

Poverty and Caste Practice in India: A Challenge to Indian Mission and Theology

Cyril Retnamma Godwin

Introduction

The church in India faces many mission and theological challenges at present. I would like to comment on two challenges: poverty among people and caste practice in the church.

The terms *poor* and *poverty* often connote and refer to those who are economically lacking, educationally deprived, and living under unsatisfactory conditions. Most of the time these words are understood in a narrow sense – i.e. in terms of the haves and have-nots. This narrow understanding prevents the church from seeing the issues within a larger framework. It indicates lack of depth, conviction and praxis with regard to ministerial vocation. The church should shape a theological reflection and formulate a relevant strategy to carry out mission to the poor. The church should look into the context of the people and formulate its theology accordingly. If people are suffering, the theology should emerge within the suffering of the people. Without solidarity and praxis theology is not complete or perfect.

Jesus' mission mandates ministers and the church to be engaged in the life giving task of struggling with people in distress, oppression and vulnerability. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" [John.10:10]. The life, abundant life, is the goal of Jesus' mission. And it is not only for a few; it is for all people. That is the same goal for the church and the pastors.

In Indian church context, various activities like worship, preaching, Bible classes, youth activities, Sunday school and women's fellowship are oriented to some goals and are functioning as usual. These goals might include healing, guiding, nurturing, shepherding and empowering the congregation. All these are good for pastoral care but they are not enough for the church. Theological reflection of the church should sensitize and conscientize people to be with the people – those who are struggling for their human rights, justice and equality. While this is very essential for the church, it is what is lacking in our church today. We should renew our church by deepening our theological thinking and contextualizing the gospel, by our clear stance and solidarity with the suppressed and poor, by relevant proclamation of the gospel of the Messianic Kingdom.

Poverty among People

In 2006, four members of a family in Parasala committed suicide due to hunger and poverty. Similar incidents of hunger deaths have been reported recently in Bonacadu Estate near Ponnudi. In Balaramapuram and Vizhijam, the death rate of farmers and handloom workers is high due to poverty and bank debts. The present scenario is much more appalling as one person dies every week. As people are used to hearing such incidents, it is not news anymore.

In 2008 a farmer committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree in Amboori village near Vellarada due to his inability to repay the loans. According to the police, he was faced with severe frustration in life as he was unable to pay back the loan from a bank to cultivate his land. The expected crop yield did not materialize and so he ended his life.

These are the heartbreaking realities we are facing day by day in our society. These examples indicate the level and intensity of the problem of poverty, which we face at different levels in our context. However, poverty is not a state of deprivation which has come about by chance. It is really a result of the prosperity of the very few rich. So poverty is not an accident; it is determined by the structures of society.

Poverty is not a new phenomenon in Indian and world context. It is an age old problem in the structures of our societies. It is very sad to note that this problem is becoming worse day by day. Millions of people die out of hunger every year and millions of people are below poverty line.

Within this context one could see that the average earning of the people continues to drop drastically. Indebtedness, bonded labor, homelessness, health hazards are some of the consequences of poverty. But while the rich are manifestly getting richer, the poor have not benefited in any way and have also become poorer. Why does it happen? It is important for us to ask why poverty/hunger has always been a major problem. In recent times, the incidence of poverty portrays an appalling trend. This syndrome is linked to a web of factors such as unemployment, low wages, and marginalization of large sectors of the population, privatization and liberalization of the market.

We could see the global disparity around the world. Global inequality ultimately results in poverty between countries and regions and it is translated into classes and categories within them. We live in a world and time where humankind is threatened by the globalization of poverty. Poverty poses a moral challenge too. How could a large percentage of humanity be left outside the market forces while a very few percentage live with plenty?

All human beings are at the center of God's creation. God created human beings in God's own image. It is an irony that only a tiny percentage enjoys the fruits of God's creation while the rest live in inhuman conditions. It is against the principles of God's order of creation. In a context like this we have the moral responsibility to intervene and fight against the forces of domination and market that create inequalities and make human life more miserable. We should engage with these issues based on ethical and theological principles.

Biblical Understanding of Poor and Poverty

We need to look at the issue of poor and poverty from biblical point of view. The Hebrew Bible has wide ranging material on the use of biblical terms on poor and poverty.

1. The most frequently used word is *ani*, or *anaw*, which indicates submission, subservience, oppression, subjugation. The term *ani* means poor, meek, afflicted and humble. This word probably derives from the root *nh* which means to be bent, bowed down, afflicted. It emphasizes the pain of the oppressed poor.

