

Indian Christian Theology's Quest to Integrate Social and Ecological Justice

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Abstract

India, with its complex social and environmental challenges, has compelled theologians to think about the interrelatedness of social and ecological justice. The article argues that Indian Christian theology has responded to these challenges by embracing a contextual and interdisciplinary approach that incorporates insights from other disciplines, including social and ecological sciences. This article is on the intersection between religion and ecological issues in India. The study explores how environmental destabilization is closely linked to the social and economic marginalization of the poor. It highlights the need to integrate ecological issues into theologies of ecology and emancipation, and to update progressive theologies in India to include a focus on eco-justice. The study critiques current revolutionary theologies in India, such as liberation theology, Dalit theology, and ecofeminist theology, for their failure to adequately address ecological issues in their theological frameworks. It also argues that an integrated ecotheological viewpoint is required for the theologies of transformation in India to be successful in the face of increasing socio-political, economic, and ecological inequality. This viewpoint will involve extensive updates to the philosophical expositions of concepts and teachings, hermeneutics, and social analysis in the respective theologies. The study highlights the urgency for transformative theologies in India to adopt an eco-justice oriented approach to address environmental issues affecting the most vulnerable communities.

Keywords: Ecological, theology, justice, destruction, victims, impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecology is a much talked about topic today. Till recently, however, Third World countries were reluctant to take ecological issues seriously, and preferred to write them off as western, imperialist issues. The new awareness that environmental issues are not only the result of social inequality, especially poverty, but also environmental degradation, mostly carried out in the name of 'developmental projects,' has encouraged some in the Third World to take ecological concerns seriously (Barry, 2002). For example, when rainforests are lost to make way for nuclear plants or massive dams, which only favour the industrial sector and the urban affluent, it is the poorer sections of society, particularly tribal people, who live in close proximity to forests, and the fisherfolk who have to pay a high price (Altieri, 1995). When the production of staple food is replaced by cash crops, which is occurring at an alarming pace in India, it is the conventional farmers and landless labourers who must bear the brunt. Mega dam projects and nuclear projects, besides causing deforestation and pollution, threaten the survival of indigenous communities. The aid provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to these projects adds a touch of neo-colonialism.

The spiritual formation/religious context cannot be interpreted in isolation from the general context of India and its neighbouring countries and the global environment. It is customary to suggest that the Indian context is marked by a diversity of cultures, a multitude of faiths, and poverty, but the

ambiguity of the situation is not considered. We must pay attention to the global context, in which new forces have emerged with a profound impact on cultures, religions, the poor and marginalised groups. It is made complicated by the emergence of people-centred revolutions in pursuit of a stronger sense of identity, unchecked expansion of globalisation, convergence of faith and violence (religious fundamentalism), secularisation of civilisation (materialistic, immediate expectation of fulfilment). The deterioration of development, new advances in science and technology, the pervasiveness of the digital environment, and the emergence of militant, territorial nationalism in opposition to nation-states, which triggered the tremendous destruction of human and non-human life and that of the planet (Arushanyan, 2017).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Indian theological landscape has undergone dramatic and radical changes, particularly in the last two decades. Till then, Christian theology in India was too abstract and almost entirely focused elsewhere. In other words, the Christian theological experiment was carried out essentially by following the formal, moral, and metaphysical structure of the West. Then came the quest for an 'Indian Christian Theology', which sought to focus on the Christian faith vis-à-vis the Hindu religious scriptures and teachings, making extensive use of the Sanskrit language. Hindu religious thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.K. Gandhi, and Swami Vivekananda also contributed much to Indian Christian Theology. This school of theology continued through the works of people like Keshab Chandra Sen, Nehemiah Goreh, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, V. Chakkarai, A.J. Appasamy, J.N. Farquhar, Pandipetti Chenchiah, and later P.D. Devanandan, Raymund Panikkar, S.J. Samartha and M.M. Thomas. Although this was a genuine effort to understand the essence of Christ's presence, work and message from an Indian religious perspective, it had two main drawbacks:

- I. The perspectives were mostly Brahmin in nature, drawn predominantly from Brahminian Hindu practices and scriptures now considered anti-Dalit.
- II. The theology became so abstract that it was considered insufficient to solve social issues, although the theology of M.M. Thomas could be viewed as an exception as it is perceived to be praxiological.

The same accusations are levied against different experiments being carried out in India in the field of religion indigenisation. It is often argued that the field uses a lot of symbols and rituals from the heritage of Brahminism and Sanskrit vocabulary, which is considered Brahminic and elitist tongue. As per A.P. Nirmal, is one of India's leading advocates of Dalit theology mentions, Christian theology in India sought to introduce its theological frameworks, either in reference to Sri Sankara's Brahminic Advaita philosophy. Nirmal mentions, reflecting on the role caste plays in these theological inputs, "It was also accurate that most of the contributions came to Christianity from caste converts. Thus, it was quite natural that most of them perpetuated a 'Brahminic' tradition-oriented approach to the theological task in India within Christian theology. In other words, this early Indian Christian Theology did not evolve from the day-to-day realities of the Indian population and thus remained in essence a bourgeois intellectual exercise like the Western systematic theology of the Enlightenment Period, completely cut off from the everyday lives of the poor and the oppressed in India.

