

## Chapter 2

# INDIGENISATION OF CHRISTIANITY

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Though the history of Christianity in India can be traced back at least to the 4th century A.D., if not earlier, it is very often considered as an offspring of western colonialism. It cannot be denied that missionary work in India was done mainly during this colonial period resulting in the prevalent presence of the western form of Christianity in India. This has led to the question of the identity of Christians in India. Amalorpavadass, recognizing the presence of a large number of Indian priests and nuns in the Roman Catholic Church says,

It is not sufficient to have Indians as priests, brothers, sisters, and laymen; they should have an Indian mentality and outlook; they should think, speak and act as Indians, should lead an Indian way of life, should be fully involved in the problems of social and national life, should be conscious of and use their cultural and religious heritage, should be fully rooted in and permeated by Indian spirituality. This adaptation remains far from being achieved.<sup>1</sup>

According to Kosuke Koyama, Indigenisation means a “theologically informed endeavour to make the content and expression of Christian theology, ministry and life adapted and rooted in a community of different cultural localities.”<sup>2</sup> For him the purpose of indigenisation is to create an authentic Christian community.

In the words of Rossman,

The attempt to locate, in the country being evangelized, words, concepts, art forms, social groupings or psychological characteristics which can (i) become communicative links from the Gospel to the people; (ii) enable the church and its

life to appropriate those cultural elements compatible with the Gospel, to minimize the shock of transition from the old to the new community; (iii) to help determine what a new and genuinely Christian culture would be in that country.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of indigenisation, then, is three-fold. It involves communication, adaptation and cultural synthesis.

Indigenisation is viewed as a kind of missionary device or strategy for the effective communication of the gospel in a form acceptable and somewhat familiar to those being evangelized, and for bringing into being a 'genuinely Christian culture', or 'cultural synthesis' compatible with the gospel of the missionary. Such a view of indigenisation, as a task of the missionary or evangelist, makes it as external to the people being evangelized as the missionary himself and his gospel.<sup>4</sup>

The quest for indigenisation is not something exclusive to India. Wherever the identity of Christians is being questioned, the search for indigenisation has become a concern of the church. The Protestant Churches in Latin America has given a very high priority to this search. For them the total framework of theological education needs to be re-articulated so as to help them to grow more as an indigenised church.

M.M. Thomas points out to five streams – Theological Education, Church Union, writings of Christian apologetic, thinking on Christianity and other religions, theology of nationalism – which have so far contributed to the idea of an Indian Church witnessing to Christ within the context of the Indian realities of life.<sup>5</sup> This is indigenious. However a discussion of indigenisation in historical and missiological perspectives is given below.

#### INDIAN EXPERIENCES IN HISTORY

Among the Thomas Christians, though many regional, cultural elements can be seen, the dominant feature is the influence of the "Eastern Traditions". They are proud of having the liturgy of "St. James" and have imbibed several doctrinal standards of the East. Many of the customs,

practices and art forms do have similarities with that of the larger society. But for them maintaining the 'Christian identity' is of supreme importance. The question of indigenisation was not crucial for them in the past because of their not being a missionary church.

In any discussion on indigenisation, the pioneer attempts of Robert de Nobili at Madurai needs special mention. Mainly because he thought of indigenisation in the context of mission. For him Christianity being a 'parangi marg' (religion of the Portuguese) cannot make any appeal to the higher castes of the Indian society. To be accepted by the higher castes he got himself 'converted' as Indian as much as he could. (As his method is well known I need not elaborate here). In spite of all the possible criticisms against his method of accommodation, he wanted to present Christianity to the Indians in an Indian way. As a strategy for mission, the history has proved its limitations. But it gives a vision of indigenous identity of Christianity.

During the 19th century both the Christian missionaries as well as the educated leaders of the Indian Church gave much importance to the development of an 'indigenous church' in India. The concept and growth of 'devolution' was part of the movement towards the growth of an indigenous church.

As early as 1848, even before the discussions on the concept of 'devolution' began one of the missionaries attempted to give significant responsibilities to the church members. In that year, K.P. Pfander, a CMS missionary in Agra, introduced a *Panchayat* system within the mission to stimulate the development of leadership within the Christian community. He consulted with this *Panchayat* or board in all cases of discipline, admission to Baptism and Lord's Supper etc. The church fund, which was the contribution of the people was also kept under the management of the *Panchayat*. This attempt was not widely copied.