2. The most general term, *Dal*, indicates the physically deprived poor of Israel (Ex. 30: 15) and also refers to social poverty (Lev. 19:5). The word *dal* is from the root *dll* which means to languish, to be weak, and to be little. *Dalal* means to become powerless, impotent, ineffectual, debilitated, weakened and decomposed (Pro. 14:31).¹

There are nine different terms used in the Hebrew text to explain poor with different meanings. I am not going to explain all the terms here. The above mentioned two terms are very important and the word *ani* seems to be most significant among the words used. These words in general take up the following meaning for poor: economic deprivation, social backwardness. The words in the Bible for poor and poverty do not state that the poor merely deserve human concern. They simply point to the plight of the poor as warning against wastefulness and sloth. The main concern here is that poor are victims of human history.

The gospel of Mark employs *ptochos* to describe the poor and poverty in its own context. Jesus here was depicted as a poor carpenter (Mark 6:3). James points out three specific ways in which the oppression of the poor and weak is carried out. First is through financial-legal mechanisms, especially against poor debtors (2:1-12). Second is because of the greedy and boastful merchants (4:13-17). Third is that wealthy landowners withhold wages (5:4). James is concerned with the sins of the tongue that create a false sense of security for the affluent, but which deny dignity, honor and justice to the poor and weak.²

Aloysius Pieris has proposed a new covenant Christology in the Asian context based on two categories of poverty. He defines the “voluntary poverty” of those who as followers of Jesus renounce Mammon and the “forced poverty” of the masses of people who are vicars of Christ and the victims of Mammon, i.e. of organized consumerism and greed. He says, “The way to eradicate poverty is to undertake voluntary poverty, which is biblically sanctioned. The hermeneutical underpinning is provided by the biblical notion of God’s active opposition to Mammon. What is important is not freedom from poverty, but the freedom that comes from poverty.”³ Therefore our struggles should be against Mammon, which makes the poor more miserable. We should also understand that poverty is not the fault of the poor. It is because of the accumulation of wealth by a few rich who are exploiting the poor, robbing them of their share.

Minjung Theology and Poverty

One of the important contributions of Asian theologies is the need to put poverty at the center of theological discussion. These contextual theologies arose from people’s struggles for justice. Even though there are many theological perspectives it is very sad to note that our church is not addressing issues of suffering. Instead, churches are only concentrating on the construction and institutions of the church. What is the mission of the church? Why

¹ Prasuna Nelavala, “Dalit Women: The Oppressed of the Oppressed,” *In God’s Image*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (September 2007).

² Thomas D. Hanks, “Poor, Poverty”, *New Testament, The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V, 415-416.

³ “Solidarity,” in Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah, eds. *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000).

does the church stray away from its vision? Now the church is under the clutches of blind spiritual leaders and caste hierarchy. We should develop a new theological thinking, even while using resources that are already there. *Minjung* theology, which emerged in Korea from the sufferings of the poor people, and Dalit theology, which emerged from Indian Dalit struggles, could help us to develop a new theological thinking within our context. *Minjung* theology emerged in the 1970s in the struggles of Korean people for social justice. It is a people's theology and a development of the social and political hermeneutics of the gospel in terms of the Korean reality. *Minjung* literally means 'the people', therefore, *minjung* theology is a theology of the people. *Minjung* theology is a contextual theology that was born in response to the suffering of the *minjung* under Park Chung Hee's regime in the 1960s-70s. It also describes that women belong to the *minjung* when they are politically dominated by men. An ethnic group is a *minjung* group when it is politically dominated by another group. A particular race is *minjung* when it is dominated by another powerful ruling race. When intellectuals are suppressed by the military power elite, they belong to the *minjung*.

Even though the struggle of the *minjung* is part of a wider Asian theological turmoil, it is firmly rooted in a particular situation. It is growing out of the struggles of people who embrace their own history as well as the universal message of the Bible. Therefore, it is also suitable for other countries where there is injustice done to the poor people. This theology is a contextual method, which is very suitable in my Indian context. Here I would like to highlight some of the important theological understandings of *Minjung* theology.

In the context of 1970s Korea, there was a need for a new theological paradigm to address the aspirations of the poor who were victims of a highly competitive capitalist market. The problem of poverty is not just an individual matter or for a congregation to address; it has to do with the structure of the Korean economy and society. The *minjung* movement was sparked when Jun Tae-Il set himself on fire in November 1970 as his protest against the exploitation of fellow factory workers. The incident shook the country and soon Christian leaders took this as a major issue and stood for and with the poor and exploited.

