

PART ONE

1. THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN INDIA

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Describing the Social Teaching of the 'Protestant' Churches in India is a massive task because of the sheer number and great diversity of these Churches. **Yet, the social thought of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) is, I believe, quite representative.** The NCCI is indeed a fellowship of Protestant and Orthodox Churches. Though its membership increased over the years, the NCCI always included the mainline Protestant Churches and its documents usually contained the same emphases than those of its constituent Churches.

In spite of the limitations of this approach, I shall therefore present the social teaching of the NCCI and its two predecessors, the National Missionary Council (NMC) and the National Christian Council (NCC).¹ For this, I shall use the documents of the Quadrennial Assemblies of the NCCI and a few other official and semi-official documents.

1. The National Missionary Council (1914-1922)

The NMC was formed in February 1914 at Calcutta. *The background was the growing emphasis of the Protestant and Anglican Churches in India on evangelism since the turn of the 20th century.* This concern for "The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation" partly came from the feeling that the time was ripe and that this opportunity might soon disappear. It was also realised that the divisions among the Protestant denominations and the missionary organisations were making the evangelisation of the country

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difficult. *The need for unity was deeply felt.* To foster the complex and lengthy process of uniting the Churches, the Provincial Councils and then the NMC were formed.²

As regards the main social question of that time, the greater say of Indians in the administration, the NMC adopted a cautious stance. As Kaj Baago states, "all that the Council dared to say in favour of Home Rule were some poetic phrases about how new responsibility might add 'to the richness of life and to the development of personality'. It was at the same time extremely anxious to defend British policy, both past and present, in India."³

2. The National Christian Council (1923-1979)

It soon became the prevailing view that the Churches, not the missionary societies, should be in charge. The Constitution of the NMC was changed in 1923 to make it reflect this reality and the National Christian Council (NCC) of India, Burma and Ceylon came into being. However, the leadership was still in the hands of foreign missionaries and *the main emphasis remained on evangelism.* "Yet, for a short period between 1926 and 1932, there was much talk of 'Rural Education' and 'Reconstruction' and even of 'Industrial Mission', but very little was accomplished in practice."⁴ With the appointment of Dr. R.B. Manikam in 1941 as the first Indian Executive Secretary, the transfer of responsibility into the hands of local personnel began in earnest. In 1944, the whole Council adopted a statement on "*Church and State in Post-War India*". It declared that "*imperialism is condemned by Christian conscience*" and "*should be brought immediately to an end*" in India.⁵

With the coming of Independence in 1947, **the NCC got more involved in the problems faced by the newly emerging nation.** Dr. E.C. Bhatta, who became Senior Secretary in the 1950s, organised the great Relief Work after the partition of India.⁶ The NCC and other bodies encouraged social research to promote informed social thinking. This resulted in the formation of the *Christian Institute for the Study of Society* in 1951. A second tool, the *Committee for Literature on Social Concern*, was started in 1954 by the NCC. Following a proposal by the accomplished scholar of contemporary Hinduism, Dr. P.D. Devanandan, the two were merged in 1957 into the *Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society*

(CISRS), with its headquarters at Bangalore. After the sudden demise of P.D. Devanandan in 1962, the CISRS was led by M.M. Thomas.⁷

The member Churches of the NCC showed, through their statements at the end of their triennial or quadrennial Assemblies in the 1950s and early 1960s, that they were deeply aware of the considerable changes taking place in India. The 1953 Assembly even spoke of “**an almost revolutionary situation**”.⁸ The Churches affirmed that *the Gospel “proclaims the recreative power of Christ for the entire individual and social life of men”*.⁹ They moreover felt that there was a tremendous scope for Christian initiatives in adult literacy, co-operatives, agricultural improvements, village cleanliness and hygiene, and so on. They therefore involved themselves in various kinds of social service and economic development projects. *The Churches also wholeheartedly accepted the proposed secular and democratic character of the Indian state.* They for example stated in 1950: “The confessed intention to construct a secular, democratic State is not inconsistent with true Christian citizenship.”¹⁰