Two famous names connected with the concept of 'devolution' in mission and its implementation are those of Rufus

Anderson and Henry Venn. Rufus Anderson was the secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. During his visit to Ceylon and India in 1854-55 he proposed a plan for the transition of 'Mission' to 'Church', which would be self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. This proposal was formulated into official policy in 1856. Henry Venn, the secretary of the CMS from 1843 to 1869, also made vigorous proposals, independent of the thinking of Anderson, as to the formation of 'churches' in the 'mission fields' instead of the continuation of the 'missions'.

Henry Venn's first paper on the subject was accepted by the committee and issued to the missionaries in 1851. This paper was entitled, *Minute Upon the Employment and Ordination of Native Teachers*. According to this paper, the object of the mission was the "settlement of a Native Church under Native Pastors upon self-supporting system". The implementation of this 'minute' did not follow immediately. Eugene Stock, historian of the CMS remarks, "in fact, it failed to produce any immediate effect in the Indian Missions to which it was particularly applicable."

After ten years, in 1861, another and much more important memorandum also drawn up by Venn, was issued. According to Venn, the object of the Church Missionary Society's missions, seen in their ecclesiastical aspect was the development of native churches with a view to their ultimate settlement upon a self-supporting, self-governing and self-extending system. When this settlement has been effected the mission will have attained its "euthanasia". In his second Memorandum he strongly advocated the introduction of the "Native Church". He also proposed a scheme of appointing a local school master in charge of a congregation, then the formation of a pastorate and after that its becoming part of a District under a District Council which would be set up.

In 1866 he issued another memorandum to this effect. Step by step his second Memorandum was put into effect. This led to the successive formation of pastorates, district

councils and central or provincial councils. In spite of these slow but significant movements, much of the power and authority on the administration side of the mission was vested in the missionaries. The realization of this vision in full measure took place only much later, at a time of rising nationalism in India.

The growth of this idea helped devolution when it became an absolute need. In the midst of rising nationalism G.E. Phillips, the Foreign Secretary of LMS wrote to the missionaries in India that "the naturalisation of Christianity in India must definitely and consciously become the aim of the Missions, if they would conserve their work. Our work must become really indigenous or be lost."

The object was to help the Indian Church to become more indigenous, so that Jesus might find a suitable home in this country. Christ should not be considered as a foreigner in India, and there was always that danger as long as foreigners appeared to be leaders in the Christian church.

Almost all the missionary societies tried to make the church truly Indian. But the 'foreignness' persisted in the Indian Church.

## CULTURAL RENAISSANCE AND INDIGENISATION

Already in the nineteenth century many Christians were becoming aware of the fact that Christianity was a source for new identity for themselves and their notion was frustrated by their new religion's 'foreignness'. They also felt a tension between their pride in being Indians and their acceptance of Christianity, the religion of the colonial ruler. Lal Behari Dey had realised that after the revolt of 1857 Indians' hatred of Christianity had become more intense than before simply because they regarded Christianity as the religion of the Europeans. They also found that in nature, organization, and leadership the Christian community was very un-Indian. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay lamented: "Our Hindu brethren cannot see the subtlety and sanctity of our Divine religion because of its hard coating of Europeanism". He characterised Western Christian missionaries as "evange-

lists of the European Gospel". Later in the 1930's a significant promoter of the Indian Christianity Movement, P. Chenchiah, articulated this deep consciousness among Christian Indians of the foreign nature of Christianity in India:

The origin and growth of Protestant Missions in India has a certain resemblance with the history of the East India Company. The territory within the forts established by the Company were treated as part of England. For example, the island of Bombay was held to be within the jurisdiction of Westminster. On the original side of the High courts of Madras, Bombay, Calcutta – English law and procedure still prevails, as these places were once regarded as territories ceded to England and therefore part of it.

