



Curriculum Theologiae

# Contextualisation in Theological Formation

## Cultural Context

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## CONTEXTUALISATION IN THEOLOGICAL FORMATION: CULTURAL CONTEXT

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### **Introduction**

HUMAN BEINGS live within a culturally structured world and organise their lives in terms of a culturally conditioned meaning system. Different cultures represent different systems of meaning of the good life. Cultures are to some extent multicultural in their origins and structure in the sense that they grow out of interactions with each other, while maintaining their identities in what they differ from each other.

Theologising in cultural context is an attempt to contextualise the Christian Gospel and life in the cultural milieu of the people. On the one hand, it is required of the Gospel to be experienced and understood through the cultural resources of a people, because given the historicity of human existence in a culturally conditioned tradition, our perception of truth, and experiencing of reality, including faith, are necessarily shaped by our cultural perspectives. On the other hand, there is also a need for the Christian Gospel to give a prophetic critique of the cultures because amid many lofty ideals, they also contain life-threatening and dehumanising values and practices.

The Indian population consists of 2000 regional ethno-linguistic groups who speak 1652 mother tongues, reflecting the rich and complex cultural tradition of the nation.<sup>1</sup> This multicultural heritage of India, which has been recognised by the Indian Constitution as the nation’s “composite culture,”<sup>2</sup> evolved through a process of millennia-old interaction between many ethnic streams.<sup>3</sup> Today all the cultures are in a state of renaissance.

Most of the theological contextualisation have been in the Hindu cultural setting, because Hinduism has predominantly, though not exclusively, influenced and shaped the Indian cultures. Moreover, Hindus comprise 80% of the Indian population. Much has been written on

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<sup>1</sup> . According to Dr. B.S. Guha, the Founder-Director of the Anthropological Survey of India, the population of India is derived from 6 main races. These are as follows in chronological order: 1. Negrito; 2. Proto- Australoids or Austrics. 3. Mongoloids; 4. Mediterranean or Dravidian; 5. Western Brachycephals and; 6. Nordic Aryans. Quoted in *Manorama Yearbook 2013*, (Malayala Manorama Press, Kottayam, 2013), p. 604. First, there is a difference between 'race' and 'ethnic group'. Race is used to denote people who share common physical and genetic traits, whereas ethnic group denotes people who have common cultural, behavioural, linguistic, ritualistic, or religious traits. Very sensibly, the Census of India has dropped the concept of race, preferring instead to focus on ethnic groups, which are identifiable by language and culture. Racial classification, which was essentially a colonial construct, has thankfully disappeared from official publications of the Government of India.

<sup>2</sup> . Article 51-A (f), The Constitution of India

<sup>3</sup> . The origins of Indian culture can be traced back to Proto-Dravidian and Indo-European epoch around 3000 BC and subsequently to Dravidian and Aryan antiquity. See Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (Penguin books, New Delhi, 1990), vol. 1, p.29

this subject.<sup>4</sup> I would, therefore, not dwell on it. Theologising need not always be with one homogeneous culture. In a multicultural India, it should be with diverse ethno-linguistic groups living even in the same locality. In fact, this mosaic of cultural variety is a great enrichment for the local Church. Hence, I have chosen the Indian Tribal cultural milieu, where we see today the growth and development of young and vibrant Christian communities. Over 75 % of the theology students, Catholics and Protestants, in North India are from these communities. Tribal theologizing is an attempt to incorporate the tribal cultural values in Indian theological discourse.

### **Defining a Tribe**

Most Tribal scholars, who belong to Tribal communities, call themselves as “Indigenous people”, meaning the original settlers of the land who named their mountains, rivers, rocks, animals, trees, flowers, etc.<sup>5</sup> In Central India, they refer to themselves as “*Adivasi*” which also means “original inhabitants.”<sup>6</sup> There are over 50 major tribes in India who form 8.2% of the total population. Most of them are concentrated in Central and North-Eastern parts of India, and in the States of Odisha and Gujarat. Tribal groups are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. Some Tribal communities have adopted a mainstream way of life.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I intend to draw attention to some of the life-affirming values embedded in Tribal cultures for the purpose of theologising.

