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Correlation could then be construed as 'the interpretation [and incarnation] of faith in the idiom [as well as structures and institutions] of its time and place'—a familiar practice of the Church in history.¹²⁴ The Church shares the Gospel with the receiving culture in a sense of profound identification, and a listening heart.¹²⁵ It will not mean submission to the 'other' nor aggression against the 'other.' Rather, it will consist of self-assertion (including initiatives of transformation) of God's people, nurtured by real listening.¹²⁶

IV. Conclusion

I have attempted as an Asian (Filipino) theologian to engage David Tracy's approach to public theology from a Reformational evangelical perspective. Looking back, for Tracy, theology's public nature directly relates to theologians' public role as well as to the three 'publics' to whom they speak: church, academy and society. Because of the prominence of conversation, public theology for Tracy is correlational theology. In dialogue with Tracy's approach, I have sketched the contours of a missiological public theology that draws from Tracy but criticizes him internally. Instead of situating public theology within fundamental theology, I have argued for a rethinking of public theology as a theology of public culture viewed transformationally.

It is hoped that this study has challenged evangelical readers to the public role of churches as well as to the public dimensions of Christian theology with implications not just to North American Christianity but also to the global evangelical churches' cultural and societal commitment to be 'salt and light' in God's world.

¹²⁴ Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective*, 210.

¹²⁵ C. Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Jose de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987) 27-42.

¹²⁶ Robert Bolton, *People Skills* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). On the notion of transforming initiatives, see Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking* (Louisville: WKJP, 1992).

Transforming the Indian Culture of Poverty and Oppression

Samuel Jayakumar

KEYWORDS: *Dalits, inequality, physical disability, governance, mission, new society, modernity, grace, Scripture*

political and religious nationalism, post-modern mind set, oppression of children, urbanization, neglect of the disabled and others.¹

THE LAUSANNE FORUM on World Evangelization, which met in Pattya in 2004, concluded that

The dramatic change in the political and economic landscape in recent years has raised new challenges in evangelization for the church. The polarization between east and west makes it imperative that the church seek God's direction for the appropriate responses to the present challenges. In the 31 issue groups these new realities were taken into consideration, including the HIV pandemic, terrorism, globalization, the global role of media, poverty, persecution of Christians, fragmented families,

Poverty therefore remains a major challenge for the mission practitioners. This paper explores some of the proven historical approaches to the problems of the Indian poor, the Dalits and the marginalized people groups. Lessons are drawn from historical models of the Dalit group conversions to the gospel of Christ. Historical examples found in the 19th century European Christian mission have demonstrated themselves capable of combating the socio-economic problems of poverty, child labour, oppression of women and physical ailments;

¹ D Claydon (ed.), *A New Vision, a New Heart, a Renewed Call: Lausanne Occasional Papers from the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2006), x.

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and ushered in socio-economic change in the larger society.

During the 19th century the poverty-stricken outcaste communities of South India with the assistance of the Christian missionaries developed spiritual resources to overcome their poverty. Their newfound faith in the gospel of Christ provided them identity, dignity and above all hope for change in the midst of misery. The congregations that sprang up in the mass movement areas became real *koinonia*—communities of transformation. The Scripture translated into their vernacular language enriched, affirmed and empowered their lives.

Although this paper relates to the Indian poor, references are made to other two thirds world countries especially, Africa.

I Context of Indian Poverty

Indian rural poverty is the greatest challenge to mission practitioners. The world's largest number of poor people are found in India. While Africa has 200 million poor, India's poor add up to 400 million.² One out of every three persons in India is poor. India lags behind the developed countries in areas of survival needs such as health, drinking water, food and shelter. About one million children require schooling. The National Sample Survey reveals that the Indian economy is substantially affected by poverty. In rupee terms, the all-India average

monthly per capita consumer expenditure (MPCE) was Rs. 495 in rural areas and Rs. 914 in urban India. Of that, Rs. 914 in urban India Rs. 400 went for food.³ For the most part the women, children, Dalits, tribals and disabled have no hope for economic development and social mobility.⁴

Indian poverty is more complex than simply income deprivation. Poverty involves lack of empowerment, knowledge, and opportunity as well as lack of income and assets. It is contended that poverty can be understood in relative (proportionate) or absolute terms but is commonly measured by level of income or wealth. 'Income based measures do nothing to show factors often associated with poverty such as the prevalence of disease, low life expectancy, inferior housing and poor education and diet'.⁵

In the two-thirds world countries such as India, poverty is not merely a condition of lack of income or basic needs, but is a sense of powerlessness and

3 *The Times of India*, 21 March 2003, 7

4 The World Food Programme, Food and Agricultural Organization and M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation planned a meeting on a road map for a hunger free India by 2007. Two questions particularly bothered the experts assembled. The first was: who is hungry? The second, was: what strategies should be adopted to overcome hunger. These questions are seems to funny because already many national level researches have identified the poor as well as the strategies. Y.K. Alagh, 'Poverty has Many Lines', *New Indian Express*, (April 8, 2003)

5 Robin Grimble, 'Rural Poverty and Environmental Management: A Framework for Understanding', *Transformation*, Vol.19, No.2, (April, 2002), 120-121.

2 Of the one billion population, 320 million are officially poor. Soma Basu, 'War against Poverty', *The Hindu*, January 28, 2003.

deprivation of entitlement.⁶

Robin Grimble defines poverty as the scarcity of economic resources or assets that poor rural people can access for livelihood sustaining or enhancing purposes. The poor thus have first of all limited access to productive resources, either privately owned or communal. These may include land, water, forests and that part of biodiversity that forms an essential part of many poor people's livelihood systems and strategies. Secondly they have few financial assets, including income from the sale of farm or wild products, or physical goods that can be consumed or exchanged.⁷

Similarly, while describing African poverty, Archbishop N. Ndungane maintains that poverty is not just low income but it is a complex situation involving multidimensional deprivations such as loss human dignity.