A similar view prevailed with regard to mission stations. The missionary was a member of the home-church sent abroad to do its work. The early converts who settled in the mission compound were overseas members of the denomination. They were ruled by home boards, financed from the church funds. The converts got their religion straight from the headquarters.<sup>6</sup>

This caused conflicts in the minds of the educated Christians who were converts from high castes, between their inherited indigenous culture and spirituality which determined their Indianness and their new religion which expressed their search for a new identity. They knew that Christianity which they received in the nineteenth century India was shaped by Graeco-Hebraic metaphysics and philosophy. The confessional forms in which Christianity spread in colonial India carried also the marks of political and social developments within Europe and North America. Its pre-eminent image was that it was the religion of the colonial master. Further, Christian Indians resented the dominant and paternalistic attitude of western Christian missionaries towards them. They were also challenged by Rammohan Roy and Keshub Chunder Sen who were convinced of the need for the liberation of Indian Christianity from Occidental organizations and formulas. All this led to

the rise of the National Church Movement in the nineteenth century which mooted the idea of a "National Church" or an "Indian Church" in the place of western denominations of Christianity.

'The Bengal Christian Association' founded in 1868 raised the question of a true Indian Christian nature of the church. Some of the leading periodicals like *Indian Christian Herald*, *The Eastern Star*, *The Cosmopolite* of Pulney Andy and *The Christian Patriot* were started during these years.

In 1887 'Christo Samaj' was formed in Calcutta under the chief initiative of K.C. Bannerji. The objective of Christo Samaj was "the propagation of Christian truth, the promotion of Christian union, and the welfare of Indian Christian". Among other things the movement was the manifestation of the quest of Christian Indians for freedom from foreign control; in other words for the establishment of "a church that would be regulated by natives of this country and adapted to their peculiarities". The growing concern of Bannerji, as of other pioneers in the National Church Movement, was to redeem the image of Christianity from being simply a religion imported from the west.

He called upon missionaries to "become Hindus in order to teach Hindus" and, without ceasing to be Christians, to recognize "the germs of truth in the religions of the country", and to make it possible for "the converts to become members of an Indian rather than a foreign church". In the same way in 1886 the National Church of India was founded by Pulney Andy at Madras taking the same concern.

The Madras movement emphasized the same motivations current among Christians in Bengal for nearly three decades and declared its aim as that of "uniting the various denominations, and to have one united church as suited to the national peculiarities and instincts of the people. It sought "to encourage independence and self-reliance, . . . and self-government". Among its categorically declared intentions it included the liberation of Christian Indians from "foreign aid and the charity of the people of Europe and

America". Like the movement in Bengal, the National Church also rejected the western denominational differences as irrelevant for India and welcomed to its fellowship any Christian irrespective of his denominational affiliation. As far as the doctrine was concerned the New Testament was considered "the only code or canon for guidance". For its form of ministry, the church envisaged the development of a system of voluntary pastors.

Andy saw the whole movement for a "national church" as a national cause and among other things a manifestation of patriotism. Commenting on L.B. Dey's plea for a national church in Bengal, mentioned earlier, Andy said: "You will find in it much patriotism, sincerity and belief in Christianity and a generous desire that the knowledge he possesses should be equally spread among his countrymen". He concluded his inaugural address to the church by appealing to Christians to "come forward boldly with a patriotic spirit" and to work sincerely "for the development of a 'national' cause". 'God's Durbar' of N.V. Tilak may also be mentioned in this context.

However, the history of most of the mass movement areas present a different picture. Many of the oppressed sections of the society wanted to adopt a different system as a mark of their emancipation. Different name, dress, form of worship, all these formed marks of their new identity. They also carried many of the 'religious' elements of their culture into the new form of faith which needs a detailed study which are outside the scope of this paper. They have to be helped to find their culture and to fully participate in that while remaining as true Christian. The authentic faith helps the people to be participants in the culture of the people. This helps to renew the culture itself because the gospel of Jesus Christ transcends the cultural barriers and it renews and revitalises the culture. So the faithful people can have an authentic life in one's own culture and not aliens to their context. The studies on Dalit Christian movements are relevant in this context. Also the 'Guru movements' and the indigenous 'Charismatic movements' need elaborate study.

The church union movements in India were partly motivated by the idea of the formation of 'Indian Churches'. They are certainly land marks in the history of indigenous Christianity in India.

In spite of all these attempts many of the rich elements of the composite culture of India are yet to strengthen the church in India. In recent times many such experiments are being done in India with regard to worship, architecture, symbols etc.

### INDIGENISATION — A CHALLENGE

With the rise of Nationalism and the revival of different religious movements in India the question of the identity of Christianity in India have become important. Therefore the Christian identity cannot be mixed with that of the West. A Christian Indian identity needs to be developed in India.