Suh Nam-Dong, a renowned *Minjung* theologian, presented his thesis in 1975 that Jesus identified with the poor, sick and oppressed and that the gospel of Jesus is the gospel of salvation and liberation. For him, it is manifested in struggle against those evil powers and that liberation is not individual or spiritual but rather communal and political.

According to Ahn Byung-Mu, a renowned *Minjung* theologian, Jesus identified in such a way that Jesus is *minjung* and the *minjung* is Jesus as he shared his life with the *minjung* and the event of the cross is the climax of the suffering of the *minjung*. The presence of Christ is not when the word is preached nor when the sacrament is conducted but when we participate with or in the suffering of the *minjung*. Jesus is God becoming flesh and body, which means material being and reality in everyday life; not an ideology or philosophy. He argued that the *minjung* is the owner of the Jesus community which is fundamentally a "food community", which is a food sharing community.⁴

⁴ Ahn Byung-Mu, *The Story of Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Korea Institute of Theology, 1990), 31-37.

Minjung theologians were deeply influenced by Kim Chi-ha, a prominent Korean activist and poet who expressed in poetry this concept of sharing food in Christian life and theology:

Food is heaven
As you can't go to heaven by yourself
Food is to be shared
Food is heaven
As you see the stars in heaven together
Food is to be shared by everybody
When the food goes into a mouth
Heaven is worshiped in the mind
Food is heaven
Ah, ah, food is
To be shared by everybody".⁵

Minjung theologians captured the people's imagination and brought the issue of poverty and exploitation into the church. Here we see *Minjung* theology as a "protest" theology on behalf of the *minjung* against injustice and exploitation. Their interpretation of the poor is not in isolation from others but it is "relational". Poor are poor not necessarily because they are sinners or do not have a "right" relationship with God, but because of the greed of some others and the unjust system of modern capitalism. Therefore, their main concern is not dealing with individual poor people but rather with the social process and the system which prevents the *minjung* from coming out of their misery. In their understanding God is dwelling among the people and sharing in their struggles, sufferings and joy. Their understanding of the Messiah is the suffering servant who shares the suffering of the poor. Jesus lived among the *ochlos*, enjoying fellowship with them and loving them without any conditions. Jesus had *koinonia* with people and he is the servant of the people.⁶ Here we could see Jesus' solidarity with the poor, as the servant of the servant God. *Minjung* theology has made a great contribution to the Korean church and society through their understanding of liberation and justice, and by showing the poor and oppressed that they are not or should not be objects of exploitation and that their protest is legitimate. It has been good news to the poor and it was intended to uplift the poor.

Minjung theology has made a vital contribution to the identity of the *minjung* and challenged them to stand up and speak out. While Latin American liberation theology has claimed that the poor and oppressed need to be liberated, *minjung* theology further asserts that the *minjung* are the subjects of their liberation and history. This was expressed as in the relationship between Jesus and the *minjung*. The focus of the *minjung* movement has been twofold: to safeguard the rights of the poor, weak and oppressed; and to transform society into a better system that would protect them.

Although it may be seen as part of a wider Asian theological ferment, one which bears a strong similarity to contextual theologies from other parts of the world. *Minjung* theology is contextual theology at its best, firmly rooted in a particular situation, and growing out of the struggles of a people who embrace their own history as well as the message of the

⁵ Suh Nam-Dong, *Toward a Theology of Han* (Seoul: Korea Institute of Theology, 1990), 64.

⁶ Kim Yong-Bock, *Messiah and Minjung* (Hong Kong: CCA-URM, 1992), 59.

Bible. I strongly believe that it is good for other countries too, where a similar situation exists, especially in my context.

Caste Practice in the Society and Church

The cultural give-and-take among various communities has been taking place in India since the pre-Vedic periods. But this inter-cultural fusion was disrupted with the arrival of Islam and Christianity, both of which refused to merge and integrate, preferring to maintain their separate identities and powers. Thus Indian culture, even today, continues to remain largely a Hindu culture without much change. Muslims are very strong in their ideologies and they do not want to part of it. Christians adopt certain practices like *thali kettu* (marriage ceremony), caste practices in marriage and other rituals, indigenous ways of worship (using *bhajans*, local lamps and other traditional instruments, etc.).