The deprivations around poverty are not just about low incomes; they include loss of human dignity: this is about human suffering. There is also poverty in terms of denial of access to opportunities for advancement. That is particularly telling since we live in a world in which, on the one hand, there are huge material and natural resources at our disposal, as well as dramatic technological advances; and yet, on the other hand, there are inequalities and uneven distribution of wealth

resulting in the fearful consequences of poverty which we see in the faces of women, children, and people with disabilities. Poverty also brings with it a retardation of knowledge, preventing all human beings from sharing in the increasing wealth of technological information that is available.⁸

For the Archbishop the war on poverty and inequality is South Africa's most important priority and our greatest challenge. He contends that eradicating poverty is essential to consolidate the gains of their new democracy, and it is a precondition for social justice, peace and security in their land.⁹ This is also true of Asia.

In the same way, according to Professor C.T. Kurian, in India poverty and inequality are closely related.

Even if poverty and inequality are not the same thing, there is nothing wrong in saying that under certain conditions the two can be closely related. Growth of income over time can affect both poverty and inequality, although the precise manner of this impact cannot be determined a priori. Growth can reduce poverty and inequality; growth can reduce poverty and increase inequality; growth can increase both inequality and poverty.¹⁰

8 Njongonkulu Ndungane, *A World with a human face: A Voice from Africa*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 20.

9 Ndungane, *A World with a human face*, 20.

10 C.T. Kurian, 'Poverty and Inequality', *The Hindu*, (November 11, 2002). Also, see Andre Beteille, 'Poverty and Inequality', *The Hindu*, (November 2, 2002)

6 *Coalescing the Unreached for Poverty Reduction: Voices from the Ground*, (New Delhi: Independent Commission for People's Rights & Development, 2003).

7 Robin Grimble, *Rural Poverty*, 122.

So also gender inequalities are common in two-third world countries. Gender based inequality is a major obstacle to escape from poverty. For instance in work places such in agricultural sectors and in unorganised sectors, women are paid lower salaries than men. It is noteworthy that women farmers are responsible for more than 50 per cent of food production worldwide. In two-thirds world countries women produce 60-80 per cent of the food. As much as 90 per cent of the work in the rice fields of Asia is carried out by women.¹¹ In the rural India women raise livestock, run poultry, and manage dairy production. Yet women are the worst victims of poverty. Consequently their families, their men and their children suffer.

Illiteracy is another situation to be addressed. Indian National Sample Survey indicates that the overall rate of illiteracy has risen to 62 percent. In India poverty affects education and vice-versa. Quality education has been established as one of the most important pointers to development and an essential requirement for capacity building and the improvement in the quality of life. In spite of increased opportunities of entry to education, the Dalits, women, and the physically challenged in the rural areas are continuing to be deprived of education. When basic education is available, the poorest are unable to take advantage of it because the direct costs attached to it are quite high. Thus poverty is both a cause and an effect of insufficient

access to or completion of quality education.¹² Eradication of poverty requires providing access to quality education. While lack of education perpetuates poverty, education would empower the poor, particularly the women in so many ways.

Another important aspect is poverty and population. In villages poor people raise larger families to provide more working hands to supplement the family incomes. They also provide safety against early deaths of the siblings.¹³ However excessive population growth is an unmanageable problem for a country such as India.

Addressing the plight of people who are physically challenged is a significant part of reducing poverty.¹⁴ It is estimated that the population with disability in India is over 90 million. Diseases such as leprosy, malaria, cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis and HIV/Aids are major causes of poverty. Government hospitals have no drugs to treat even ordinary illness, let alone the major ones. The private multi-speciality hospitals serve the rich and the affluent community. The medical profession is no longer considered a ser-

¹² K.Venkata Subramanian, Education and Poverty, *The Hindu*, (December 4, 2001).

¹³ But one can not be dogmatic about this view. There are examples show that lower economic decline leads to lower population, particularly among the Indian middle class. Cf. Bharat Jhunjhunwala, 'Poverty and Population', *The New Indian Express*, (October 9, 2002).

¹⁴ According to James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank efforts to reduce global poverty must include the disabled. 'Efforts to Reduce Global Poverty', *The Hindu*, (December 3, 2002).

¹¹ Elizabeth Warham, 'Feeding the World', *Developments: The International Development Magazine*, Issue 13, First Quarter 2001, 7.

vice to humanity, but for the most part is merely a business for making money. Private clinics are found in abundance, but they are like petty shops opened on every corner to rob the people.

Above all, as in Africa so in India, bad governance, corruption, loss of markets, lack of expertise in disaster management (such as flood, earthquake etc) as well as erosion in ethical values,¹⁵ unending completion, laziness, lack of ambition, lack of thrift (or savings) and consumerism are further causes of poverty.¹⁶

In such a context the Christian answer should be one of hope. In the past the two hundred years the performance of Christian mission in India was remarkable. Therefore this study is undertaken to draw lessons from the 19th century missionary work among the poorest of the poor who are now called the Dalits.

¹⁵ About 30 percent of the edibles sold in various parts of the country are adulterated. The adulterants used include sand, marble chips, stones, earth, horse dung powder, bark powder and non-edible colours. Some of the clarified items like soft drinks have been found to contain asbestos fiber, which leads to intestinal cancer. Profit margins are so high in adulteration that some anti-social elements have even taken to the commercial manufacture of adulterants on a large scale.

¹⁶ The Indian consumer market is growing rapidly. The Indian masses are targeted by the consumer markets and the multinational corporations. See S.L. Rao, 'India's Rapidly Changing Consumer Markets', *Economics and Political Weekly*, (September 30-October 6, 2000).

II Christian Mission Envisioning a New Society

Historically Christian mission in India among the poor and outcaste communities was the envisioning of a new society. This was humanly speaking very odd for the missionaries. In reality for them it was just hoping against the hope, because the missionary work was done in a society that was deeply religious, deeply caste-ridden, the lower castes of which were terribly oppressed. The missionary task was a battle against sati (burning of widows), untouchability, child marriage, temple prostitution, infanticide, slavery, illiteracy, oppression of women, children, etc. Nevertheless a new society was taking shape before their very eyes as the missionaries and the new believers worked towards it.

As the Bishop of Madras, George Spencer wrote in 1845, the missionaries and the native pastors who worked among the poor outcastes regarded themselves as prophets in the 'valley of dry bones'. They saw that the 'dry bones of these people in the valley of the shadow of death had been shaken and were coming together by the influence of the Spirit towards the living Head.'¹⁷ The missionaries had the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. Like the prophets they saw the restoration of the glorious kingdom by God himself.

For the most part, persons who were involved in the 19th century mission were more motivated by the expansion of the Kingdom of God than

¹⁷ Bishop Spencer, 'Missionary Clergy in Tinnevely', (January 11, 1845).

by any national or political interest.¹⁸ Christian mission and social transformation of the poor and oppressed are always inseparable. The missionaries and their native pastors believed that the gospel of Christ was not only the power of God for salvation but also the power of God for socio-economic and political liberation.¹⁹

During the 19th century in some parts of South India, especially in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the native Anglican priests who were also converts accepted the gospel of Christ as an option for social change among themselves. The missionaries and the native clergy, including outstanding leaders like V.S. Azariah (first Indian Anglican Bishop of British India), had a definite understanding of the process of social change. For them social transformation came through vital personal religion and vibrant faith.²⁰

The missionaries focused on the individual poor persons, families, communities and caste groups and not merely on the problem of poverty or oppression. Their aim was a church among and of the poor and oppressed communities who positively responded to the gospel of Christ, and not the total

transformation of the whole oppressed society. In other words the missionaries were not universalists, but particularists. This approach to change among the poor communities did not necessarily result in either privileging some people within a caste group or promoting separatism between different caste groups, but within a century people belonging to different castes experienced transformation. They together crossed the pollution line and attained the status of respectable classes in Indian society.²¹

Later on Indian Christian leaders such as K.M. Banerjee saw conversion to Christianity as much related to 'the prospect (or envisioning) of India's regeneration'.²² Similarly the Madras Native Christian Association said in its report (1893) that 'Christianity has wrought miracles in our midst. It has lifted many of us from the mire of social degradation, it has enlightened us, liberated us from the trammels of superstition and custom and has planted in us the instincts of a free and noble humanity'.²³

The report asserted that Christians have not simply exchanged one creed for another, but 'have undergone a radical change of life, a thorough readjustment in standards of Judgment in motives and in conduct' and reminded themselves that they ought to be alive to their responsibilities and thus become 'a real power for good in this land.' As Bishop J.W. Gladstone has

rightly observed, 'for many Indians who were leaders of thought and action in the Indian Christianity, their new religious confession was a segment of the new Spiritual and cultural self-image of their nation'.²⁴

Historically speaking Christian mission always has been inviting persons to Christ, challenging corrupt and evil systems, structures and cultures and helping individuals and communities to experience the transforming power of God.²⁵ When we examine 19th century missions we see that the gospel of Christ provided the missionaries and the poor with whom they worked with a vision of transformation. They believed and hoped that their lives and their circumstances would be changed. Bishop Stephen Neill, a distinguished mission historian with extensive personal experience, said that 'things will not change until men and women begin to believe that they can change. The outcaste Christian saw them change before his very eyes and worked towards it'.²⁶ Likewise Vinay Samuel observed, 'the faith of the poor themselves is a significant factor in poverty reduction.... religious faith is also, part of their personal identity, the foundation of their sense of community, and the basis of their hope'.²⁷

24 Mission and Evangelism in India: A Historical Appraisal, Gurukul, Madras, 30, 31.

25 Vinay Samuel, 'Mission as Transformation', *Transformation*, Vol.19, No.4, (October 2002), 244.

26 Stephen Neill, in D.McGavran (ed), *Conciliar Evangelical Debate*, (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), 321.

27 D.Belshaw, R.Calderisi, and C.Sugden, *Faith in Development: Partnership between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa*, (Oxford: Regnum, 2001), 5-6.

The Christian communities and congregations established and maintained by the missionaries and native priests created hope for the poor and the oppressed classes. The gospel released the poor from centuries of bondage when there had been no escape otherwise from their situation. Christian faith provided the poor with the general confidence that life is meaningful and that it was possible to change one's quality of life by one's efforts.²⁸

Even so the poor believed in the gospel of Christ because they could see the changes in the lives of other poor persons who have committed their lives to Christ. As the missionary has remarked that *the poor walk by sight and not by faith*.

... seeing their Christian countrymen free from boils [or rage] of quarrels, happier in their villages, cleaner and neater in their persons and to all intents and purposes more contented if not actually wealthier than themselves, by the simplest logical process they conclude Christianity to be a better religion than their own, and embraced it. Nor is this to be wondered at when it is remembered that they walk by sight not by faith.²⁹

Moreover, as Vinay Samuel has put it, transformation of individuals and society is the will of God for all people and especially for the poor.