Growing Awareness of Ecological Concerns

A new phase of Indian theology began when its proponents realised that they had been neglecting the issues affecting biodiversity. The scope of the quest for justice had to be broadened to include issues of nature in such a way that they were related to the problems faced by the oppressed and the marginalised. An awareness was created on the urgent need for a holistic ecotheology from a distinctly Indian liberative viewpoint — a spirituality that would incorporate the interests of the poor, the Dalits, and nature.

Daniel D. Chetti said issues affecting ecology are of paramount importance among the new challenges facing the field of philosophy in India. He said environmental degradation due to air, water and land contamination, threatens the very survival of the earth. Spiritual and ethical issues behind this are of serious importance to India's theological reflection and education. What's essential is a philosophical paradigm shift. He said: First, we have to note that our contemporary understanding of theology itself has undergone enormous changes. We no longer understand theology as "the Science of God," the "Dogmatic of the Church" or the "Doctrines of the Church" ... we increasingly understand theology in relation to human life in its totality. Human dignity, human rights, human liberation, human development, communication, social analysis, women's concerns, Dalit liberation, the people — all these have become theological issues ... we can characterise this whole business as the "Human face of theology" ... the trouble with such themes ... is that they generate the anthropocentric theological paradigm. We should be moving away from the "Animal Theological Face" into the "Cosmic Theological Face".

Nirmal's views are representative of the current impulse among theologians in India to include problems affecting ecology in liberation theology. K.C Abraham, a staunch advocate of the liberation school of theology in India, has shared the desperate need to extend the scope of justice and liberation theology and take ecological concerns seriously. According to him, the issues of the marginalised and environmental concerns are inextricably intertwined and need to be looked at from the viewpoint of 'eco-justice' and an integral liberalisation context (Krishnamurti, 2006). Abraham says, "The scream of the oppressed, the groaning of humanity, is for justice, and that is the subject of our religion and our faith, which refers to metaphysical, artistic issues. Justice concerns the right relationships between human beings as well as other imaginative fragments. A broader view of justice to accept environmental concerns is needed." This argument seems to be the one often embraced by Indian liberation theologians. Nevertheless, the pure expansion to include ecological concerns in itself does not address the inadequacies of liberation theology.

As far as liberation theologians in India are concerned, there is a clear recognition that the original theology of Latin American emancipation is wholly inadequate to meet the new challenges posed to biodiversity. Attempts need to be made to update it by adding the needs of nature and those of the oppressed. Nevertheless, this path does not take us to an integrated ecotheology until liberation theology of the original Latin American context undergoes a much more profound quest for the soul. There needs to be systemic reconstruction and reformulation in three important areas: anthropocentric treatment of theological concepts, inadequate scriptural hermeneutics, and use of Marxist social analysis. In a framework where social and economic injustice of the vulnerable thrives along with ecological exploitation, it is impossible to achieve 'liberation' of the exploited by resolving the ecological aspects of slavery. This fundamental insight is not yet represented in the doctrine of liberation. The philosophical doctrinal interpretations are presented in an anthropocentric way. The 'new poor' or the 'new oppressed' is nature.

Liberation Theology's Flawed Approach

Ecocentrism and human-centeredness is one of the key disadvantages of virtually all liberation theologies in their theological reflections. Early Christian theology tended to focus primarily on the question of God and centred on mankind, but again in a philosophical and spiritualised manner. When liberation theology laid emphasis on the poor and the oppressed as subjects of religion, this attention became radicalised and concretised. It still remained anthropocentric because it ignored the interests of non-human creation such as nature, plants, the planet and its fullness (Love, 2003). While the focus on the poor and the disadvantaged in the Developing World is a step in the right direction, continuing to see nature and animals as 'fellow exploited' is a significant mistake in the theology of liberation. Although this has been pointed out by theologians from other schools of thought and recognised by a few liberation theologians themselves, it has had no serious effect.

In treating theological themes, Latin American liberation theology has been predominantly anthropocentric. In a sense, it is true of almost all liberation theologies today. However, there has been a shift in focus as liberation theologies have started speaking about ecological issues along with matters affecting the oppressed. In liberation theology, we have seen the prevailing anthropocentrism explaining 'liberation' as salvation, Christology, ecclesiology, and the theme of 'preferential option for the poor. Though there are slowly emerging signs of liberation theology heading towards a cosmic perspective, liberation theology remains largely anthropocentric and historically focused (Love, 2003). On realistic fronts, obvious changes are seen, that is, among the movements of the people which connect human rights and ecological issues and the fight for eco-justice. One-way liberation theology can take up this challenge is by developing an ecological and liberative doctrine of creation.

Is 'Spirituality for Creation' Relevant in India?

