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The Mission of the Church in India New Challenges and Opportunities

As an Indian, from childhood, I always believed when it was said, we all belong to a global family (*Vasudeiva Kutmbakam*) and that we live in peace and harmony with each other. I grew up in a society made up of people of different religions, castes, cultures and languages. On the street where I lived with my parents and siblings ours was the only Christian family. My neighbours were mostly Hindus, a few Muslims and even one Sikh family. We all lived in peace and harmony. We shared our joy at various national and religious festivities and even shared each other's sorrows at the time of loss and together we helped each other in need.

As the years passed, with the boom of technology, population growth and many other reasons, the proximity with our neighbours slowly started diminishing. People gradually isolated themselves. The neighbours became anonymous to each other and doubt and suspicion started creeping in. In terms of progress and development, we moved forward and our life became more comfortable. But in terms of relationship, we moved away from each other. Life narrowed down to isolated individuals. Instead of seeing the similarities we shared, we started seeing the differences. Our communitarian life moved to the individual, 'me' and 'myself'. Besides, there are divisive ideologies and politics that further isolate and divide the people from one another. People are set against each other. Conflicts and riots are on the rise. The great characteristic of India; 'Unity in diversity', has turned into divisive differences. Although technology helps to connect people on-line, in reality, people have gone far from each other.

When we talk about the mission, we understand, it is proclaiming God's Kingdom of peace, justice, equality by the People of God in their own contexts. When faced with crisis, they are inspired and motivated to engage in addressing

the issues, engage through their words, lives and actions as they witness to Christ.

In addressing the topic, 'The Mission of the Church in India: New Challenges and Opportunities', one needs to remember that since Indian culture and traditions are ancient, they are deeply rooted in the lives of the people. No matter what religion, caste or language one belongs to, they are part of the life of every Indian citizen. Historically, it was only after the arrival of foreigners, especially the Moghul invasion and subsequently British rule, Indians felt the need for unity and started asserting themselves. Thus, attempts have been made to define and assert Indian culture, religions and languages. After Independence, the Indian constitution safeguarded the democratic values of liberty, fraternity and equality of all, irrespective of caste, culture, language or religion, giving special privileges to the weaker sections, poor and minorities. At that time, there existed a small right-wing group, that wanted a different India, a different nationalism with its own ideology. As the years passed, this small group has grown and become a political power, that is not in favour of giving special privileges to the minorities.

When we talk about the mission, we need to remember the history of India. In the recent past, in the attempt to define it, this assertion has taken on a rigorous form and resulted in communal disturbances. This is backed by political interests; thus, making the mission of Christ more difficult. This mission is presented as foreign mission to 'convert' (converting from one's religion to Christianity). It is presented negatively as a threat to the nation. The political parties that backed these attempts have come into power and it has become a political tool. Every activity connected to mission; to missionaries, missionary work, charity, helping the poor, working for health, educational and social development, etc. have been considered as a means aimed at

‘conversion’. This has become the biggest hindrance in working for the mission of Christ, which is basically working for the values of the Kingdom of God, i.e. peace, justice and equality for everyone.

There are various factors that influence the mission both positively and negatively. Among the many factors, I have identified the following four, namely; Growing Communalism and Fundamentalism, Right Wing Politics, War and unrest in Bordering countries and the Covid-19 Epidemic. At the end, I have suggested the need for change in terminology, replacing it with new terms, suited to today’s context. Certain terms such as ‘conversion’, ‘mission’, ‘missionary’, ‘charity’, etc. have taken on a negative meaning today.

Growing Communalism and Fundamentalism

Earlier, in the colonial and post-colonial era, the term ‘communal’ was often used in order to uplift and defend the minorities and weaker sections of the society who did not get adequate opportunities, be it on the basis of gender, class, caste and religion. Since the communal policies were mainly centred around the allocation of jobs; access to education and political positions; a large number of people were unaffected by communalism. But later, it developed into weapon for reactionary social classes and political forces. The communal leaders and political parties allied with them and the vested interests deliberately encouraged them to keep away from the real issues, to gain political mileage. In the present situation, the political parties backed by such elements have come into power and thus such communal and fundamental incidents are growing day by day.

In this situation, to carry out the mission has become extremely difficult. As political parties have made it their agenda (hidden or obvious), the fringe elements have mushroomed in fuelling the fundamentalism and communal tensions. In the name of ‘conversion’, the priests, nuns and the churches have become the target of their attacks. The missionaries are monitored. There are programmes like *Ghar Wapsi* (bringing people back to the religion to which they belonged), where Christians are forced to leave the religion of their choice.