18 One example is that the extraordinary three-way programme in India was of cooperation involving Lutherans and Anglicans and drawing support from Germany, Denmark and Great Britain. This reveals the greater concern for the expansion of the Kingdom of God proved more powerful than the national or political interests.

19 V.S. Azariah, *Dornakal Diocesan Magazine*, Vol.XIII, No.4, (April, 1936), 3-4.

20 S. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 332-333.

21 Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 327.

22 R.D. Paul, *Chosen Vessels*, (Madras: CLS, 1961), 145ff.

23 The Madras Native Christian Association', (HF, June 1893).

28 S.Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 218, 286.

29 J.F.Kearns, 'Muthalur Mission', *SPG-R*, (1854), 630.

Transformation is to enable God's vision of society to be actualised in all relationships, social, economic and spiritual, so that God's will may be reflected in human society and his love be experienced by all communities especially the poor.³⁰

But it is not a counter-cultural effort, whereas it is a cross-cultural endeavour—that is, it engages with rather than confronts those of other groups. For instance V.S. Azariah recognized Christian faith not as a cultural contradiction but as a fulfilling of the imperfect native culture. He was of the opinion that Christianity was a refinement of the culture of natives to enable them to live a civilized life, free from the negative and oppressive aspects of their culture such as ignorance, illiteracy, spirit worship, immorality and other traditional practices.³¹

Missionaries attempted to transform the declining heathen rural communities into a visible koinonia, Christian community. Among the mass conversion movement areas of South India the village congregation is a kind of koinonia, a fellowship of believers devoted to Scripture and worship. While much was similar to pre-conversion community life, a Christian village in South India was a new community with new responsibilities and privileges. As the poor accepted the missionaries as their new leaders, they were willing to modify the administra-

tion of their villages according to Christian principles.

Missionaries like Caldwell, Huxtable and Margoschis enabled their villages to be governed by their own traditional elders called headmen but based on Christian principles that they had drawn up. Thus local leadership was developed with a view to social change among the new converts as the people cooperated with the missionaries by accepting them as their leaders. It was a community living based on biblical principles of equality, liberty and fraternity for the all-round advancement of poor believers.³²

The gospel of Christ has fascinated the poor because it offered the promise of change and transformation. However, first of all the gospel has to deal with the culture of poverty and oppression in which the poor struggle.

III Gospel and Transformation

India is known to the world over for its ancient culture and belief systems as well as for its poverty. All these elements are quite inter-related with each other—so much so that poverty is very much linked with culture and religion. Traditionally, Indian belief systems have always determined Indians' lifestyle. For the majority of Indians life has been one of negation rather than affirmation. Rightly or wrongly, Indian sages chose to renounce the world and run away from all the good-

ness of life rather than face the challenges of it. These ascetics lived off alms in abject poverty and want.

Although modernity and western culture have affected our Indian belief systems and cultures, poverty is still regarded as the outward sign of 'spirituality' for the *swamijis* and *mahatmas*. While these *swamijis* and *mahatmas* adopt this type of 'austere and simple life', theirs and the message of the priestly class to the masses, the poor and the oppressed is a little different. They say that they are poor, untouchable and handicapped because of their *karma*—retribution of the sins they have carried with them into this birth! The belief in '*karma janmanthra*' destroys the spirit of enterprise and the inner urge for development and growth. Any belief system that doesn't liberate the people from the shackles of poverty and misery, but rather compels them to accept the sufferings as their fate, need to be jettisoned.³³

Consequently the 19th century European missionaries who worked among the poor and the oppressed communities had to approach the culture of poverty and oppression in a new way. As Professor Kancha Ilaiah has pointed out, the real change among the Indian poor came only after the Christian missionaries began interacting with them. The missionaries, instead of condemning the food habits, dress code, ritual practices of these masses, began seeing the people as those created in the image of God with all the potentials for change and progress.

They accepted them as they were—with an unconditional positive regard. They lived with them, ate their food and freely interacted with them in order to give them cultural confidence.³⁴

In some parts of South India the poor and the oppressed masses had the advantage of living with the European missionary families and being influenced by their lives. This influence was to be seen particularly amongst the people who were living in mission stations such as Edayangudi, Nazareth, Muthaloor, Puthiamputhur, Christianagaram and Sawyerpuram. While some of these towns had a permanent missionary for many decades, others had a missionary for ten or fifteen years only. Many of the early missionaries such as J.L. Irion, A.F. Caemmerer, G.U. Pope, R. Caldwell, J.F. Kearns, and J.K. Best lived with their families in the midst of the poor Dalits.³⁵ The progress the Dalits have made in every aspect of life could be attributed to the personal influence of the European missionaries:

That Christianity should have made so much progress under such circumstances must be attributed to the personal influence of the numerous European missionaries who have laboured in this field, many of them living with their families in the largest of the Christian

³⁰ Vinay Samuel, *Mission as Transformation*, (Oxford: Regnum, 1999), preface.

³¹ V.S. Azariah, *The Bishop's letter* (1934), 4. S. Harper, *Azariah and Indian Christianity*, 249f.

³² S. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 223, 280, 309. Stephen Neill, *Under Three Flags*, 77. S. Harper, *Azariah and Indian Christianity*, 246.

³³ M. Ezra Sargunam, 'Culture as an element of Development', Unpublished Paper, October 13-14, 1999.

³⁴ Kancha Ilaiah, 'Culture of Oppression', *Hindu*, (Chennai) February 22, 2003.

³⁵ There were also many CMS missionaries such as C.T.E. Rhenius, John Thomas and others who lived among the Dalits with their large families, effecting great influence upon the minds of the local people.

villages, entirely cut off from the European society, but being brought into daily contact with the people. The result has been that the religion of the people is more of a subjective nature than it is objective.³⁶

Maybe this is one of the reasons why in India the missionaries who chose to live in villages were more successful in effecting group conversion of the natives and subsequent social change than those who settled in towns or cities, who effected only occasional individual conversions.

Since the method adopted by the missionaries suited the feudal system, it was a means of social change as well as a source of rapid growth in the number of converts among the poor and oppressed communities. The missionaries reshaped their villages into model Christian settlements with the cooperation of government authorities. Since, for the most part, it was at the initiative of the missionaries that the government provided facilities such as post offices, railways, road transport, telecommunications, dispensaries, educational institutions, and clean drinking water, these should be treated as the contribution of the missionaries.³⁷ On one occasion the District Collector remarked that Christian villages were an oasis in the desert. Hence the English newspaper, the *Madras Mail* reported,

But, after all, this institution is

merely a small part of the multifarious cares which Mr. Margoschis undertakes for the good of the people. In the buildings around us children are taught, and the youth of both sexes are trained in professional and industrial occupations which will make them useful and orderly members of society; orphans and children abandoned by their parents are cared for; the deaf and dumb are instructed in technical arts; the distressed are relieved. No one can come to this oasis in the desert and be a witness of all this, and watch the contentment and happiness bearing on every face, and the order that reigns throughout, without being filled with admiration for the man to whose philanthropic, wholehearted and self-sacrificing labours these results are due, and whose genius pervades the whole.³⁸

Another newspaper, the *Eastern Star*, reported that there were a number of other villages regarded as having become oases through the efforts of the missionaries and native priests, such as a South Indian town, Kudangulam, the head station of the Radhapuram mission district, and by the efforts of the native priest, S.S. Daniel.³⁹ However, for the most part, being somewhat paternalistic, the missionaries provided all these facilities and opportunities not for the mere social advancement of their converts but to

arouse them from what they called their spiritual, moral and intellectual slumber so that they could gain all-round growth and live an abundant life.

Whenever converts desired only worldly benefits and advantages without making any visible spiritual progress, the opportunities for social advancement were denied them. The missionaries and the native priests always gave first place to Christian character formation and Church discipline. The missionaries wanted the means of social advancement to be used to develop what they called deep spirituality and consistent character which is a result of spiritual transformation. The missionaries looked for signs of faith, confidence and hope in Christ as well as giving and sharing, family fidelity, honesty and stewardship as the pointers to character change.⁴⁰

The village Christians often confessed that because of Christianity they enjoyed privileges which the non-Christian villages did not. They contended that it was the gospel which enabled them to progress in knowledge, and in what the missionaries called civilization and social status. Thus a South Indian native Christian leader D. Periyanaayagam observed that,

We as Christians enjoy several blessings and privileges, spiritual and temporal which heathens around us do not have, and which

are worthy of being proclaimed with joy as good tidings. Spiritually we have abundant knowledge of the true God, we know how God sent His only beloved Son to redeem us sinners by his precious death; the Holy Spirit is given to us to sanctify us. The Church has been established among us as a house of salvation; we have the holy sacraments whereby we may be united to Christ.⁴¹

He goes on to say that,

We have the different means of grace whereby we may obtain grace from God, we have the Word of God for being acquainted with His holy will; in short we have everything that is necessary to enable us to secure a happy life in eternity. So also, we have several temporal blessings. We have schools established amongst us for the cultivation of our knowledge. There are dispensaries in various places where the sick can receive help. We have pecuniary assistance in a variety of ways. In short, we have various means of progressing in knowledge, in civilization and in worldly circumstances.⁴²

The native Christians were aware of the awakening and progress that Christianity had brought to them. The native priest acknowledged that peo-

³⁶ A. Margoschis, Tinneveli Mission, 49.

³⁷ A.F. Caemmarer, Caldwell, Margoschis and a few others reshaped their villages into self-sufficient model Christian towns.

³⁸ Madras Mail, (October 22, 1892),

³⁹ Edward Pillai, Eastern Star, (November 4, 1895), quoted by S.S. Daniel, 'Radhapuram Report', SPG-R, (1897), 2.

⁴⁰ S. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 249-270. Cf. Makonen Getu, 'Measuring Transformation', *Transformation*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (April 2002), 95-96.

⁴¹ D. Periyanaayagam, 'A Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the SPG Bicentenary Festival', SPG-R, (1901), 1-2. Cf. 'The Rt. Rev. Father in God, Henry, by the Divine permission the Lord Bishop of Madras', (Madras: Addison Press, 1901), Pamphlet in *SPG-R*, (1901), 1.

⁴² Periyanaayagam, 'Sermon', 1.

ple who once sat in darkness and doing the works of darkness have now come to the light and have put on the armour of light. People who were once were 'slaves to sin and Satan' have become the children of God and are trying to live a holy life. People who once acted 'as beasts and were barbarous and addicted to cruel actions' have now been made children of God and are progressing in civilization.⁴³ Social scientists such as Lila Krishnan believe that while negative religious beliefs are a hindrance to social change, positive beliefs 'nurture the idea of working in order to improve the quality of worldly life'.⁴⁴

Similarly in other parts of India, the missionary approach to culture is noteworthy. There are many examples of missionaries who lived with the people and identified with them in order to bring about transformation. One example is William Carey who identified with the culture and customs of the common Bengalis in order to serve them most effectively.⁴⁵ Once while lec-

turing in Fort William College he said that, 'I may say, indeed, that their manners, customs, habits and sentiment are so obvious to me as if I am myself a native'.⁴⁶ That is the way he could effect transformation throughout the state of Bengal with the help of the British government.

