

## Chapter 5

### WOMEN IN MISSION

*By Sakhi Athyal*

One can look at issues of Mission from different perspectives. But one of the best ways to discover some of the prominent issues of women in mission is to look at different themes of conferences, consultations, books and articles written on this issue. This paper is based on the study of about 40 or so consultations and conferences, both international and local and several books and articles written by men and women in India.

Sun Ai Park says that the biblical studies and theological reflections emerging from the women's perspective in the West are helpful in the development of feminist theology in Asia but she adds that the experiences of Asian women arise from such a different social context that it is necessary for Asian feminists to adapt the universal applications to reflect our particular context. "We must remember and emphasize again that our own lived experiences from our own unique contexts are the sources of creativity."<sup>1</sup> Women in mission need to discover what we all have in common, and what is unique to our own contexts.

#### SOLIDARITY WITH OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Many issues of mission of women in India are the same as those developed in feminist theologies in other parts of the world. Asia, especially India, being the birth place of many other religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Jainism, the inter-relationship between these religions is a major issue in today's theological debate. Asian theologians such as M.M. Thomas, Stanley Samartha and Gnana Robinson treat dialogue as a dominant theme in

their discussions. Asian women are also discussing their social relationships and the need for solidarity among women, because the common issues affect equally women of all religions. The joint women's council of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore had organised groups of women from different religions, at least on two different occasions, that they might engage in seminars to discuss their common problems. This type of encounter has been very important.

In 1985 a consultation on "The Authority of Religions and Status of Women" was held in Bangalore. This consultation

urged the participants to help in identifying the discriminatory and derogatory practices against women and work towards their removal so that women could claim their rightful status in the society.<sup>2</sup>

Strengthening the unity and solidarity of women throughout Asia is a very important issue. But many social problems stand in the way of achieving this so women need to stand together to remove these injustices.

M.M. Thomas' idea of the "dialogical existence" of all religions and all cultures and all the possibilities of co-operation and coexistence between them without in the process losing one's particular spiritual basis" is a very important concept to remember.<sup>3</sup> The question is whether Asian Christian women are losing their own, individual spiritual basis in this united search for solidarity in the struggle for justice.

The basic presupposition they have adopted – all religions lead to the same salvation – is both misleading and contrary to the Scriptures. Christian women do not need to buy this type of secularised theology and hence lose the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

The main attention seems to be concentrated on analysing the status of women in Asia's varied societies and in the separate churches of Asia. It is very true that raising the status of women in society and in the church is the first step towards accepting women for the ministry and mission of

the church. The attitudes of men and women towards the role and status of women have to be changed before progress can be made in this task. No wonder then that the first and most popular issue found in feminist literature and in the discussions taking place in women's conferences and consultations is the status of women in society.

### *Status of women in society*

If we review the details of the conferences and consultations mentioned earlier, we will find that most of them have included this issue in their studies. In India alone three books have been published on this subject. The titles are: *Indian Womanhood: Then and Now*; *Women in India and in the Church* (Both edited by Jessie Tellis Nayak) and *The Emerging Christian Woman* by Stella Faria. All these are important books because they seek to analyse the situations facing women in Indian society. In each study, a section is devoted to the history of Indian religions and how those have affected the position of Indian women in their homes and in society at large. They show how in the earlier period of Hinduism, for instance, women had a better situation but it gradually became worse because of the impact of Aryan and Muslim invasions. The Hindu law-giver Manu made laws against women in the later period. *Indian Womanhood: Then and Now* has devoted a whole section to such acute problems of women as purdha, dowry, wife beating, widowhood, rape and prostitution. This book also devotes a section to recording what women are trying to do about these matters. One learns of the varied organisations which are trying to help those women who are particularly troubled. Some organisations are singled out for their efforts to do what they can to help.

The All India Christian Council of Women (AICCW) and the Joint Women's Council under the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society have convened several consultations in which they have encouraged Christian women to raise their voices against some of the most acute injustices and oppressive laws against women. This is one area in which all Indian women need to work together. When

some specific cases arose such as the one concerning Mary Roy in Kerala, in which women had to fight against the laws of inheritance, the AICCW has supported them and helped them.<sup>4</sup> As a result a new law has been passed in favour of women. It grants women equal inheritance. It has become axiomatic as a Christian law for men and women. An article in the magazine *Stree* published by AICCW under the title,

“Supreme Court rules Travancore-Cochin Succession Acts Repealed” explains this new law in detail. This article was initially published as an editorial in *Indian Express*. This is the type of work the AICCW is seeking to accomplish along with the Joint Women’s Council. The AICCW has conducted many seminars to educate women on their rights and to give them a comprehensive awareness of the laws concerning them. Many women do not yet know their rights they already have. Hence, these seminars are important ministries for women.