Caste system is an evil practice, which has come from Hinduism and its culture. But Christianity has adopted this practice, which is unfair to the Dalit people at large. Hindu society has traditionally been categorized into four castes called *Varnas*. In Sanskrit, which is the vedic and primitive language, it means colour, form and appearance. The caste structure has divided the people into the following:

- Brahmins: teachers and priests
- Kshatriyas: warriors, nobles, and kings
- Vaishyas: farmers, merchants, and businessmen
- Shudras: servants and labourers
- Dalits: outside of the caste structure

Kancha Ilaiah, an influential contemporary political scientist, proposes that the Dalits and Shudras are bound together not only by their alienation but also exploitation from the other dominant caste groups.⁷ Dalits are known as untouchables and they have retained their identity as a subordinated people within Indian society. The condition of Dalits is far more severe than merely being at the bottom of an inevitable hierarchy.⁸

In the British colonial period Christian missionaries fought against this evil practice and so it has been abolished by law. But still it is in practice in the communities, especially during the time of marriage and other rituals. Christianity could uproot some cruel practices like *sathi* (killing of the widows after the death of their husbands), child marriage, untouchability and caste discrimination, etc. But in fact, the caste system has been adopted from Hindu tradition by the church. The so-called followers of Christ, called Christians, are creating these boundaries. Many social reformers, including Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar, criticized caste discrimination. One of the religious teachers, Sree Ramakrishna, once said that a lover of God does not belong to any caste and a brahmin without this love is no longer a brahmin. A pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah. But very sad to say that Christians are still practicing this evil system within the church itself.

⁷ Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996).

⁸ Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 115.

Today through the increasing domination of the caste system, Dalits have suffered or been subjected to severe oppression and a most degraded inferior status. This conditioning of the mind of the Dalits makes them different from other low caste people who have also suffered either as economically poor or politically powerless backward caste groups. The Dalits are poor and needy, and are in a very pathetic situation.

Let me share one story that was narrated by my friend. One day, in one of the Dalit settlements in Kerala, a priest said saw a terrible sight. A woman with four small children and a baby clinging to her neck stood in front of a small hut. The priest saw that they were fainting from hunger. The baby seemed to be dead. He said, "Give the baby some milk, woman!" "I can't, Father," she answered. The priest insisted that she should, and she that she couldn't. Finally, she opened her blouse. Her breast was bleeding for the baby had sucked it violently. The mother who had given the baby life was feeding it, like a pelican, with her own blood, her own life. What is our response to this tragic event? This is not just a story. It is the reality today. There are hundreds of such stories among the poor and marginalized communities. But what is our response to these tragic events? There are thousands of poor in and around our churches. The struggles of Dalits double; they are depressed by suppressive structures and by poverty. What is the response of the church? It is our responsibility to act positiv

According to Elizabeth Joy, "Dalit women are mostly in the rural villages of India working for their survival as agricultural landless laborers or doing manual scavenging. About 85% of Dalit women are in the agricultural sector working as landless laborers. More than 700,000 women are still involved in manual scavenging... About 40 million people in India to this day are bonded laborers including 15 million children."⁹ Many people fall into this due to severe poverty and they do not have any other option as they struggle for a living.

Need for a Dalit Theology

Dalit theology, which emerged from the struggles of the Dalits, is one among the various theological expressions of the world. The theology affirms that Dalits are a part of God's overall plan of redemption or liberation. In fact the prophetic messages have specially referred to the Dalit community by name as part of God's concern (Isaiah 11:4, Zephaniah 3:12). I learned that Dalit theology emerged because the existing traditional theologies, like systematic theology as well as the present Indian Christian theology, are irrelevant for the Dalits. These theologies are not based on their life experiences and do not address their needs and struggles in their daily life. Instead, these expressions fulfill the needs of the rich, who are placed caste-wise on the top, whereas the Dalits have been pushed to the bottom.

According to Sathianathan Clarke, a well known Dalit theologian,

The Dalit Christian theology actually developed in the wake of the emergence of liberation theology in South America and black theology in the USA. All these theologies are a counter to the colonialist, western Christian theology, which is

⁹ Elizabeth Joy, "A Dalit Woman's Voice in Biblical Interpretation: Can She Speak?" *In God's Image*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (September 2007), 49-50.

highly individualistic and does not take history, especially that of the oppressed, seriously. But what marks Dalit Christian theology out is the centrality it gives to the question of caste and caste oppression, which is unique to India. Caste is an important category in Dalit Christian theology in analyzing social oppression. This should be seen in the light of the fact that the leadership of the Indian Christian Church ought to convince its own members that everyone was equal in Jesus Christ, that we are all part of the body of Christ, despite the existence of gross discrimination against the Dalits inside the Church itself. What Dalit theology began to do was to force the Church to recognize this discrimination and oppression of the Dalit Christians.¹⁰