In fact, Christians do participate in the life of the nation along with their brothers and sisters of other faiths. But it is important that they assert their Indian identity. The decree on missionary activity of the church of Vatican II declares:

But they (the faithful) must give expression to their newness of life in the social and cultural framework of their homeland according to their own national traditions. They must be acquainted with their culture. They must heal it and preserve it. They must develop it according to modern conditions and finally perfect it in Christ. Thus the faith of Christ and the life of the church will no longer be something extraneous to the society in which they live, but will permeate and reform it.

This demands that the church may launch a process of educating its people about indigenisation. Theological education should equip the leaders to participate in this task.

Cultural orientation in worship (about which much has been written recently) and Christian practice such as *Ashram* movements needs to be encouraged.

However, the difficulty in this task are two sided. First is the fear of the Christian community that such efforts might lead them back to Hinduism. This fear must be assuaged by affirming that it is not a going back; but it is going forward to a new, relevant understanding of their own faith. Faith in Jesus gets strengthened when the Christians keep their own cultural heritage. A rethinking of one's faith may also be required.

Second is the problems involved in the composite nature of the Indian culture. The Indian culture is too complex to generalise. Indigenous to one section of people may be foreign to the others. Any number of examples can be cited. A study of history and culture would be required in this venture. Very often the efforts to indigenise end up in mere intellectual exercises.

To grow as a people fully rooted in the Indian culture and to have a participatory role in the destiny of the land serious and conscious attempts must be made.

1. As theological education plays an important role in training the leaders, more contextual oriented form of theological education needs to be framed. The theological educators are aware of this needs. An ongoing search for more indigenous forms of education and the vision of indigenisation need to be developed. A study of history and culture will also be essential.

2. Theological education and the people/churches need to build up better relationships and understanding. This will help the people as well as theological education itself. Theological education of the laity also needs further encouragement in this process. The people should be able to see that the Christian community has been an indigenous community in India. Their faith cannot be given a foreign image.

3. A better participation of the community of the faithful in the struggles of the people as part of the spiritual endeavour may be developed. The faith in Christ should make the people discern the structures of darkness and

struggle for justice. The church should not just be an agency of the foreign partners in India. In this endeavour they may also participate with people of other faiths in this land. This would assert that Christians in India authentically participate in the life of the nation as Indians. This consciousness is very often need to the Christians.

4. Indian Christian or Christian Indian art, symbols etc. need to be encouraged. The elements of the culture cannot be branded as the elements of 'paganism'. This would help a fuller expression of the Christian faith.

5. In worship and liturgy cultural elements can find better recognition. Here I would say the traditional elements should continue, because they belong to the 'faith tradition'. Indian music, musical instruments, symbols, dress etc, can find an increasing role.

6. Visual arts and architecture needs further development, spontaneously they bring in indigenous forms.

7. The Asian/Indian spirituality can be given encouragement. Some of the elements have unconsciously gone into our Christianity particularly among the rural people.

8. Better understanding and relationship with people of other faiths need to be developed.

9. The search for a Christian identity should enable to renew one's own faith and practices. This should lead people to deeper commitment and ecumenism.

10. The Christ centeredness as witnessed through the Holy Scripture should not be sacrificed. (This is asserted to avoid any doubt in the contemporary discussions on this issue). The affirmation of faith in Christ should be the corner-stone of Christian identity.

## CONCLUSION

Indigenisation is not a specific, single event nor something that happens as a result of scholarly dissertations or conciliar deliberations of the church. It is a phenomenon which happens quite naturally and even imperceptibly in

the believing and witnessing community under the 'kerygmatic impulsion' all the time.<sup>7</sup>

It makes the church a truly witnessing community in India. A witnessing community that participates in the total life of the society where the witness becomes meaningful. The church will have to involve in a continuous process of indigenisation.



## END NOTES

1. As quoted in P.B. Santram, "Indigenisation of the Church in India: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal", Samuel Amirtham (ed.), *A Vision For Man*, CLS, Madras, 1978, p. 180.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. M.M. Thomas, "Toward An Indigenous Christian Theology", Gerald Anderson (ed.), *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1976, pp. 11-35.
6. P. Chenchiah, "Church Union: A Study of Underlying Ideas", G.V Job et al, *Rethinking Christianity in India*, A.N. Sudarisanam, Madras, 1938, p. 173.
7. Santram, *Op. cit.*, p. 195.