But a question arises regarding the motivation behind such action. It is interesting to notice how Stanley Samartha regards this type of activity.

In a multi-religious society where women of different religious persuasions come together for common human purpose of society, religious labels should not become hindrances. Christians need to learn to work together with their neighbours of other faiths and ideological convictions and should not give the impression that only Christians are actively involved in feminist hermeneutics or theology or in active struggles for feminine rights.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that the demands of one cultural mandate has been placed by God on human race, not just on the redeemed. Women of all religious and ideological backgrounds should work together to contend against the evils and injustices of society.

But our Christian faith can provide the additional motivation of love and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others. Only in Jesus Christ and the cross do we see an unsurpassing demonstration of free, unconditional self-sacrificing and totally self giving love.

In these discussions on the place of women in society, the summary seems to be that whatever new society is to be created it should be rooted in the spiritual heritage of Indian culture. What is this spiritual heritage of India? Is it only in the background of Hinduism? Christianity has also been in India from very early times and has added to the rich spiritual heritage of India. Sunder Raj in his book *The Confusion Called Conversion* has demonstrated that “Christianity is about as ancient, eastern and indigenous in India, as any other faith.”<sup>6</sup> One important phase in the emancipation of women in India started with the coming of Christianity through the ministry of Apostle Thomas. Syrian Christian women started wearing *Chatta*, a white blouse and, “mundu”, instead of showing their bare tops like Hindu women. They were much more free in their relationship with men than other groups.

Western society with its particular emphasis on the liberty and emancipation of women is not necessarily the example Asian women are looking for.

A link is rather sought between liberative trends in traditional culture but with rejection of its oppressive elements. It is useful to see what was reached by women in Western culture, but the atomising of society accompanied by hyper-individualism is not attractive, to say the least. In the collective struggle for fuller humanity reflection on the real goal and purpose of this struggle is requested.<sup>7</sup>

Indian Christian women should create a society established on the spiritual basis of love of Christ, which means ‘giving love’. But it is neither self effacing nor destructive. It is not selfish in its outlook. In the process of women’s liberation, women would not want to destroy the future of their community. The men and women of Asia are family and community oriented and this means that they do not want to lose their separate identities. They have always tried to keep in mind the well-being and happiness of others in the process of seeking their own liberation. This giving love that carries with it the knowledge of ones separate dignity should be the basis for the liberation of Asian women.

### *Status of women in the Church*

The status of women in the church is another issue which is important in many Asian Christian women's conferences and writings. This is because there is a great deal of criticism about the church's present attitude to women. This attitude, in a way, not only is related to the role of women in Indian society but it is also very much related to the growing awareness of the biblical witness on women and their roles. This is why there is a growing interest in the new hermeneutics. How shall the biblical data be interpreted?

The traditional structure of the church is being criticised heavily because it decrees a subordinate place for women in the church. The old, patriarchal, hierarchical and bureaucratic structures are also responsible in part for why women cannot occupy formal service roles in the church.

The denial of ordination of women must be also seen as the denial of a right to respond to a call from God. Any man or woman who has had a call from God has a right to respond. Rather than placing importance on structures and traditions the Church must be still and discern the will of the Holy Spirit. By ordaining women, it must be recognised that the ministry of the Church in the world will be enhanced.<sup>8</sup>

This was the opinion of the AICCW's national consultation. Though many churches such as CSI, CNI and Methodist churches in India have been ordaining women now, the situation has not significantly changed. Attitudes have to be changed first. For this to be achieved, a right concept of servanthood and ministry has to be developed. Women have already come a long way and they are realising their responsibilities in the church and are coming forward to be theologically trained. But the sad part is that those who have been trained are not being adequately used. A survey made of theologically trained women has recently shown this. Even theological education programmes are not accepting women on equal terms with men in ministry. As a result there is a considerable discussion going on about the need for distinct change in the atmosphere of theological colleges and in the curricula. Recent consultations on the leadership of women in the churches have been extensively concerned with this.