Carey's approach was clearly reflected in his stated missionary purposes. They are: (a) churches should be run by Indians for Indians; (b) no overseas control to be imposed on the Indian churches which were to maintain fraternal relations with foreign church bodies; (c) to esteem and treat Indians as equals; (d) Serampore Mission would endeavour to develop Indian leadership.⁴⁷

Carey and other missionaries in different part of India led the battles against *sati* caste, untouchability, child marriage, female infanticide, bonded agricultural labour, drunkenness and opium addiction. Also, they recovered the local language, literature and revitalized them. This resulted in renaissance in various parts of the country. Nevertheless most of the missionary activities had to begin with the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, for the Bible was central to Protestant Christian faith.

enced timid and hesitating men and women to take steps to the evangelizing of the world.' Another wrote of him, 'Taking his life as a whole, it is not too much to say that he was the greatest and most versatile Christian missionary sent out in modern times.' See www.wholesomewords.org

⁴⁶ William Carey, *Primitai Orientalis*, Vol.III, (Calcutta: Fort William College, 1802)

⁴⁷ T.V. Philip, 'William Carey Lecture', Senate of Serampore College, Serampore, 1993, 2.

IV Vernacular Scripture Empowers the Poor

In their scholarly and Christian endeavour, the missionaries produced Bibles, Prayer Books and other literature in Tamil.⁴⁸ For the Protestant missionaries the Bible was central to Christian faith. Consequently from the beginning they gave themselves to the translation of Scriptures into the vernacular. Being influenced by the intellectual currents of the period, especially Empiricism and Enlightenment, they were also interested in studying the religions and cultures of the world.⁴⁹

Among the languages spoken in India, Tamil was the first into which the Bible was translated.⁵⁰ As a result the Protestant Christians of South India who were predominantly from the outcastes began to regard themselves as *Vethakaramga*, the people of the Scripture. It had always been the Brahmins and the caste Hindus who had possession of the Hindu scriptures, the *Vedas*, whereas the outcastes were for centuries prohibited

not only from possessing the *Vedas*, but also banned from hearing the *Vedas* being read. Now they were given *Vetham*, the Bible, to possess and use by themselves for their edification. They came to be considered by themselves and the people around as People of the *Vedas*, the Scripture. Yet the Brahmins and the caste Hindus, who had always boasted of the *Vedas*, had no such popular designation. Generations have passed; the Dalit Christians of South India still regard themselves as people of the Scriptures. The Scriptures have thus given them a particular identity, which thus far is claimed by no one else in the region.

Bible study in the vernacular was a key feature of the pastoral care offered by the Anglican missionaries, and efforts were made to give scriptural guidance to suit the oppressive circumstances of local people.⁵¹ They interpreted the Bible in the local context. They saw this as essential to effecting transformation. For example, J.F. Kearns taught the book of Exodus, emphasizing the lesson that God takes an interest in the worldly as well as spiritual prosperity and happiness of those who love and adore him as their God. The book of Joshua was taught in such a way as to demonstrate that even in this life, despite their power and prosperity, God punishes the wicked *heathen*; the book of Judges was used to illustrate that God protects and blesses his people so long as they con-

⁴⁸ The missionaries were motivated by evangelical concern and the long tradition of learning and scholarship among the Church of England's clergy.

⁴⁹ However, while the concerns of the colonial Indologists were political and secular, the missionaries' concerns were Christian. When the British established political superiority over all other European rivals in India, they also tried to establish intellectual superiority over all other European countries with regard to understanding India. A.K. Davidson, *Evangelicals and Attitudes*, 16-37.

⁵⁰ I.H. Victor, 'A Brief History of the Bible', *ICHR* vol.VIII, No.2, (December, 1984), 106.

⁵¹ R.Caldwell, 'Edaiyangudi Report', (1845), *CVND*, Madras, Box 8, 5. H.C.Huxtable, 'Sawyerpuram Report', *SPG-R* (1856), 2509ff.

⁴³ Periyannayagam, 'Sermon', 5.

⁴⁴ Lila Krishnan, 'Has Rural India Changed?' *International Journal of Indian Studies*, Vol.3, No.2, (July-December, 1993), 92,97.

⁴⁵ William Carey was born in a small thatched cottage in Paulerspury, a typical Northamptonshire village in England, August 17, 1761, of a weaver's family. It was in 1793 that Carey went to India. 'Shoemaker by trade, but scholar, linguist and missionary by God's training,' William Carey was one of God's giants in the history of evangelism! One of his biographers, F. Dealville Walker, wrote of Carey: 'He, with a few contemporaries, was almost singlehanded in conquering the prevailing indifference and hostility to missionary effort; Carey developed a plan for missions, and printed his amazing *Enquiry*; he influ-

tinue to obey him.⁵²

The Bible in vernacular language produces indigenous spirituality for it helps the poor to relate the gospel to their culture. This is not only true among various South Asian countries, but also in the continent of Africa where the 'next Christendom is emerging'.

The actual results of the impact of the message about Jesus often turned out to be quite different. In specifically religious terms, the single most significant feature of this coming of a worldwide faith in Jesus was that the Bible became quite early available in the mother-tongues of the people who were then learning about Jesus. In areas where the acceptance of the message has been most widespread, as in tropical Africa, having the Bible in African languages enabled African converts to discover parallels between the biblical world (not just in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament) of miracles, exorcisms, healing and prophecy, and their own cultural and religious world of spirit-beings and supernatural forces.⁵³

Also, the Scripture in the vernacular is the cause for proliferation of denominations and community

churches. They are numerous in India as well as in Africa. The mushrooming of churches is an indication of the transformation that is taking place due to the indigenous form of religious experience of the marginalized people.