Therefore, when Dalit theologians refer to Dalit theology, they are in fact contextualizing their theological expression. It really helps them to overcome their life situation of oppression, poverty, suffering and injustice. So these realities of Dalit people form the reason for the formulation of Dalit theology. I would say it emerged from the context the people. Dalit theology shares something with liberation theology, particularly on the question of history as well as in the general goal. But it is not for the whole liberation of the whole people; it is for the Dalit people those who are suppressed and marginalized. The role of Dalit theology is challenging the structures of the status quo within the church, which is very much caste-based. We have to take the risk to unveil the structures of power which are putting on a mask of neutrality to hide the operation of caste within the church. We have to fight for justice for the Dalit in the church itself.

Conclusion

For me solidarity with the people is the most suitable expression, which can help us to re-discover the core message of the Bible from the perspective of the poor. The meaning of solidarity is a commitment to the good of one's neighbor. In the Gospel we see that it means to lose oneself for the sake of the other. Solidarity is undoubtedly a process action, which we have to practice. The *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* explains that "solidarity is the process-action of being united with the cause and political project of a person or a group. To be in solidarity means to share solidly the other person's struggle for justice, peace and harmony. Solidarity is built on mutual respect and trust, sustained by accountability and strengthened by one's spirituality."¹¹

Solidarity is a commitment, but solidarity without praxis is meaningless. Praxis is an expression of action in the search of justice and solidarity. According to Gutierrez, the meaning of 'Christian praxis' or 'historical praxis' is almost the same. He says:

In the first place, charity has been fruitfully rediscovered as the center of the Christian life. This has led to a more biblical view of the faith as an act of trust, a going out of one's self, a commitment to God and neighbor, a relationship with others... love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith, the gift of one's self to the other, and

¹⁰ Dalit Theology by Sathianathan Clarke and Yoginder Sikand, in www.countercurrents.org/sikand071007.htm-36k

¹¹ Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Solidarity," *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 188.

invariably to others. This is the foundation of the praxis of the Christian, of his active presence in history.¹²

Solidarity and praxis should go together. In the book, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen B. Bevans describes his praxis model which focuses on the identity of Christians within a context which is understood in a terms of social change. He says theology should be done in the context of commitment to action. It also should have a dialogue between the heritage of faith and experience in this struggle.¹³

Solidarity is action in response to God who first showed God's solidarity with the human beings in history. We also should remember that God's solidarity with us was not just an idea. It was in the form of concrete 'action' or 'actions' in human history. Genesis 1 and 2 very clearly witnesses to God's historical action which began with creation itself. While visiting the human beings in the Garden of Eden, we could see God with full solidarity with human beings. After that we also see God directly intervening in human history by calling Abraham (Genesis 12). Then again we see God's action of solidarity through the Israelites who were under slavery in Egypt. But God saw their suffering and oppression from the hands of the Pharaohs of Egypt and God helped them through Moses (Exodus 1:8-14, 2:23-25). God said to Moses, "I have witnessed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know they are suffering and have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians..." (Exodus 3:7-8). Here we see that God is not only offering solidarity with the oppressed in word or idea, but in action – for God "came down to rescue them". God became a part of the struggle of the people. God's action also shows that God took a definite side with the oppressed against the oppressors. Later, God was fully involved in the history of Israel and other nations through the prophets, kings and the people. Therefore, in the present context, God has chosen us and we are the chosen ones to take part in the struggles of the poor.

Again God's solidarity with human beings, particularly with the oppressed people of this world, can be seen in God's incarnational act. Through the act of incarnation, God not only identified with human beings but also fully became a part of human history by making "his home among us". In Luke 2:1-7 we see a concrete picture of God's solidarity with us. Here we see Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Isaiah prophesied, "A young woman... will give birth to a son", who will be called "Emmanuel", meaning "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14). In the act of incarnation, we do meet God in full solidarity with the poor, not just as any human being, but one who became the poorest of the poor. Therefore, our new theological thinking should be praxis-oriented and with full solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

¹² Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 6.

¹³ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 34.

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Rev. Cyril Retnamma Godwin <tomcrg@yahoo.co.in> is an ordained minister of South Kerala Diocese of Church of South India (CSI). He has served as Youth Director of the diocese, then on the faculty of Premarriage Counseling Department, on Christian Education and as coordinator of The Association for Theological Education by Extension (TAFTEE) in Kerala region. He has authored two books, "Vivaha Poorva Counselling" and "Marriage and Market". Now he is a doctoral student in theology at Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea.