equating the Gandhian movements of Boodan and Gramdan to the bib-

¹² C. B. Mamoria and B. B. Tripathi, *Agricultural Problem of India*, (New Delhi: Kitab Mahal, 1989), pp. 713-719.

lical Jubilee institution of the Priestly group. But there is a similarity: whenever a nation is liberated from bondage (Egyptian), or exile (Babylonian), or colonial rule (British), land is the foremost issue to be dealt with.

Contemporary Challenges

Biblical messages remind us of the need to make our lives more meaningful to our society. Land alienation happens quickly, and many people in India are becoming poor, leaving their villages in search of jobs in towns and cities. One of the main reasons for leaving the land and becoming bonded labourers is the problem of debt. In times of monsoon failure, extra medical or education expenses, or marriages of children, house repairs, purchase of seed and fertilizers, farmers borrow money from money-lenders by mortgaging their land. Unable to pay the capital and interest, they transfer the ownership of their land forever to the money-lenders and surrender themselves as their servants. Now they plough their land for the sake of their new master.

The reviving of the biblical idea of Jubilee in the last decade has challenged many of our churches and missionary organizations. The theology of land is becoming prominent in India. Three missionaries belonging to one of the missionary organizations in India have initiated a scheme to help the tribals in their area. Farmers bring the best of their wheat harvest to be stored in the church as seed to be used in the next cultivation, rather than selling all their harvest at a low price and then later bor-

rowing money from the money-lenders to buy the seed for sowing. They use the church as the seed-bank and later as a marketing place to sell their harvest at a good price. Some of the tribals who co-operated with this scheme were able to redeem their land. The mediating role of this church in storing the seed and promoting the sale and clearing their debts was not liked by the money-lenders. They accused the missionaries of converting the tribals to Christianity and finally set fire to the church. This kind of micro-level social action in redeeming the land and labourers is repeated in different parts of India.

However, loans and debts are problems not only for the farmers but also for the people who are working in organized and unorganized sectors in the cities and towns. They borrow money from the illegal money-lenders and also fall into the debt trap. Many Christians think that the Jubilee challenges are not relevant to the people living in towns and cities, since most of them do not own land or are not involved in agriculture. But some industrial workers go home without their salary and borrow again to sustain their family. Some of them hesitate to go out of the company confines, and stay inside the campus until late at night to avoid the money-lenders waiting at the gate. Some of them take leave on pay-day to avoid money-lenders. If they regularly avoid the money-lenders and fail to pay the interest on their loans, they are beaten and their wives and children are ill-treated by the money-lenders.

A survey was made by our students to find out the seriousness of loans and debts of the poor living in a particular area near our seminary and the problems faced by them from the money-lenders. These money-lenders collect Rupee 1 per day as interest for a loan of Rs.100. It looks as if it is a very low interest rate, but it is calculated per day. A poor labourer who borrowed Rs.500 pays Rs.5 as daily interest which makes Rs.1825 in interest by the end of the year. The loan of Rs.500 still remains an unsettled burden. Money-lenders encourage their borrowers not to worry about the capital now but to continue to pay the interest regularly. The small capital lent is used as a hook to fetch a big income through interest. If the person is unable to return the capital borrowed, they will remain on the hook, paying the interest continuously for years. These people who are hooked to the vicious cycle of debts undergo mental agony, become sick, and resort to alcohol and drugs and even commit suicide.

Churches and missions are fighting not only against these principalities and powers but also against our government. The ruling BJP government in New Delhi (religious fundamentalist party of Hinduism) and their militant outfits like RSS and Bajrang Dal (suspected of killing the Australian missionary, Graham Staines, and his two sons in Orissa) see the Christian mission activities of evangelism and liberation as a threat to their status quo and their policy of keeping the poor as poor and the rich as rich, low caste as low and high caste as high. So, the liberative actions are accused of being conversions. This government celebrated the 50th year of Independence as a mere political function, ignoring economic and social reform. There is a great need for solidarity and co-operation of leaders in politics, religion and economics to make the ideals of Jubilee more meaningful to the people in a local area or at the national level. This is urgently needed in the light of the mounting debts of the Third World countries.

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