### **Tribal Land**

Tribal land is not merely for one’s livelihood but has social, cultural, spiritual and economic significance. The tribal people believe that land is God’s gift for them. An ethics of collective ownership and trusteeship of land and eco-system prevails in their approach to natural resources. The land ownership is practiced in such a way that the land and its resources are protected. An economy of care for others, and harmony with nature is an essential aspect of Tribal ethos. Wati Longchar, a Naga theologian, states, “An aggressive economy for excessive accumulation of wealth is disapproved by God and community.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Community of Inter-human Concern**

All celebrations of major stages of life as well as dance, music, seasonal hunting and agriculture are done in a village ambience in which the entire village is involved in organisation, celebration and caring for the cost of these events. Their folk-songs, dances and tales resonate with an attitude of communitarian interest. Justin Tirkey, a Tribal scholar from Jharkhand, says, “Festivals give unity and cohesion to the group, and they act as a bulwark

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<sup>4</sup> . Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras, CLC, 1969); D.S. Amalorpavadas, *Gospel and Culture* (Bangalore, NBCLC, 1978); Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations: The Journey of Indian Theology* (Madras, University of Madras, 1993). Mundadan A.M., *Paths of Indian Theology* (Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> . Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth* (PTCA, Taiwan/SCEPTRE, Kolkata, 2012), p.20; T. Vanlaltlani, *Tribal Religion: Mizo and Bru*(Mizo Theological Association, Aizawal, 2009),pp.8-13

<sup>6</sup> . *Ibid*, p. 10. In this paper the terms tribal/indigenous/*adivasi* are used interchangeably.

<sup>7</sup> . *Manorama Yearbook 2013*, p.604

<sup>8</sup> . *Op.Cit.*, Wati Longchar, p. 33

against the problems that crop up in life.”<sup>9</sup> Dance and songs are part and parcel of the indigenous people’s social and religious life. These have got an important significance in the festivals. The indigenous people sing and dance with the rhythm of drum. Dance, song and drum cannot be separated. R. Lalthanmawia, a Mizo scholar insists that dances are a symbol of freedom and happiness that express the inner joy of the people.<sup>10</sup> Dances and folksongs have played an important role in the religious revival movements of the indigenous people. The Mizos of the Mizoram of the Northeast India hold that “men and women dancing together is an expression of their gratitude to God. It is not only a gratitude to God but also a symbol of their commitment to God.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, in some churches of the indigenous people dancing has been enthusiastically inculturated in Christian worship. It is regarded as a sign of the spiritual liveliness of the Christian life and worship.

Marriage arrangements are a community responsibility. Vincent Aind, a Tribal scholar from W. Bengal, says, “One hardly hears of an *Adivasi* going into debt on account of marrying off his daughter or son”.<sup>12</sup> Widows, orphans and physically challenged persons are especially cared for. For instance, widows would be assigned to central plots for cultivation, so that in case of attacks by wild animals their crop would be spared.<sup>13</sup> A sense of equality and participatory administrative system through elected representatives are prevalent in most of the Tribal societies.

### **Tribal Cosmology**

Indigenous people perceive their cosmology in an organically interconnected way. Wati Longchar, says, “All creation, including the Sacred Power, affects each other. Though the Sacred Power and the Spirits are understood as the Creator and Sustainers of all living beings, they are also perceived, though distinct, as part of the total cosmic life.”<sup>14</sup> Nature is sacred to be contemplated and revered. It is beyond human comprehension. Nature is integral part of human community. Humans do not have the right to exploit and manipulate other creatures. Each creature has intrinsic rights and humans, as integral part of cosmic life, must respect them.

### **Theology of Eco-Justice**

Indigenous people depend completely on nature for their sustenance, especially for economy and medicine. Hence, Yangkahao Vashum, a Naga scholar from the North-East India, writes, “space, creation and land together serve as the foundation of indigenous people’s concept of life, relationship and interdependence.”<sup>15</sup> Placing space and creation as theology’s starting

<sup>9</sup> Justin Tirkey, “Tribal Values and the Principle and Foundation,” *Sevartham*, Vol. 32, 2007, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> R. Lalthanmawia, “Mizo Hnam Nun lek Kristianna” in *Didakhe* 24/12(November-December 1996), p.62.

<sup>11</sup> Lalngakthuami, “Indigenous Theology in Dialogue with Asian Theology”, in *Doing Indigenous Theology: Towards New Frontiers*, eds. H. Chhungi, M.M. Ekka, Wati Longchar(NCCI/GTC/Sceptre, Kolkata, 2012), p. 48

<sup>12</sup> Vincent Aind, “Tribal Culture of Chotanagpur at Peril”, *Sevartham*, Vol. 33, 2008, pp. 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.24.

<sup>14</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Wati Longchar, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Yangkahao Vashum, “Identity Issues and Indigenous Theology” in *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia.*, H. Chhungi, et.ali., eds., *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia* (Nagpur, NCCI, 2012),p.34

point is crucial because it affirms that humans and the entire creation are destined to be together as one universal family in which everyone is coequal participant. Commenting on this approach of Tribal theology, Wati Lonchar writes, “Their [Tribal] culture, beliefs and practices were developed to maintain a balance between human and ecological needs...This balance was maintained through the practice of taboos and totems.”<sup>16</sup>

Nirmal Minz, a Tribal theologian from Jharkhand adds, “Space means that everything is integrally related to one another and therefore, they must treat each other with justice.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the tribal people maintain a very strong sense of symbiotic relationship with the environment. Creation is approached as the exegesis of God since it manifests the order and beauty set by God. Seen from the perspective of the Indigenous people, a space-creation centred theology calls for critical new thinking on our life-style, our Christian spirituality and our attitude towards all God’s creation. Looking from the indigenous people’s view of life, physical and spiritual, matter and spirit, human beings and the rest of creation are interconnected and interrelated. For the indigenous people spirituality is essentially a way of life – part of one’s life style. In our times, when we are faced with environmental crisis due to unsustainable development projects, it seems to me that space-creation centred theology of the Tribal people can be a source of inspiration toward building a community of justice where all people and nature itself can flourish.

### **Theology of Harmony**

The Tribal worldview is based on the idea of harmony, wherein the whole is the sum total of the web of relationships and interconnectedness of the various parts with each other. The idea of cosmic harmony spoken in many religious traditions in Asia<sup>18</sup> resonates with the tribal culture in India. As mentioned elsewhere, the Tribal cosmology perceives the world of diversity of creatures as an organic whole with the web of relations knitting together each and every part of it. When this ethics of symbiotic harmony is put into action in the society, it takes the form of inter-human concern by which a righteous order begins to take shape. Hence, sensitivity in human relationships, close ties of love and cooperation in families, villages and neighbourhood are highly valued in the Tribal societies. These are celebrated through songs and dances which are always communitarian performances. Tribal idea of harmony adds richness to Christian understanding of harmony which is sourced by the Trinitarian mystery of perichoresis and the Christ’s Paschal mystery of reconciliation and redemption.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>16</sup> . *Op.cit.*, Wati Longchar, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> . Nirmal Minz, “Tribal perspective on Ecology”, in Wati Longchar and Yangkahao Vadhum, eds., *The Tribal Worldview and Ecology* ( Jorhat, Tribal Study Centre, 1998), p.4.

<sup>18</sup> . Edmund Chia, ed., *Resource Manuel For Catholics in Asia* (Bangkok, FABC-OEIA, 2001), p.118.

Theologizing in the Tribal cultural context is first and foremost an attempt to listen to the Spirit of God working in the Tribal communities in India who live and experience their own faith by sharing and celebrating it in their own socio-cultural and religious environment. Contextualisation of theological formation involves accompanying them in their attempt and search for justice, harmony and inter-human care. In the light of Vatican II, it is to discover the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in the Tribal cultures (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 11) and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.

The indigenous cultural contextualisation of theology will lead to mutual enrichment of the local Tribal Christian communities and the universal Church. A theology of this sort happens when the Tribal communities live out their double heritage of faith and culture. An ethics of inter-human concern as against aggressive individualism, eco-justice as against unsustainable development policies, and symbiotic harmony between humans and nature as against abuse of natural resources are some of the enduring values that the Tribal Christians contribute to world civilisation through their theologising in their cultural context.

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