Within Mathew Fox's iconoclastic spirituality and the Creation Spirituality Movement, the elitism of some of the ecotheological interpretations is noticeable. This, as noted by Margaret Goodall and John Reader, is essentially a trend that encourages yet another type of American lifestyle, though it is called the 'green way of life'. Fox explains the rather magnetic, politically neutral and Western-oriented essence of the Creation Spirituality Movement, and its irrelevance in a Third World setting such as India. He says, "Creation Spirituality as a phenomenon becomes an incredible gathering place, a kind of watering hole for people whose heart has been hit by the issues of our day-deep ecologists, ecumenists, musicians, indigenous peoples, social advocates, feminists, gender liberationists, gay and lesbian women, animal liberationists...All these groups find a common tongue and common ground on which to serve in the Creation Spirituality Movement." In addition to his propensity to fall into pantheism, his somewhat quixotic idealism of 'celebrating the divine splendour' often betrays a severe ignorance of social justice, such as the 'First World' economic and ecological oppression of the 'rich' nations. We see the solution to the problems of the poor and nature in a human commitment to learn how to unleash the 'mystical child' inside humans.

The prayers given in this liturgy are not only for humans but also for the whole world. Earth is represented as a religious concept, the instrument of incarnation (God in Christ was 'earth') and the locus of our redemption. It's also an important spiritual message embedded in the observance of harvest festivals, where people offer nature's blessings back to God. This spirituality should also be a 'worldly-ascetic' spirituality, which is neither an exemption from the realm of reality nor a consumerist spirituality, but a 'true' spirituality (in the case of an 'anti-consumerist' spirituality, where people take nature for their needs only and not for their greed). It must also be spirituality rooted in solidarity with the oppressed: the Dalits, the tribals, the women of these communities and their ecology. This spirituality would address the 'Creation Spirituality' elitism that insists on returning to the 'simple garden state'. The essential eco-spirituality cannot and should not be a journey back to Eden's womb, but it should be a path to the future of a 'new heaven and a new earth', God's kingdom where harmony, justice and natural dignity can prevail in abundance.

Ecology and the Problem of Social Justice

Eco-theology, associated with eco-justice and eco-ethics, is a vexing issue of our time. In short, the question is: Who are the polluters and who are the victims? The saddest reality is that the critical and first casualties are those who have contributed nothing significant to environmental pollution and the subsequent global warming, ice melting, seawater rising. The first victims are poor people living on the smallest of islands. Likewise, large-scale deforestation has a double devastating impact for the sake of industrial development. First of all, the people living in forests are deprived of their means of livelihood. Secondly, the industry's invasion inevitably kills the environment-friendly and safe ecosystem, where nature-friendly people live. How do we balance sustainable development with ecological health protection and ozone purity? It can be summed up the new theology's ecological dream as:

- a. The principle of spiritual immanence within the whole universe.
- b. A dynamic, evolutionary view of God, human beings and the natural world, rather than a hierarchical one.
- c. A profound reinterpretation of the concept of human dominance of nature in terms of natural partnership.
- d. A commitment to justice for all animals, not just humans, representing the needs of the poor and endangered species around the world.

3. CONCLUSION

In formulating an ethical theory of development in India, 'eco-justice' and 're-mythologization' are important principles. The parallels found in the Genesis origin story's 'mythical' narratives, and some of the tribal/Dalit creation myths, will facilitate the advancement of an ecological creation theory (Hunter, 2019). As suggested by Sallie McFague, the 'making' model in the Genesis narrative must be complemented with a 'procreation' model. The accounts of the creation have been extensively reinterpreted in recent years. The divine commandment to 'subdue' humanity and have 'dominion' over creation has been reinterpreted in terms of a model of 'stewardship'. The capitalistic and manipulative aspects in which this idea was propagated, however, make it irrelevant to an important ecotheology. Not only does it neglect the dimension of the intrinsic value of nature, it is also devoid of an orientation toward social justice (violated eco-justice).

In an integrated ecotheology, the purview of redemption is applied also to non-human creation. The redemption of the poor from all dehumanising influences and the salvation of humanity from its devastation form part of the salvific understanding of the acquisition of full peace within Christ. From this point of view, resurrection is seen not as an exit into a vortex of disembodied spirits, but as an entry into a real world, as an integral ecotheology sees death as a 'return to earth'. That is the eschatological revolutionary dream of an integral ecotheology. Isaiah's (Is. 11) and Revelation's eschatological dreams (Rev. 21) envisage a prosperous world. As this dream threatens, mankind is encouraged to actively engage in the approximation of this realm by engaging in the struggles of the oppressed, the needy, the tribals, the Dalits, and women, to conserve their soil (land and forests), the 'waters of life', the 'trees of life', the 'wolves' and the 'lions' with whom these communities live in harmony. That is essentially ecotheology's praxiological sense. The voice of the 'broken asunder' people and the groaning development will be an important ecotheology. That voice needs to be heard in India today.

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