The Bible in the mother tongues of Africa became a time bomb which exploded into the numerous and diverse 'independent' churches proliferating on the African continent. But the Independents only exemplify in the extreme what is now true also of many of the mission-established churches of Africa. Far from being the work of 'foreign agents' promoting an imperialist religion, this mushrooming of churches in fact indicates how at home Africans are in the message about Jesus. In African Christianity, it is not a Western Jesus who reigns, but the Jesus who is powerful to save in the African world.⁵⁴

For the most part the Christian faith has in the course of its expansion developed generally as a vernacular religion. The poor could directly speak to God in vernacular as well as listen to him directly while God speaks to them in their own language. This revolutionized their understanding of God and their relationship to him as their creator and redeemer. Now they are no more in need of sacred language (Sanskrit) or sacred person (Brahmin priest).

Unlike Brahminical Hinduism and Islam the refusal of an imposed, the so-called sacred language, has meant that

the Bible in whatever language always remains the Word of God. Here is the clue to what has been called the 'infinite cultural translatability' of the Christian faith. This is what creates change in the perspectives (world-view) of the poor. The people's understanding of their god and his relationship with life-problems are affected positively.⁵⁵

Christian conversion encompassed the expansion of a world-view. The missionaries contended that non-Christian societies were in need of 'comprehensive regeneration' or transformation both in invisible experience and visible change in life. Their attempt was not completely to change their traditional cultural customs but to alter, modify, preserve and build upon them. The poor and the oppressed communities whole heartedly accepted a vernacular version of Western Christian culture and values that the missionaries offered to them along with the gospel. The natives confessed that the new religion has enlarged their ideas, sharpened their intellects, and above all taught them to feel they were superior to what they originally considered themselves to be.⁵⁶

Modern development workers contend that, as they work with the poor, they are beginning to see the whole issue of poverty as a question of faith and spirituality. It is not socio-economics plus spirituality. It is deeply spiritual and religious issue. Jayakumar Christian of World Vision wrote that, 'the more we work with the poor, we

are beginning to realize that without addressing the issue of spirituality, we cannot do sustainable development at all. Whatever we might do, in terms of health, economics etc, fundamentally is an issue of spirituality'.⁵⁷ Bishop J.W. Picket made a similar observation after a thorough study of mass movements to Christ.

The depressed classes in India are desperately poor. But their chief economic need is not financial; it is an antidote to the poisonous ideas that have made them incapable of struggling successfully with their environment.... Much more devastating than physical oppression has been the psychological oppression inflicted by the Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth, which have taught them that they are a degraded, worthless people suffering just retribution for sins committed in earlier lives....The concepts that the Christian Gospel gives them of themselves and of God in relation to their sufferings and sins are worth incomparably more to them than any direct social or economic service the Church could offer.⁵⁸

Similarly an Indian Christian leader, V. Mangalwadi wrote that,

Poverty is not their main problem. The lack of hope (for a better future), lack of faith (in man, government or God) and lack of initia-

52 J.F. Kearns, *Puthiamputhur*, (1859) 1259. Here we must note that the Bible is not used as a blunt instrument in the oppression of people, where as an instrument of liberation. See Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

53 Jesus 2000: *One Man Above All others have Changed the World*, (Oxford: Lion, 1989).

54 Jesus 2000.

55 Jesus 2000.

56 S.Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 330, 333.

57 Jayakumar Christian, 'Spirituality and Social Transformation among the Poor', in S.D.Ponraj and John Robb (ed), *Transform Your World Through Prayer*, (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 1999).

58 J.W.Picket, *Christ's Way to India's Heart*, (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing Co., 1938), 173.

tive (born out of dehumanizing oppression and loss of self-confidence) are paralyzing mental/cultural factors which prevent them from any action towards freedom and development.⁵⁹

Vinay Samuel contends that, 'it is only the sense of human dignity and self worth conferred on the poor through the Christian salvation experience and world-view that empowers them to respond proactively to opportunities for material improvement'.⁶⁰

The foregoing description shows that we need a wholistic understanding of the problem of poverty. A study of mission history helps us to discover the need for such understanding in order to serve the poor.

V Biblical Concern and Transformational Mission

In the Bible God always identifies himself with the poorest of the poor—the orphans, widows, strangers, and people with no hope. This is very clear from the exodus event. 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their task masters: I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...' (Ex. 3:7-8). After liberating them from slavery, he commanded them 'You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You

shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry' Ex. 22:21-23). The conviction that the God of Israel was sovereign over all nations and that he was a saving God is absolutely central to the Scriptures. Israel's liberation from slavery is a revelation of the way this sovereign God can act on behalf of all nations and all peoples (Amos 9:7) if they call up on him in faith as Israel did.⁶¹

The Bible refers to people who are socially, economically and religiously poor.⁶² In India the Dalits, tribals, women, children, diseased and disabled are such people. These people are branded as outcastes, untouchables and un-sightables. Foremost of all they have no sociable position. Secondly they have no reputable religion. They are born outside of Hinduism so that they cannot enter into Hindu temples. Thirdly they are denied dignified jobs so that they remain economically poor.

The Bible marvellously portrays that the poor and oppressed are not deserted by God, but loved by him

⁶¹ D.Senior and C.Stuhlmueeller, *The Biblical Foundations for Missions*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 321.