*In the mid-1960s, a certain disillusionment with the economic policies of the Nehru era gradually emerged, especially with regard to the obvious injustices that remained unaddressed by the type of economy India had adopted. The Message of the 1963 NCC Assembly observed that “the magnitude of human need in our country should... disturb us out of our sense of complacency and lead us to a fresh commitment to be instruments of Christ’s compassion and love.”*¹¹ *In the latter part of the 1960s, the themes of social justice, people’s organisations, participation in liberation struggles, siding with the oppressed, etc., came to the forefront.*¹² In 1971, the Commission Report on Social Action stated: “In many parts of India, **the basic injustice is that of deep and widespread poverty... The struggle against this injustice is a matter of first priority for the life of the nation as a whole and should take the first place among the social concerns of the Church in India.**” The Churches should therefore “take immediate steps to prepare all their people for **involvement with the poor of India**, without distinction of class or creed, **in their struggle for justice.**”¹³

In October 1975, the Message from the 18th Assembly stressed **the need for liberation and participation.** The Church, it was

acknowledged, is chosen to be a partner in the struggle of people for liberation. A new perspective was enounced: “In the past, the development programmes of the Churches and Christian institutions have mainly helped a section of the people who were privileged to be near the sources of power and influence and decision-making... The time has now come when *the Church must concentrate its attention on rural areas, landless labourers, the illiterate, the rural unemployed, marginal farmers, slum dwellers, etc.*” The Assembly also affirmed its “faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who calls us to participate with Him and His people in the struggle for liberation so that ‘all may have life, and have it abundantly’.”¹⁴ *However, the Message had nothing to say about the Emergency that had been declared in June 1975, about four months earlier.*

While not directly speaking of **the Emergency**, the 19th Assembly (October 1979) recognised that, in the last four years, “we have fallen short of some of our major emphases, such as a more meaningful participation in the socio-economic and political life”.¹⁵ This sentence was perhaps expressing regret for the generally neutral and sometimes pro-Emergency stance of the Protestant Churches. The lack of reflection on the suppression of democracy was partly due to the fact that, after the fall of two governments, a mid-term election was looming. Political instability and the economic crisis were then uppermost in people’s minds. In her Presidential Address, however, Mrs. Daisy L. Gopal Ratnam commented that the Emergency “was a severe test to our faith, when we could not speak with one voice. This experience should teach us that *there are occasions which demand from us the courage to evolve a common mind for the Church and express it openly and stand with the people in their agitations and struggles for fundamental human rights.*”¹⁶

3. The National Council of Churches in India (1980-2004)

Development and Liberation

The NCCI saw in the 1980s a significant rethinking of the concept of Development and the Church’s role in it. The 19th Assembly had resolved that the NCCI “should study in depth the whole concept of development and social justice in relation to the national and regional issues that arise”.¹⁷ A Development Working

Box 1.1**Perspectives on Integral Development**

“The debate on development should not merely be confined to poverty. **Development, liberation, social justice, human rights—all these are inter-related.** In other words, *development is liberation from the influence of those economic, political, religious and cultural values which help maintain the status quo. It sometimes means rebellion.* At a given and decisive point in history, people decide to act against the conditions which restrict their freedom as human beings.”¹⁸

Group was set up to obtain some clarity. Its 1983 Report referred to Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (esp. PP, # 14 & 20, cf. below, 54-5) and brought out the multifarious nature of development: “Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. It must be authentic, it must be complete. In other words, it must be integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every individual... *Development also means ‘liberation’.* It includes the transition from a less human condition to a more human one – *the transformation of the oppressive social structures. ...Development has to do with bread and fish, with ideas and dreams, with identity, pride and love.*”¹⁹