The dominant emphasis in these discussions is on the need for a workable partnership of men and women in the Church. Women should neither be separate from men nor be subject to men. In this regard Asian women seem to have adopted a concept of ministry that seems biblical.

But one thing that is very confusing is the understanding of ministry emerging from these conferences. The dominant question is: what is the purpose of ministry? Is it simply to maintain the church, nurture members and uplift them socially or is it for a wholistic mission? Women have been involved in evangelism as Bible women, but this does not seem to be the present concern of Indian conferences. Now the discussions are mainly about the question of occupying the positions of authority, policy making, and for sacramental duties. But again the question surfaces: Are women making exactly the same mistakes as men in not realising the importance of the fundamental responsibility of being the channels for the kingdom of God? Indian women are very committed to their faith, and this need not change. As in the case of Pandita Ramabai and B.V. Subbamma, the development in Christian maturity and the increase in their opportunities for ministry did not divert them from evangelistic ministry. Evangelism need not involve forceful confrontation but rather adopt a sharing kind of approach. When women are deeply convinced about something, such as the cruciality of faith in Christ, they can share their holistic liberation in Christ with others also. If this is downgraded, women can then become interested only in gaining power, but this would mean power in the wrong sense – to rule and not to serve. Indeed, a balanced understanding of ministry is essential to all women desiring such service. Jesus' understanding of ministry as servant-leader should be brought back to our attention. The concept of true service does not deny the opportunity of ordination for women. But this allows full use of women's gifts. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the dominant concern in any of the above mentioned discussions or in most women's writings except in some Roman Catholic circles and a few

specific local churches. An interest in expressing the love of Christ needs to be revived among Indian Christian women.

### *Authority of the Bible*

Many conferences and consultations have raised the issue of the authority of the Bible. Honig mentions that the international feminist theologians conference in 1987 (EATWOT) issued guidelines to be used at all subsequent national consultations in Asia and recommended that these guidelines be geared to relevant theology of liberation themes found in the Bible. EATWOT also devoted an issue of its journal to the subject on interpreting the Bible. In the 1986 book, *New Eyes for Reading*, edited by John S. Pobee, many Asian women including Aruna Gnanadason from India have made contributions. They share relevant messages which they discovered as they read the Scriptures and new insights gained out of their profound experiences as Third World women. It is very interesting to note how the essays in this book were reviewed by Dew Esther Byu, the president of the Baptist women's Union.

They therefore, challenge us, – Asian women, to move beyond the boundaries to break ourselves from the set pattern and become free to think and express our experiences in the light of God's word. In doing so we may be able to discover what has been ignored or left out; may learn to express our faith and hope in contextual forms; may see God amidst human struggle, suffering and pain; and to conceive for instance, a feminist experience of birth as a metaphor of Gods creation of new life and new beginning as illustrated in the book.<sup>9</sup>

Another interesting book is *Reading the Bible as Asian Women*, published by the Women's Concern Unit of CCA, Singapore. There is a series of biblical reflections in four sections: Women in Poverty, Women in Law, Women and Racism, and Women and Justice. All these are closely related. There are stories which have explosive power. These are not intellectual or theological exercises but are application oriented. These lead us to an examination of ourselves as a unit in the family, in the society and finally as a member of the human race. These include poems, prayers and

songs. The whole methodology is unique. Graphics and pictures are used with power. This book is a group achievement and reflects the scholarship of a group of women working together in a non-threatening and intellectually creative fashion. The "Asianness" of this book lies in this united efforts as well as in the acceptance with which the writers face issues which are unique to our own situation in Asia.

The authority of the Bible is not questioned but the way the Bible is taught is questioned in this book. Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis stresses that in Asian feminist theology there has been a close relationship between the scriptures and their experiences.

Driven by their experience to search for biblical clues, imagery/ies and stories to articulate their faith, Asian women theology draws their authority from the Scripture. The emphasis is a rereading of the Scripture with women's eyes. Most writings of Asian women theologians reflect a correlation between the Scripture and the women's experience.<sup>10</sup>

This is no wonder since the Bible is an Asian book in its human aspect. All the strengths and weaknesses of Asian culture will be visible in the biblical accounts. This includes womens involvement in Asian culture as well. This is mainly in the Bible's descriptive parts and not in the objective, underlying unchanging principles.