Therefore, the growth of communalism and fundamentalism has seriously affected the mission. At the same time, the Protestant groups add fuel to the fire by boldly preaching and baptising, which aggravates the situation further. Though the Catholic Church has changed its understanding of mission, i.e. from baptising and saving souls to improving the lives of the people and creating a better world of peace, justice and equality, it still has to face the brunt.

Right Wing Politics

As we know the left or right political spectrum likes to classify the political positions, ideologies and parties from the social equality perspective, also used for liberals and conservatives. The Left-wing emphasises on ideas such as freedom, equality, fraternity, rights, progress, reform and internationalism. Whereas the Right-wing ideology places emphasis on authority, hierarchy, order, duty, tradition, reaction and nationalism.

In India, so far, the Congress Party, at the centre, is leading the country with the ideology of the Left-wing, where the minorities and the weaker sections of society have some privileges. They followed the Indian Constitution based on the democratic values of freedom, equality and fraternity. But due to the growth of fundamentalism and communalism, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Shiv Sena and other like-minded parties have replaced Congress. After nearly eight years in power, the Right-wing usage has been accepted by the BJP party and the ideological forces behind it. They are all out to establish a particular nationalistic country and are imposing their ideology.

In spreading their ideology and forming such their nationalism, the Left-wing policies are a hindrance. For this reason, the minorities such as Christians and Muslims become rivals. So, anything done against them redounds to their advantage. And this explains the increasing attacks on churches and mosques. Therefore, this too makes the mission difficult as there is a growing fear among the missionaries of being attacked at any time. There are new rules to suppress their work and to put them

behind bars easily. Whereas, the rules are lenient towards the attackers.

War and Unrest in Bordering Countries

There has been unrest with the countries bordering on India since past three-four years. On the North-West border, Pakistan has always been a constant disturbance. Especially after the articles 370 and 35A, have been scrapped, the Jammu-Srinagar region has been in turmoil. Terroristic acts and on-going conflicts have increased. This has become a cause of concern for the Muslim communities living in India. On the other hand, though India has a fairly good business relationship with China, the military relationship is not at ease. Besides, India doesn't favour China supporting Pakistan as it is accused of aiding terrorism. The relationship with Myanmar is also a point of concern for India. It has been accused of allegedly training the Naxalites and preparing their own terrorist groups to invade India. There have been proofs of existing training camps on the Indo-Myanmar border. There has not been much trouble from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, as they are facing their own internal problems. But on the whole, there is a variable amount of unrest with the bordering countries. Besides the unrest the on-going war between Russia and Ukraine has affected the country in various ways, weakening India's financial growth.

Therefore, at this juncture, much of the focus is on financial recovery and containing the rise in the price of commodities. The good values are losing importance. Thus, in this context, the Mission suffers.

Impact of the Covid-19 Epidemic

When the Covid-19 epidemic suddenly burst out, it shook the whole world. Seeing people die one after the other, was the greatest tragedy one could experience. Fear and uncertainty gripped everyone. It is now more than two years and still the world has not come out of it. Though it is diminishing in some places, in others, it is re-emerging. Covid-19 has changed the life of the world. The biggest change it has brought to humanity is, isolation. Living together and participating in the lives of one another is basic to human nature, and this has been challenged by this epidemic. Thanks to technology that

made the virtual reality and kept people in contact. But certainly, its impact on people's livelihood, their health, food systems and the world of work was enormous. We have seen the sudden loss of human life all over the world. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating too. Millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people has grown tremendously and continues to grow.

It is a universal phenomenon and its impact on humanity is inestimable. It has changed the face of the earth and given it a new face called, the *New Normal*. The world is struggling to cope with these new phenomena. To name a few terms the phenomena brought: - work from home, study on-line, lockdown and quarantine, wearing a face mask, public distance and sanitisation.

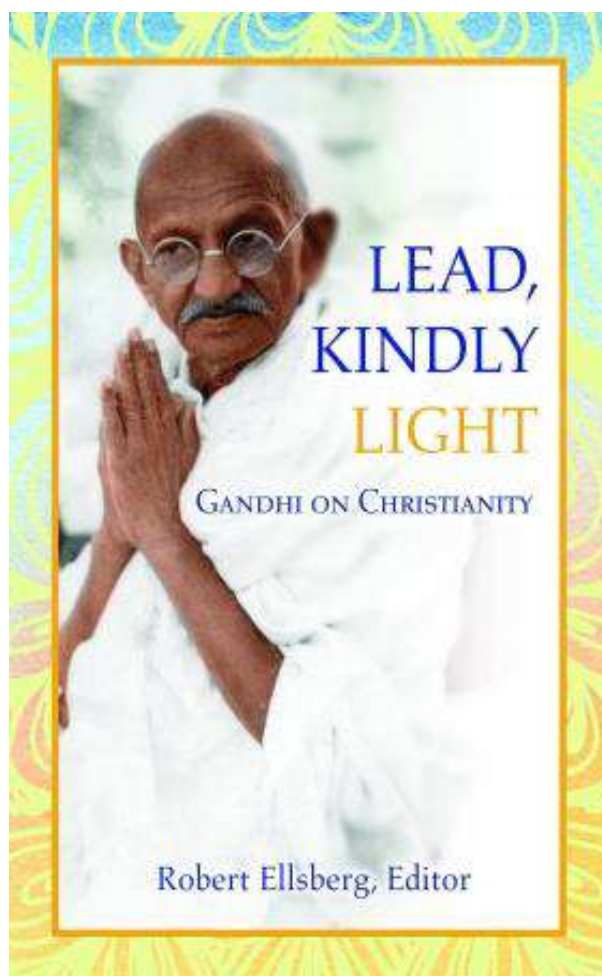
In this situation, the mission also faces new challenges and new opportunities. One has to follow this *new normal* to protect oneself and the others. The Church as the communion of people has been challenged, as the physical contact has been limited and reaching out to others physically, has come to a halt. It's also an opportunity to reach out to the people who are struggling for food, medical assistance, education and many other needs. But at the same time not only the people but also the missionaries and leaders are afraid to come forward. Instead, the on-line churches, on-line masses and other religious gatherings are being held virtually. A much bigger number is able to join in the online programmes. People are connected to one another far and wide. The Church has become more creative, reaching out to the unreachable. This pandemic has brought many negative and positive elements to our lives. Nonetheless, it is up to us to adapt as we face these new challenges. In whatever way we respond, it will surely affect our personal and social life. Indeed, there are many lessons for us to learn to enhance human life and to create a better world. It is for sure that even when this pandemic is over the *new normal* is going to remain. We need to explore new possibilities for the mission.

Review and Change Negative and Confusing Terms

As I have already suggested that there is a need for a change in the terminology which is being used. Many terms have either lost their actual meaning or they convey a negative one. For example, the word 'Mission' is connected to the colonial period and reminds people of the atrocities of that period. The missionaries came to India, to baptise as many as possible, to save souls because the Church held the view that salvation is not possible outside the Church. This understanding still continues within the Church and it is taken as a tool by the fundamentalists to accuse the missionaries of converting their people to Christianity. Due to which, there is an increase in attacks on 'missionaries' and the institutions attached to mission. The term 'conversion' in India, means, converting from other religions, mainly from the Hindu religion. These days, any fundamental group may come and disturb the prayers being held in churches or even in houses, on the pretext of an attempt at conversion. Even the retreats and healing prayers are not spared. They too are interpreted as an enticement to convert. In some States, the Government has even promulgated strict Anti-Conversion laws, which prohibit the mission of Christ. Even worse, the word 'charity' is taken to be negative. Any work of charity, social work for the poor and marginalised is being criticized and prohibited as it is considered to be an allurements for the poor to convert to Christianity. Similarly, there are many terms that either create misunderstanding or have become negative. Therefore, to spread the mission of Christ, there is a grave need to adapt to the context and use the terms that are acceptable. The mission of Christ has to become the mission to all, no matter to which caste, culture and religion one belongs. Let the Kingdom of God rein in the hearts of all.

As India faces its internal problems such as; religious fundamentalism, communalism, ideological and political conflicts, caste exploitation, discrimination based on caste, gender, language, it is also affected by the problems of others; such as Russia and Ukraine on-going war, conflict with bordering nations

and the Covid-19 epidemic. It is believed that the root cause of all these problems is poverty. A few rich amass the maximum property and wealth of the nation and refuse to share them with those who are deprived. Above all, the Government's inability to serve the poor adds to the problem. Unless the Church addresses these issues, to speak about God's mission makes no sense. The Church has to join hands with all the people of goodwill, who are concerned about making this world better. There is a need to join hands with other churches, other religious communities, Government and non-Government agencies and other ideological groups. It is urgent to find new ways of relating to people belonging to the different strata of life.



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