The Report was quite critical of the Indian Church, accusing it of being primarily involved in the “institutional mission”. It went on to say that the Church rests upon the praise that it receives for its medical and educational institutions. In reality, however, “what remains of the erstwhile Christian institutional mission is the debris of *an elitist, highly institutionalised structure that precludes in every way the poor and the struggles of the poor to achieve a fuller humanity.* Development, after all, is the facilitation of the struggle of the dehumanised to achieve a fuller humanity.”²⁰

Perhaps taking inspiration from these insights, the 20th Assembly in 1983 at Lucknow issued **a call to bring about a radical change in the oppressive structures**, especially in rural areas. It called upon the Churches to nurture the family where the dignity and worth of human persons are valued. The Assembly also “noted with concern *the growing violence against women* due to dowry, outdated laws relating to marriage, divorce, succession, etc. In matters of employment, health and education, women are still at a disadvantage.”²¹

Standing with the Poor and the Oppressed

In the 1990s, the issue of **reservations for Dalit Christians** became very much alive, especially as Dalit Buddhists were granted this facility in 1990. It was hoped that the same might be extended to Christians if sufficient pressure was put on the Central Government.

In March 1991, the NCCI called a meeting of the Heads of Churches at New Delhi on the theme, “Moving with Christ into God’s Tomorrow”. The Message emphasised that the “Indian context is marked by *religious, cultural and racial pluralism*, contributing richness as well as tensions to our society. *Casteism* and economic powerlessness leads to oppression and injustice against the Dalits... *Women* suffer indignities, humiliation, oppression and discrimination on account of centuries of patriarchal prejudices, attitudes and structures, often sustained by religion and culture.”²² In response, **the Church’s mission** was redefined as follows: “*Mission means being with the poor and oppressed people and responding to their needs with sensitivity to the presence of God in all cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the kingdom of God through presence, solidarity and word.*”²³

Christian institutions were again asked to evaluate their mission: “While these (institutions) are needed as instruments of service and change, the time has come to critically examine their functioning and purpose from the point of view of God’s mission. *Are these serving the poor and needy and the oppressed sections of society for their development and liberation? Are they transmitting the values of the kingdom of God?*”²⁴

The first two **Recommendations to the Churches** were: 1) “*that the Churches speak clearly and unitedly on issues of national importance* such as the liberation of Dalits, communalism, the threats to the secular and democratic framework of our society, atrocities against women, etc.”; 2) “*that the Churches raise their voice against the demonic use of amniocentesis for sex determination in order to abort female fetuses...*”²⁵ Strangely enough, the message remained silent about the dire economic situation then prevailing in the country and the majority communalism being fanned by the BJP campaign to build a Ram Temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

The Era of Globalisation and Communalism

At the time of the 23rd Assembly in March 1996, the Congress government had almost completed its five-year term and the General Elections were round the corner. **The Assembly's Message thus criticised the economic reforms:** *"The new economic policy which has brought in a market-friendly society along with its values has become a dangerous threat to the poor and marginalised. Corruption has almost become a lifestyle in our country."* Turning to the issue of **job reservations for Dalit Christians**, the Message regretted that the recently dissolved "Tenth Lok Sabha (had) failed to restore equal rights to Dalit Christians. *In this context the Church in India is called upon to facilitate awareness building among the people of the nation to use their fundamental rights and valuable franchise to build up a new polity based on equality, fraternity, justice and peace.*"²⁶

In its Recommendations, **the Assembly appealed to the Central and State Governments** (1) to "redress the grievance of Dalit Christians urgently", (2) to "initiate new programmes to put an end to the discrimination and violence against women" (including the unborn female child), and (3) to "discourage all the activities which cause communal hatred as well as danger to national peace". Perhaps with an eye to the forthcoming General Elections where the BJP was expected to do well, the Message stated: *"We affirm our solidarity with the Government which respects human rights (and) stands for secularism and the unity of the country."*²⁷

The 24th Assembly of the NCCI was held in March 2000 at Ranchi, after **the persecutions faced by Christians** in 1998 and 1999 in various parts of the country like Gujarat and Orissa. The Assembly stated: "In our country the social and political systems have endangered the life of the poor and the marginalised people." Now the Christians and other minority groups have been deliberately targeted. "The Church in India today faces a 'Kairos' moment – *the finest hour to witness with commitment and service* in spite of all the hurdles and limitations."²⁸