This relationship between culture and experience is a very delicate one and there is no easy solution to this. Our experience always affects our interpretation of the Bible. Padma Gallup, an Indian theologian comments,

The authority of the Bible is not to be found in the text *per se*, it is not a book of rules or norms for every action. The authority of the Bible is in the power of the textual witness, God's liberating power, God's authority in action, in history which, providing a critique of our own contexts leads persons into faith and shapes individual and institutional life styles.<sup>11</sup>

The theology derived from Asian culture always has the danger of not balancing the substance of the scripture and culture. Because of the over-emphasis on culture there is

the danger of evading the individual responsibility of sin and generalising every structure as oppressive and domineering. They could simply exchange one set of biases for another. We have to guard against this.

### *Feminist aspect of God and biblical anthropology*

Many Asian theologians have written about feminine aspects of God. In India, in the famous Indian theologian Appasamy's *Bhakti Marga* God is spoken of as "mother".<sup>12</sup> A.K. Julian says that God is described as "mother" in the *Thiruvachacam*.<sup>13</sup> Narayan Vaman Tilak wrote poems like,

Tenderest mother-guru mine  
saviour where is love like thine?<sup>14</sup>

Hindus find it strange that the Christians do not speak of God in this way, because they feel that the love of mother to the child is the highest form of love. A mother is the first teacher and the mother figure must not be underestimated in the Asian context.

The feminist theologians of Asia are very interested in this aspect of theology. Anna Vareed Alexander says, "Christian women need to claim all their rights and privileges as children of God made in his image", because "in real life women have rarely been in God's image as we are all too painfully aware today."<sup>15</sup> This is the main reason why the stress on the feminine aspect of God is very strong in Asia. Indian women are trying to redeem the Hindu feminist images of God to show that Indian culture had this strong image of God earlier. Feminine gods like Kali, Shakti, Lakshmi and Saraswati are the goddesses of power wealth and wisdom. Kali and Shakti are goddesses of power. They are brought to the attention of society to show that the Hindu concept of god includes the male and female sex. They argue that the Hindu impact on Indian culture is not to the reason for the low status of women.

Feminist Asian theologians like Leelamma Athyal want to keep the mother goddess concept along with the idea of

the father god the concept of parent. Several feminists have noticed that the name

*Elohim* for God has come from 'Eloh', the title of a feminine goddess and 'im', masculine plural ending. Why then did the Israelites develop the concept of Father God and not a Mother Goddess? Scholars say that this happened as the result of the reaction of the Israelites to the perversities associated with the female fertility cult of their neighbouring peoples. The concept of the deity as a goddess actually reduced women to mere sex-objects and as a result of it, the Old Testament eliminated the idea of a femaleness from their description of God.<sup>16</sup>

She also points out the biblical feminist characteristics which are described in the Bible. The care and protection of Yahweh as a mother bird and the love of God compared to Mother to her child.

The Hebrew words *Shekinah*, *Torah* and *Chokmah* are all in the feminine gender and when they are spoken of in relation to the nature or attributes of God, they could be taken as giving expressions to the 'feminine' characteristics of God.<sup>17</sup>

Marianne Katoppo also talks about God's mercy and compassion and that it literally means the "movement of the womb", (*rechem*). She says, "Forcing people to relate to an all-male Trinity is oppression. In the context of Asian cosmic religion and meta-cosmic soteriologies, it is also ridiculous."<sup>18</sup> In this relation she reminds us that the Hebrew noun *ruach* is feminine. But the biblical concept of God points to neither a male nor a female, but to a spirit.

In Asian feminism this is a big issue. In the context of Asian religions where the female image of God is so important, the biblical emphasis on the feminine aspects of God has to be brought into Christianity as well.

### *Mariology*

This is another topic which often appeared in the discussions of Asian conferences and Asian women's writings. Why is this an important subject? The Asian women's consultation in 1987 in Singapore had a conference statement which says,

It is the task of all women to reclaim Mary and redefine her as liberator of oppressed people, especially women of all ages and cultures. We reject the distortion of Mary's identity which comes from male interpretation. We claim the right to liberate the Church's teaching about Mary. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth has been used to oppress women. We understand that the real meaning of the Virgin Birth is the end of the patriarchal order. We reject this order in ourselves, our families, the Church and society.<sup>19</sup>

As it is mentioned earlier in the Asian context of Goddesses and female images of God, Mary was the only image left in Christianity who is worshipped in Roman Catholic Churches and some other Eastern Churches. But these are distorted images, seeing Mary as a sinless Madonna and as a super human being. Leelamma Athyal's comment in this relation is very interesting to note,

Belief in female archetypes and deities can never lead to the liberation of women; otherwise, in India women would have achieved a higher status long ago. One might wonder why this is so. I would assume that it is because one's belief in a female figure in heaven can become a comforting compensation for one's tendency to oppress women on earth!<sup>20</sup>

This is an interesting way to put it. She suggests a Mariology from below to make Mary a human being like us. Then she can be a model for us.

Mary and her relationship to the incarnation of Jesus is very important for women. Jesus took flesh and human nature from Mary and from the Holy Spirit. There was no other human male involved in this incarnation, but God the Spirit who is the creator of power and life. He had the perfect nature of man and God. The humanness of Christ came from Mary the women. Mary attains her full humanhood in cooperation with God and being an agent for God becoming flesh. Third also affirms the biological flesh and the sex quality of Mary which has been created by God from the time of creation.

The story of the Virgin-birth is thus an enigma, not only with reference to the origin of the earthly life of Jesus, but also with reference to his human nature. Nevertheless the

fact remains that the Bible affirms his humanity as well as his virginal conception.<sup>21</sup>

Leelamma adds that Mary alone without the help of a male, could provide to God what was needed to become "human". In other words his full humanity lies in what a woman could contribute. She emphasises that there is a great implication of this to the theology of the humanness of women.

"Mariology thus affirms the full humanness of womanhood".<sup>22</sup> This is one reason why Mariology has become very important to Asian women.

Another important contribution to Asian women from the study of Mary is the concept of purity. In Asia the biological functions of women are considered as impure. Leelamma Athyal argues that

Womanhood is an essential part of the humanity that God has created, and the physiological functions of women are not only a precious gift of God to humanity, but also the most important means which he used to bring salvation to the whole world.<sup>23</sup>

This concept is very useful to redeem women's purity in Asian culture.

Leelamma is not in favour of using Mariology for making women more conscious of female aspects of God. She argues that "To those who are eager to incorporate a 'female dimension' in God: God is neither male nor female."<sup>24</sup> She agrees that we can use either masculine or feminine metaphors to give expressions to the various ways in which we seek to understand or experience the divine reality. But this is no justification to divinising Mary. Another argument she opposes is to idealise Mary's virginity to connect it to the idea of women's independence from men. Leelamma says that what we want to stress is the right relationship between men and women and their mutual dependence. Asian women stress the importance of partnership with men and women even in this experience of Mary giving birth to Jesus, sharing her humanness with God incarnate.

Marianne Katoppo stresses the importance of understanding Mary's submission to the will of God not as the submission of a slave but as a creative submission.

We fail to recognise that Mary's submission to the Will of God is no way the *subject submission of a slave* who has no choice. On the contrary, it is the *creative submission* of the fully liberated human being, who – not being subject to any other human being – *is free to serve God.*<sup>25</sup>

Submission is a big issue in Asian culture for women. Even through the study of Mariology, Asian women are trying to show the need for the mutuality of men and women in the service of each other and to God.

### Christology

Another very important theme in Asian feminist writings and discussions is Christology.

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ has opened up the perspective of working towards God's new creation in which the distortions of sexual exploitation will be overcome and God's image as male and female will be restored.<sup>26</sup>

The Christ-centredness of Feminist theology has been made very clear by Leelamma Athyal in the consultation held in Bangalore 1984. She believes, that,

"From the point of view of the cultural and religious background of the society in general, and of the Jews in particular, at the time when Jesus was born it was probably necessary that God should become a man."<sup>27</sup>

She also argues that God becoming flesh and living a human life had to be either as male or female and not both. It would not matter which form he took. But she says, the important thing is that he was a real male in that he believed in a community of women and men.

The supreme characteristics of the real male is the awareness of being the counterpart of the female within the community of persons. The male finds his own proper place and importance in the community only to the extent that it recognises the place and importance of the female. The awareness of the real manhood of the male is thus closely linked to the awareness of its inadequacy and incompleteness in the society apart from the womanhood of the female.

This is what makes us talk about a community of women and men even apart from marriage relationship.<sup>28</sup>

Leelamma goes on to say that because of this, it is very significant that Jesus chose to become a man. "Being truly male he knew the true importance of the female in the purpose of God even outside sexual relationships."<sup>29</sup> Therefore he received women, talked with them freely and defended them. He took them around in his mission and gave them privileges to witness about his resurrection and to announce the good news to others. He showed the principle of love and receptivity.

But as long as humanity remains a community of men and women, we may very well add that he came also in order that the male may become truly male, and the female become truly female; and that we may receive and accept each other in true love.<sup>30</sup>

A.G. Honig says that she did not come across any Asian feminist theologians questioning the traditional theology of the Council of Chalcedonia concerning Jesus Christ as the unique incarnate Son of God, who is both human and divine. She feels that western feminist theologians are more critical of this doctrine and raises the question whether this close connection between maleness and salvation must be interpreted as male domination or as divine preference to male.

The theme of the fourth Assembly of AICCW was "In Christ: Power of Women". In the opening address, Bertrice Wood, USA moderator of Women's Commission of WCC, said that like Mary in Luke 10: 29-42,

"Being attentive God's Word, as taught by Christ, that gives us the power to be who we are as witness in this world."<sup>31</sup> The emphasis was not Mary making the choice of being a disciple and receiving the power from Christ to obey Christ.

Asian women claim that women can understand the pain of Christ suffering on the cross better. Kwok Pui Lan writes,

Feminist theology in Asia is a story of suffering . . . women suffer from the thousands-years-old-prejudices, discriminations of the male dominated eastern cultures, from the rampant socio-political exploitations, and from their structural vulnerability.<sup>32</sup>

Jesus suffered like them. He experienced what it was to be a nobody. It is not whether Jesus should be a man or woman that matters. It is the very person on the cross who suffers like us, who was rendered as a nobody that illuminates the tragic human existence and speaks to countless women of Asia. "We are not looking to Jesus as a mere example to follow, neither shall we try to idolise "him". We see Jesus as the God who takes the human form and suffers and weeps with us."<sup>33</sup>

In this relation many say Mary the mother of Jesus also suffered with Jesus. Kikuo Matsunaga, president of Tokyo Union Biblical Seminary, Japan says that like Mary

We too face a long time of pondering and suffering that will continue until all the fragmentary facts and experiences of our own context come together to form the unified confession that Jesus is really the Saviour of the world.<sup>34</sup>

Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis emphasises that,

Unlike radical feminist theologians in the West, eg., Mary Daly and a few others, Asian women theology looks up to Jesus Christ for enlightenment and inspiration for their struggle. As some of them argue, Jesus affirms women and encourages women to break with tradition, and to examine their own experience of the Godhead.<sup>35</sup>

Asian women see Christ as for them. They do not question the incarnation of Christ as a male. They do not think that it is the divine preference to male. Their main emphasis is that Christ being a male recognises the immense worth and value of the female. This seems to be a very healthy approach. The Asian women's conference statement has summarised this very well.

The Asian women's understanding of Jesus is that of one who transcends the evil order of patriarchy. Jesus is the prophetic messiah, whose role is that of the suffering servant, who offers himself as a ransom for many. Through his suffering messiahship he creates a new humanity.<sup>36</sup>

### *Asian Women's spirituality*

Asian women are understanding spirituality in a new way now.

There is, however, an emerging understanding of spirituality as the inner core made up of all the experiences and encounters one has had in ones life and out of which come the motivations, inspirations and commitment that make one live and decide in a particular way.<sup>37</sup>

Asian women identify and define spirituality as a faith experience which motivates the thought process and behaviour patterns in relation to God and neighbour. "Spirituality is awakened souls urging dignified humanhood."<sup>38</sup> It is not individualistic and inward looking. It is not passive and distinguishes the holy from the unholy. It is integral, outgoing and community oriented, active and holistic.

The concept of dying to ourselves to live for others is an important one in Asian women's spirituality. Kwok Pui Lan who teaches at Chung Chi College in Hong Kong says,

Women are more sensitive to other's feelings and they treasure relationship with others. In the times of misfortunes, a woman sacrifices herself to take care of the family. The love from the womb, the self sacrifice of the mother is the foundation for the passion of humankind.<sup>39</sup>

Asian women do not want to throw away what they have and what they are, but want to make it their strength instead of weakness. This spirituality is prophetic and has a mission with commitment. It is helping them find a new identity and strength in Christ.

Padma Gallup says that two aspects of Asian spirituality should be examined in search of a theological anthropology. The concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *aparigraha* (non-attachment). The non-attachment is not from persons but from material possessions. These ideas come from the teachings of Gandhi. Gallups says *ahimsa* is not only founded in compassion but also in unconditional love, as exemplified by Jesus in his teaching and ministry. It is active resistance to evil, and demands courage and moral force. It is neither self-effacing nor monastic. These ideas

can be successfully used by feminist movement in the world.

The concern of Asian feminist theology is to make it more than a temporary strategy. It has to become a style of life undergirded by habits of thought and action based on unconditional love of neighbour and enemy, learned and lived in community.<sup>40</sup>

*Aparigraha* is the spiritual principle for frugal attitudes and for non-grasping, non-attached attitude to the material things in a life style. In other words, living a simple life according to the Asian social context that will be satisfying and less demanding than other foreign contexts.

Living in harmony with nature and with each other is another emphasis Gallup discusses. In Asian thought, money does not become the most important priority in life, but relationships stay at the top of priorities in life. This kind of spirituality – Asian feminist spirituality – can really enrich the Asian society if we are able to use our understanding the Word of God in relation to our experiences.

### Conclusion

From the study of different conferences, consultations, and writings of Asian women, and especially Indian women, it seems that the main agenda is now to change the attitude of the family, society and church towards women. Our main interest is to show that women and men are mutually interdependent and both are independent of each other and to recognise woman as equally human. This understanding will only enhance this situation in their homes, society and the church. A theology and a spirituality is being developed to enhance this understanding. We are not attempting to escape from our responsibilities as women, but want to work with men in community, to have dignity given to the responsibilities which we can carry out as women. This is no denial of femininity but, a desire to receive dignity and humanity and an acceptance from God to make the best use of our femininity for God. This seems healthy with regard to the ministries that need to be developed for women, the

writing and conferences seem one-sided. The socio-political and social justice issues seem to be our main agenda. To some extent this is understandable. Women need acceptance and escape from our suffering before we can do any ministry. But there is another side to this. If women are only involved in social justice the spiritual development of women will be retarded. Asian women are very pious, and will continue to be interested in spiritual matters. A wholistic approach to mission is important. Evangelism is an important ministry that needs to be taken into consideration. India is the second most populated country and only 3% of the total population is Christians. This responsibility of women to evangelise in the context of family becomes more important. It is true that mothers will have the complete responsibility of care and spiritual nurture of the children in Indian families. So women are the hope of bringing the future generation to Christ. This implies that women can bring the whole family to Christ at least in the next generation.

This is not to say that women can only evangelise women and children. But this is also an important aspect to consider.

In a Hindu culture, it is difficult for men to evangelise women. Until now, most of the evangelism among Hindu women has been done by women. When we think of establishing churches, it helps a great deal to have some women ordained for this special ministry.<sup>41</sup>

Subbamma has done a thorough study on the *ashram* kind of ministry for women. She is developing a whole new holistic concept of mission through her *ashram* movement.

Theologically trained women in India will not accept traditional theory any longer. They have realised that if God calls women for any type of ministry, to use their gifts that God has given them, they are responsible to obey him. God did not recommend special roles in ministry for women and men. The Bible is misunderstood in this regard and should be taught correctly. It is important to communicate to the

men and women of Asia. This is one of the ministries to be developed. Asian and Indian women on the whole, have a balanced view of mission and ministry now, even though some writings only show the liberation theology type of understanding. Majority of Indian women are much in favour for a wholistic approach to mission. It will be difficult to change them to the extent of just liberation theology. But it is very possible that because of social cultural changes and our involvement in society, we will accept the concept of partnership in the ministry if we are taught that the Bible is for the ministry of women. Also some cultures of India come from a matriarchal background women are used to leadership in home and society to some extent. This will be easily accepted in those areas. In this changing era of Asia, especially India, the teaching and conviction coming as a result of a proper biblical understanding that women and men are partners in the ministry and mission of the church is very important. If women are encouraged to be effective they can be a great force for the mission of India.



## END NOTES

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