⁶² There are six different terms used to refer to the poor. *Rash* means persons who are destitute, without money. *Dal* refers to the social status of those who are destitute. *Ebyon* relates to the needy, those who lack material goods. *Ani* and *Anaw* refer to the oppressed, the powerless, those who are impoverished by the rich and powerful. *Mishken* refers to a dependent person. In Psalm 82:3-4 four of these terms occur. Santa Ana, *Good News for the Poor*, (Geneva: WCC, 1977), 10-11.

⁵⁹ V.Mangalwadi, 'A Theology of Power in the Context of Social Development', *TRACI Journal* (April, 1981), 15

⁶⁰ D.Belshaw, R.Calderisi, and C.Sugden, *Faith in Development*, 6.

through his son Jesus Christ. Jesus in his first preaching at Nazareth synagogue quoting from the book of prophet Isaiah, declared: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favour' (Lu. 4:18-19).

In Mathew 9:35 we find the summary of Jesus' ministry: 'Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness'. Jesus proclaimed by word and deed deliverance from sin and all its consequences. He saw himself as coming with good news for the world's troubled and distressed people. This was further made plain from his response to the disciples of John the Baptist to whom he indicated that, 'the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor' (Mt. 11:5) as signs of his messiahship

Jesus pointed to his healing and life restoring miracles which are integral to Christian mission among the poor. Christian missions were born out of this vision that the gospel of Christ would truly become good news to the poor. As the Father has sent him, so he sends us among the poor, the sick, the downtrodden and the marginalized communities (John 20:21).

Jesus' mission is our mission. The church as a people of God are called to follow the example of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who became poor for their sake (2 Cor. 8:9). He lived as one

among the poor. He promised that the kingdom belongs to them. He said, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lu. 6:20; cf Mt. 5:3). 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom' (Lu. 12:32). Those who work among the poor have to believe that they cannot build the kingdom of God in this world, but God will give it to them.⁶³

The kingdom of God is present reality as well as future hope. The Kingdom of God is, as Hans Kung puts it,

Where in accordance with Jesus' promise, the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are downtrodden will finally come into their own; where pain, suffering, and death will have an end.⁶⁴

Jesus invited the poor to come to him for rest and refreshment. He said, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.' On another occasion he said, 'I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.' (Mt. 11:28; Jn. 10:9).

Also, Jesus compels the poor to come to him. In the parable of the great feast (Lu. 14:16-24), when those first invited did not respond to his invitation, the king commanded his servant to go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. They were to be compelled to come in

⁶³ J.V.Taylor, 'My Pilgrimage in Mission', *IBMR*, Vol.17, No.2, (April, 1993), 60.

⁶⁴ Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, 215.

so that his house may be filled. The parable teaches that we have to compel the poor, the oppressed, the tribals, the marginalized women and the disabled and bring them in.

VI God's Presence with the Poor

Jesus Christ is God Immanuel, God with us. He is with the poor and the oppressed people. Through his incarnation Jesus dwelt among the common people (Jn. 1:14). The sinners, the tax collectors as well as women and children love him for he loved them first. He is the light to those who are in sitting in regions of darkness (Mt. 4:15-16). In his presence those who are mourning will find happiness (Mt. 5:2). He identifies himself with the hungry, thirsty, naked, prisoners, strangers and the least in the society (Mt. 25:31-33, 41-46). As Samuel Escobar points out,

What missionary action needs today is to recover the awareness that God dwells with the poor and has a kind of preference for the poor, that there is a biblical teaching about justice to the poor and oppressed and that we have the example of Jesus himself, of Paul and the primitive church, as well as that of being among the poor with the efficacy of Agape which is not necessarily the efficacy of a given political programme. Missionary action also needs to remember from its biblical point and its historical development that the repentance to which Jesus Christ calls us today may mean for some men, the opening of their eyes to their condition

as oppressions, and the change of their social practices.⁶⁵

VII Poverty not Part Original creation

We are to be aware of the fact that poverty was not part of God's original creation. *The Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics* observed the following three crucial points about God and the poor.⁶⁶

1. Poverty was not part of God's original creation, nor will poverty be part of God's restored creation when Christ returns. Involuntary poverty in all its forms and manifestations is a result of the fall and its consequences. Today out of every five human beings lives in poverty so extreme that their survival is daily in doubt. We believe this is offensive and heart breaking to God.
2. We understand that the God of the Bible is one who in mercy extends love to all. At the same time, we believe that when the poor are oppressed, God is the 'defender of the poor' (Psalm 146:7-9). Again and again in every part of scripture, the Bible expresses God's concern for justice for the poor. Faithful obedience requires that we share God's concern and act on it. 'He who oppresses a poor man insults his maker, but he who is kind to the needy honours Him' (Proverbs

⁶⁵ Samuel Escobar, 'The Gospel and the Poor in' in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (ed), *Evangelism and the Poor*, (Oxford: Regnum, 1987), 106

14:31). Indeed it is only when we right such injustices that God promises to hear our prayers and worship (Isaiah 58:1-9).

3. Neglect of the poor often flows from greed. Furthermore, the obsessive or careless pursuit of material goods is one of the most destructive idolatries in human history (Ephesians 5:5). It distracts individuals from their duties before God, and corrupts personal and social relationships.

⁶⁶ Chris Sugden and Vinay Samuel (ed), *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel*, (Oxford: Regnum, 1999), 335.

Conclusion

In this paper we were trying to answer the question of how to bring change in society, especially among the poor and the disadvantaged people. We have drawn some specific lessons from the mission history. We have noted that the missionaries considered ministry to the poor and the oppressed was not an option but an imperative. They served the poor with the vision and hope of bringing change. The poor shared their vision and worked alongside and changes were taking place before their eyes. In the past, the approach of certain missionaries to the culture in which they worked helped the poor to overcome poverty and oppression. We find that this approach is still relevant in our time.