The Message boldly continues: "The Hindu fundamentalists accuse us of engaging in forced and induced conversions. But in the past two years, the Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches have

established beyond doubt that (this) accusation... is a mere bogey and a cover... to prevent and terrorise the Church from serving the poor and upholding their dignity and human rights." *The Church in India is "called upon to intensify her service to the marginalised and the poor with greater efforts in the fields of education, health and development, thus ensuring dignity and fullness of life to the indigenous peoples, the Dalits, the Tribals, women, youth, children and other such categorises."*²⁹ The Message concludes: **"Our major challenge is to follow Jesus Christ in empowering the poor and the marginalised so as to enable them to assert their dignity and rights and become subjects of their own history."**³⁰

The 25th Assembly was held in February 2004 at Tirunelveli against the backdrop of **an extraordinary upsurge in violence:** internationally, the events of 11th September 2001, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and domestically, the Gujarat massacres of February and March 2002. The escalation of the violence against Dalits, Adivasis and women was also noted. For the first time the suffering and discrimination of people afflicted with HIV/AIDS was also mentioned. In the face of these challenges, the Message called for the Church "to rediscover its lost vision (and) realise its calling to be a prophetic voice in society".³¹

Confronting **the challenge of majority communalism**, *the Message called upon the State "to uphold the secular fabric of our nation and ensure the security of every citizen", and "to condemn and combat all communal/fascist forces that exist in any religion and culture"*.³² **The Church moreover affirmed its strong support for the following:** 1) to work with the Government to enhance the life of children, especially the girl child; 2) *to stand for "the rights of the marginalised, especially the Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis, Indigenous Peoples and Women, and combat the violence meted out against them"*; and 3) *to struggle against caste*, as it robs people of their right to be treated as human beings.³³

Conclusion

We can therefore conclude from our examination of the NCCI documents that **the Protestant and Orthodox Churches in India have, since Independence, displayed a considerable concern about the Indian society.** *The emphasis has of course varied,*

Box 1.2
The 2005 CNI Synod³⁴

Around 300 members representing 26 dioceses took part in the Synod of the Church of North India (CNI) at Ranchi from 16 to 21 Oct. 2005. The theme was, **Towards a Transformed and Transforming Community**. The *Concluding Message* “urged all people in general and particularly the members of the Church *to work for the transformation of religious, social, economic and cultural aspects of life, to identify with the whole creation, and to stand by those who are victims of poverty, injustice and oppression, upholding their rights to human dignity and equality*. The Synod also called to ensure the dignity, rights and well-being of senior citizens, persons with disabilities and subaltern groups in society.” It “urged everyone to be environment-friendly and to take care of the creation”.

A **People’s Synod** was also organised from 21st to 25th September 2005 at Nagpur. About 500 delegates from 14 CNI Dioceses “deliberated on issues and concerns confronting them as Church members”. *This Synod Of, By & For the CNI People was an independent initiative of the people to renew and restructure the CNI to make it more sensitive and committed to the poor and oppressed, whom it is meant to serve*. The participants hope that this critical and creative dialogue will lead the CNI “**towards building communities to BE THE CHURCH as a PEOPLE’S MOVEMENT**”.

with the questions of majority communalism and its impact upon Christians, and of reservations for Dalit Christians being mentioned more frequently in recent times.

There has however been a constant focus on issues such as the marginalisation of the poor, justice for the oppressed, equality for women and the need for a secular government in India. Whenever these topics are discussed, the Church highlights that it is called to act like its Lord Jesus Christ, and *stand in solidarity with those who have been pushed to the periphery by individuals and social and economic structures*. The social teaching of the Protestant Churches in India and of the NCCI has thus sought **to inspire the member Churches to make a significant contribution towards the building of an India where justice, gender equality and inter-religious harmony reign**.